



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

Volume 130

(3 August 2020 to 27 September 2020)

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Assembly Members

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F

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Foster, Mrs Arlene (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
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I

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N

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O

O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
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P

Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)

R

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S

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Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
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W

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Official Report (Hansard)

Assembly Settings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 18 August 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Members, before we proceed with today's business, I want to acknowledge that this is the first sitting of the Assembly since the sad passing of the late John Hume. I wrote, of course, to express the condolences of the Assembly to Pat Hume and her family, but I want to ensure that the Assembly has the ability to pay tribute to such a figure in the normal way in due course. Members should be aware that my office is liaising with the SDLP directly on the timing of formal tributes to both John Hume and John Dallat when business resumes in September, and Members will be given the proper time to record their reflections.

Private Members' Business

AS-level and A-level Grading Crisis

Mr Speaker: Before I move on to the main item of today's business, Members, I will make some introductory remarks on the upcoming debate before formally commencing it shortly. Members will be aware that we announced the establishment of a Youth Assembly, here, in the Chamber, in July. In the past week, we have heard the voices of many young people on the matters that we are gathered to discuss today. It is not for me, of course, to comment on the issues involved this afternoon, and we are clearly in very unusual and challenging times, but I have role in being concerned about how the Assembly is perceived and in building public confidence in this institution. Today, there may be many people watching our business for the first time, and I therefore ask all Members to bear that in mind in how we conduct this very important debate.

The Assembly was recalled today on the basis of a motion with cross-party support. Clearly, circumstances have changed significantly since the original motion was tabled. I want to record slight disappointment that, this morning, I was in a position of having to select between a number of amendments, which, for the most part, shared common principles. I think that it would have helped proceedings today, and would have sent a much more positive message, had a cross-party amendment been presented to update the motion. I do not want to dwell on that now, but I ask all parties to reflect on that for the future.

We are mindful that there are many young people of a new generation watching today who have a direct interest in these issues, so let us ensure that the debate is constructive and informative from their perspective. On that basis, Members, I will move on to the one substantive motion on the Order Paper, the motion on the AS-level and A-Level grading crisis.

Mr McCrossan: I beg to move

That this Assembly is deeply concerned that the modelling used to calculate grades for AS levels and A levels has awarded incorrect results for students across Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Education to award students the highest of their AS, teacher-predicted or CCEA grades for A levels, AS levels and GCSEs due to exceptional Covid-19 circumstances.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to two hours and 30 minutes for the debate. Your amendment has been selected, Mr McCrossan, and

is published on the Marshalled List. Please move the amendment.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome you back to your duties after being off for a few months and I wish you well in resuming those duties. I also thank the Assembly and parties for supporting the recall petition that I felt was so absolutely necessary in order to have the debate today.

I will start by —

Mr Speaker: Will you move the amendment?

Mr McCrossan: I beg to move the amendment

Leave out all after 'Northern Ireland' and insert:

“; welcomes the Minister of Education’s decision to reverse the unfair model used for awarding grades to ensure students now receive the higher of their teacher-predicted or CCEA grades for A levels, AS levels and GCSEs due to exceptional Covid-19 circumstances; recognises the immense stress, anxiety and disruption this has caused many students; further recognises the resultant implications for local colleges and universities; and calls on the Minister to work urgently with Executive colleagues to provide clarity and guidance to students and educational institutions.”

Mr Speaker: Thank you for your kind words. By convention, when a Member or a Minister seeks to amend their own motion, they are invited to address both the motion and the amendment within the 10 minutes that are allocated to them. Therefore, you will have 10 minutes to address both the motion and the amendment. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr McCrossan: Before I speak on the motion and the amendment, it is important to follow on from the comments made by the Speaker in relation to the former SDLP leader, MEP, MP, MLA and peacemaker, John Hume. It was with great sadness that we learned of John’s death. He had been unwell for some time, as many will have known. Unfortunately, in the circumstances that we faced during COVID, we could not give John the send-off that we would have liked, albeit that he got a really lovely send-off in his home city of Derry. I know that many would have loved to have lined the streets, paid tribute to him and comforted his family, and many would have loved to have said thank you to John for the huge sacrifices that he made that, undoubtedly and absolutely, benefited each and every one of us and the children of this society. I welcome the Speaker’s confirmation that we will have an opportunity in September, hopefully, to pay tribute to him. He was of such significance to this place that only history will properly reflect it.

Mr Speaker, I asked for the support of parties to recall the Assembly today, very importantly to ensure that the concerns shared by young people, parents, teachers and the public across Northern Ireland could be heard and that we, as a House, could speak and act on that. I am delighted, however, that, late yesterday, the Minister moved from his original position to a position that we had discussed in detail over the course of the past months, particularly in the past week. What happened this week to 28,000 of our young people, particularly the 11,000 students and young people who had their grades

downgraded, was unforgivable. The system failed them incredibly, and after —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: I will, shortly.

After months of warning the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and the Minister about the concerns that were being shared with me, I was very frustrated to see that the Minister and the chief executive of CCEA were adamant that they would continue, quite determinedly, down the line that they were going, which has absolutely disadvantaged quite a number of young people.

I thank the various parties that signed the recall petition. It is vital that we are having the debate, and although the debate has shifted somewhat, serious issues remain that must be addressed.

The reality of the situation that we are in today is that young people in our respective constituencies, whom we represent, have been let down and failed. I welcome very strongly the Minister’s move, in the first half of the day, on GCSE and, in the second half of the day, on A level and AS level. I just regret that it did not happen sooner and that the concerns and worries of young people, teachers and academics across Northern Ireland and further afield were ignored.

I raised considerable concerns with the Minister and CCEA, as did others. David Canning has been a huge support and help to me in that regard. At a very early stage, when exams were cancelled, we realised that there would be huge difficulties in trying to roll out the system. It is a system that has failed and confirmed our worst concerns. The reality is that young people will pay the price for that.

Minister, I am glad that you have moved, but I regret that it took Boris Johnson or London to move first. That really begs this question of the House: are we here as public representatives of the people of the North of Ireland, Northern Ireland or whatever you want to call it? Are we here to represent them, or are we to take our lead from London? Are we here to put first the best interests of our young people and teachers, or are we to follow the British Government and their agenda? There are really serious questions about what has happened here. Yes, we are in a better position today than we were in yesterday, but huge damage has still been caused. Damage has been caused to the mental health of young people. Teachers have been offended and annoyed.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. He is, obviously, a member of the Education Committee. Does he recall, on 22 April — this is in Hansard — that his description of the model that was put in place was a:

“complex fix ... to what is a very difficult situation”?

If it was a “fix” on 22 April, how can you say that you were warning about it for months?

Mr McCrossan: Thanks very much for your intervention. You will note — this has been acknowledged by the Minister and the chief executive of CCEA — that I have raised considerable concerns about it. Throughout the past few months that have led to today, I was told by the chief executive and the Minister that it was a work in progress

and that they would get a model that, they felt, would work. It turned out, from information that was received shortly after that date, that that was not going to be the case. From that, I raised concerns over Zoom with Justin Edwards, the chief executive, and I realised at that stage that we were on a slippery slope.

The reality is that, even given all the concerns that were raised, the Minister and Justin Edwards, the chief executive of CCEA, were determined to see that system out, to die in a ditch for a model that was untried and untested and to stand by an algorithm that no one has even seen. That brings me to a fundamental point: I asked on Friday, as I have done for months, for the algorithm to be produced for checking. We are now sitting on Tuesday and the public have not yet had sight of it. Why is there a huge cloak of secrecy surrounding the processes of CCEA? There are serious questions about the processes that determined grades — they have not been checked — and dismissed the judgement of teachers. I had to listen all week to Justin Edwards, the chief executive, saying that teachers' judgement could not be trusted. However, early yesterday morning, the Minister said that we could trust teachers' judgement when it came to GCSEs. Then, by 4.00 pm, it was, "We'll trust teachers' judgement in terms of A level and AS level now as well". How our teachers have been treated is intolerable and unacceptable.

The House needs to do what is right for the people whom we represent, not follow London. Have we learned nothing from the chaos of Brexit or the Government? It is vital that, at all times, we put the interests of the people whom we represent first. That brings me to an important point: I want the Minister to tell us whether he will produce the formula or algorithm to the public to be checked. That is what caused the situation to begin with. It is a situation that downgraded students from a grade C to a U, and then, at 7.00 pm on the night before the results were released to young people, they were told that it was an anomaly. Young people are not anomalies. Their futures cannot be hung in the balance of an algorithm that has not been tried or tested.

12.15 pm

Our Minister stood firmly, even on Friday, defending the system, but here we are today. I will say again that I welcome it. Our young people are relieved; they are happy that we are in this situation. The reality is that, when it comes to university places, a huge number of our young people have been rejected. Again, on Friday at the Committee for Education, the Minister told me that he was assured by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) that young people would not lose university places. That was incorrect. I was not out of the Chamber two minutes before a spate of emails told me otherwise. Who is advising the Minister on this? He is severely off-track.

I also welcome the Minister's apology, given publicly to teachers and young people, but, Minister, we need to go further. We need to guarantee, as an Executive, that our young people will get the places that they should have and not suffer at the hands of a system that failed them, let them down and was defended by you, Minister, and Justin Edwards, the chief executive.

Ms Hunter: Will the Member give way?

Mr McCrossan: I will.

Ms Hunter: Does the Member agree that the last week has caused significant stress and anxiety for our students across Northern Ireland that will, undoubtedly, have a detrimental impact on their well-being? Does he also agree that it is vital that we give them extra resources during this challenging time?

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for her intervention. Yes, young people have suffered incredibly. GPs and the mental health champion have talked about the impact on the mental health of our young people. That is an unforgivable situation, Minister. An apology will not suffice, but action will. Moving now to rectify the issues and ensure university places for our young people is key in all of this, as well as transparency around the processes by which determinations were reached that outflanked the judgement of teachers.

I commend the motion and the amendment to the House.

Mr M Bradley: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is nice to see you in the Chair. It is also nice for me to be here after isolation.

As already alluded to many times in the Chamber, we are in unprecedented times and have been forced into making unprecedented decisions, none more so than those that affect our economy, our health system and, most importantly, our education system. In an ideal world, young people would have been able to sit their examinations as normal. However, we are not in an ideal world, and the recent method of grading examination results has left many young anxious, distressed and angry. Those feelings have been replicated by parents and teachers alike. I congratulate the Minister and his staff for their efforts over the past few days. It was a case of "You cannot do right for doing wrong", and I am pleased that the Minister has listened to the concerns outlined by students and teachers throughout Northern Ireland.

There was never going to be a perfect solution. Despite the stress that exams bring, I am sure that our young people would have preferred to sit their exams, but, for this year, that was never going to be the case. There is no doubt that we are in unusual times, and, hopefully, we never have a year like this again. Like other Members, I have been contacted by parents, students and teachers outlining their concerns about the awarding of A level and AS level grades this year. It is only fair that those students are treated the same as GCSE pupils and awarded the grades predicted by their teachers. The Minister's decision to revert to the predicted grades is correct. I have every faith in our teachers. They have been working hard with their students to prepare them for exams for the past two years, if not longer. They know their strengths and what is achievable. I have no doubt that the prediction of grades was a difficult process for teaching staff. They did not make those decisions easily, and we should thank our teachers for all their hard work in preparing their students.

From the outset, it was clear that Minister Weir did not want our young people to be disadvantaged, and that needs to be highlighted. Minister Weir's announcement brings Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK and, most importantly, means that our young people will not be disadvantaged. The past few days have caused huge distress to thousands of young people. For many, their plans have been scrapped, and others have had to

rethink their future. We are in difficult times, and we hope that we will not be placed in a scenario like this again. However, I reach out to the young people and ask them to be patient.

In closing, I ask the Minister and his officials to look at the pupils who are content with their grades, to ensure that the new method of grading will not disadvantage them in any way, and to set up urgent dialogue with universities to ensure that there are places available and that appropriate finances are available for students who wish to attend university here, on the mainland, in Europe or in the Republic of Ireland.

Ms Mullan: It is good to see you back.

I speak in support of the motion and the amendment. I acknowledge the deep upset, distress, frustration and anxiety that have burdened thousands of our young people over the last week. This time of year is usually difficult enough for many, but the way in which this debacle has played out in the context of truly exceptional circumstances has compounded the distress and upset of those young people.

Young people have sacrificed an awful lot throughout this global health pandemic, and it is important that we recognise that. The very least that they deserved in the absence of the usual exam process was a system that was fair and transparent and that recognised their hard work, ability and potential in the subjects that they had elected to take. Unfortunately and unacceptably, students were failed in that regard.

Like other Members, I have had numerous phone calls and contacts over the last week from distraught students, concerned parents and frustrated principals and teachers. There was understandable and warranted shock and disappointment at how the process, which was designed to standardise results, could downgrade over 11,000 A-level grades, completely throwing the professional judgements of our teachers to one side. I found it impossible to comprehend that teachers who had spent years working with young people, had built relationships with them and are best placed to understand their strengths, weaknesses, potential and overall ability, would have their professional judgement disregarded to allow for an untried and untested computer algorithm to cast the final assertion on the results of AS and A levels.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Ms Mullan: Yes.

Mr Stalford: The Member will recall her colleague who is sitting on the Back Bench, Catherine Kelly, saying, in relation to teachers:

"I believe that we need to be very careful around that. How will teachers ascertain grades when there is little to no evidence of continual assessment?"

That was at the Education Committee on 22 April.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Member for his comments.

The Minister and CCEA were all about protecting the system and disregarding the needs of the young people. If we trust teachers more, this process will level out and we will find the true ability of our young people, which is not always reflected in the pressure of testing. Over the last number of months, we have constantly heard about the new normal. Let us be adventurous and use this time to

explore the new normal in education and put our children and young people first and foremost and not have an outdated exams system.

I could accept the argument made about the anomalies if this was an isolated incident. The fact is that drastic examples of downgrading were replicated right across schools in the North. That pointed to a flawed, unfit, unfair and unreliable system, and our students deserved far better. I sincerely hope that lessons will be learned from this by the Minister, his Department and CCEA. I welcome the fact that the Minister recognised the need to overhaul his approach. I also welcome his apology to the young people. However, Minister, everyone else was away ahead on this issue. Other parties had demonstrated a willingness to work together in order to reach a workable solution that worked for our young people and respected our teachers. The motion agreed by the Education Committee last week and today's motion are testament to that.

One of the most frustrating aspects of this whole episode is that many of us raised concerns with the Minister and CCEA. This could have been avoided if the Minister had not followed the Tories and waited for England to lead. The Minister needs to take a stark lesson from this: you are in a devolved stand-alone Assembly that has its own mandate and powers. Use that mandate and powers for the betterment of all young people here in the North.

As we head into the 2020-21 academic year, I am fearful that all the lessons of this year have not been heard and taken on board. As the mother of a daughter who is entering year 12 next week, I worry that her year and year 14 could be severely disenfranchised.

Those young people have lost four months' learning and teaching, right in the middle of a two-year course for GCSEs and A levels. I urge the Minister to look urgently at the curriculum for those courses and ensure that young people are not left in the same situation next year. The focus now needs to be on clear and concise guidance for principals, teachers, pupils and parents. The Minister needs to reassure us all that the mishandling of the exams fiasco will not follow him into restart. Let us not allow the chaos of this exams debacle to define the restart of our education system.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Robbie Butler.

Mr Butler: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I welcome you back after the long break. I want to pass on my regards to the SDLP. It has had a hard time over the past year: it lost not only John Hume recently but John Dallat and Séamus Mallon, so there has been a great loss to the SDLP family.

I want to acknowledge the voices that have been mobilised over the past four or five days. There have been many, and they have been loud. Each of us, regardless of the party that we are in, will have been inundated by emails, text messages, Facebook messages and phone calls, at all hours of the day and night. The voices were those of students, parents, carers, teachers, other professionals and student advocate bodies, and they all agreed that something needed to be done because something just was not right. We absolutely are in unique times and unique circumstances, and there is no doubt that we needed a unique response to the problem.

The Minister's U-turn on the GCSE and A-level awards, with the decision to award students the best of their teacher-predicted or CCEA grades, is one that everybody here should be rightly grateful for. That will bring great comfort and give some hope to those students and their families. I do wish, however, that it had come sooner.

During the Committee's work on this, there was, I have to be honest, only a little bit of flag planting by some over the issue. I thought that we worked collegiately and that it was one of the best things that I have been involved with as an MLA. There was some flag planting, but not too much. I thank my Committee colleagues for how robustly we worked on that together. I thought that that was remarkably good, and it perhaps gives some hope to the people of Northern Ireland that, when we come together, we can achieve much.

Let us look at what happened last week and what those young people were faced with. When they got their results on Thursday, some received emails from universities rejecting their place, which must have doubled down on their pain. That was coupled with what already exists, and that is the anxiety related to getting exam results. For many of us, that was some time ago, but that is a real pressure for young people, and it is probably worse now than when any of us went to school. That is picked up in the high levels of mental ill-health in Northern Ireland. We know, from the information and data that we have, that adverse childhood experiences and trauma are what inform us now in how we are going to beat mental ill-health. As has already been picked out, 11,000 grades will need to be changed, so I charge CCEA with carrying on that work post-haste to make sure that universities and further education colleges are able to allocate places fairly.

In the next two minutes I will give a couple of examples. The first example, and I have heard it many times, is one that came to me. A young female student who lives in Lagan Valley was predicted four straight As in her A levels. She was an A-grade pupil; a high-achieving pupil. Instead, she got one A, two Bs and one C. We know that that will be fixed. The potential loss to her was a place at Queen's to study law. I believe that we can and should catch the tail of that, but there were some lost days.

This next example is more stark, so please listen to it. I have permission to share this, without giving the name. A student was awarded a U, an E and a D. His target grades were not As or Bs but Cs and Ds. The young man had a mother who was severely mentally ill and was assessed many years ago as not being capable of looking after her family. The young man's problems were compounded by the fact that his dad was violent and had a temper. On his fifth attempt to run away from home, this young man was successfully picked up within his own family and became a looked-after child. That bit is important: a looked-after child; one of our most vulnerable. I know that one of the Minister's priorities is to look at educational underachievement, and this, right here, is an example of that. This young man really wants to get his predicted grades of two Cs and a D. What compounded his problem was that, on her deathbed at the start of this year, he made a promise to the granny who took him in that he would go to university. That was his promise to her. He wants to go to university. He does not want to be a doctor, a lawyer or a teacher. He wants to be the best that he can be. That is what we want our young people to be: the best that they

can be, regardless of what that is. We need to re-evaluate our values. We need to make sure that that young man gets the opportunity that he deserves and, indeed, that every student who has been caught in this gets their opportunity.

12.30 pm

I know that mental health will get picked up, so I will just leave it there because I am sure that some of my colleagues will deal with that.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the children and young people of Northern Ireland for the —. Is that microphone on and picking me up OK, Mr Speaker?

A Member: Unfortunately. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Lyttle: Thank you.

Mr Speaker: I do not hear your microphone on.

Mr Lyttle: Is it OK to proceed?

Mr Speaker: It is on now.

Mr Lyttle: The light was not on. Thank you.

I thank the children and young people of Northern Ireland for the sacrifice and the contribution that they have made to limit the impact of COVID in our community and, indeed, to save lives. I welcome the Minister's change of position on the award of grades on their behalf. I am delighted for the pupils, parents and teachers who have worked for this outcome, and I welcome the Minister's apologies for the distress that they have experienced.

However, there are concerns. It is concerning that the Minister could oversee an approach that produced such seriously flawed results for so many. In one school department, further to the CCEA-calculated grades, the percentage of pupils attaining A* to C grades reduced from 90% to 60%, 20 of 126 pupils did not gain a university place, one pupil who was rank-ordered by the school as second in the B band was awarded a D grade by CCEA and a pupil who was rank-ordered 21st in the B band by the school was awarded a B grade by CCEA. Those are startling inconsistencies.

It is also seriously concerning that a pattern is emerging of a Minister who is consistently following a Conservative Government rather than leading for the people of Northern Ireland. That Conservative Government have adopted a slow, inadequate and flawed response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I sat in the Assembly on Wednesday 25 March as Chair of the Education Committee calling on the Education Minister to set a date for the planned closure of schools only to be told, "No. Now is not the time to close schools". Boris Johnson announced a closure of schools that same afternoon, and the Minister of Education immediately followed suit. I sat in the same place last Friday and put to the Education Minister that the only fair option was for him to award all pupils with whichever was highest of their AS-level, teacher-assessed or CCEA-calculated grade for GCSE and A level. I note —.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: No, I will not give way.

I note that that is not exactly what the Minister has announced, so I seek clarification on it. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, now, Member.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I seek clarification on that.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Just on that point, will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: I am happy to give way if you want to clarify that, Minister.

Mr Weir: Just to clarify that. The Member is referring specifically to the situation with the AS grade, and the grade will be the higher of the two. There are two reasons for that. The AS grade is based on 40% of the work whereas the other two grades represent the full two-year experience. However, we have also now reached a point at which everyone throughout the United Kingdom, where there was going to be complete competition, is now in exactly the same position. Indeed Wales, where reference was previously made to the AS grade, has now dropped that as an issue, and everybody is in the position of taking the higher of the two. I think that it would disadvantage our pupils if we were to muddy the waters by introducing that.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I thank the Minister for the intervention. He will, obviously, have a bit more time to go into that in a bit more detail.

There is also a concerning pattern of failing to heed contributions of the Education Committee and, indeed, the education profession. The Assembly and the Education Committee consistently questioned the approach to this matter, particularly the key aspects of it that failed so many pupils so badly. In particular, those were the rank-ordering approach that I referred to and the past school performance.

The Minister was questioned about why the rescheduling of exams was dismissed and rank ordering was used at the Ad Hoc Committee at which he announced the cancellation of exams, on 16 April, and the Education Committee held a number of sessions on those matters. We were absolutely clear that grades must be awarded on the basis of individual ability, and, for Christopher Stalford, I will refer to some of that. The Education Committee wrote to CCEA on 3 June emphasising that fairness and transparency must be key to this approach and expressed considerable concern in respect of the statistical model that was to be used to inform the awarding of grades, which had yet to be fully developed or subjected to any testing, and concern that its characteristics and method of application had yet to be explained and communicated to schools, including how the CCEA model would link to similar models across the UK. The Committee indicated clearly that an examination and appeal process should allow for individual variation and that professional teacher assessment would be a reliable basis on which to proceed. Indeed, it also said that appeals should be based on the characteristics and application of the statistical model, something that the Minister introduced only last week. So, we responded robustly.

I hope that the Minister will engage with the Committee on the matter, because urgent clarifications are needed, particularly of the timescale for grade allocations to pupils, colleges and universities and, in particular, on how he will work with the Minister for the Economy to ensure that those institutions have all the support that they need to

honour the offers that they have made to pupils across Northern Ireland. We cannot see this repeated next year, so we need urgent clarity on what the curriculum and assessment process will look like next year, including what contingency plan will be in place for post-primary admissions in 2021.

Mr Speaker: I call Robin Newton.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Like others, I welcome you back to the Chair.

In my opening remarks, I pay tribute to the pupils, students and teaching professionals of Northern Ireland. I want to recognise that, however you measure it, our education system is second to none across the world. It provides opportunities for progress. It provides opportunities for those with ambition and supports those who need support. That is characteristic of what the Minister has tried to do in his tenure in office.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member giving way, because Mr Lyttle was so reluctant to. Does the Member recall Mr Lyttle saying — it is in Hansard:

"It is safe to say that we, along with students, teachers, schools and parents, welcomed the clarity provided by the Minister last week on the question of examinations"?

There it is on the record.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Newton: On that theme, last Friday's Committee meeting was telling in terms of its politics; not the issue of the meeting but the politics of the meeting. The Minister subjected himself to a grilling, and he is to be commended for his performance at that meeting. We had two members of CCEA sitting outside the door and were about to interview them when the Chair did not want to divide the Committee but wanted to take a vote before the Committee listened to what CCEA had to say.

Peter Weir's tenure in office has been characterised by his ability, his interest, his willingness and his giving of himself to attend Committee meetings. He has been unstinting in that. I have to say that I have often wondered why he has done it, considering what has happened at some of the Committee meetings. Minister Weir characterises the Assembly's ambitions for our education system. He has recognised — this has already been paid tribute to — that many children and young people do not get the opportunities that they deserve and has taken action on it. He also acknowledges that there are many young people who do well, and he wants to support them so that they do even better. Minister Weir has made no comment about the campaign across Northern Ireland or across the UK. All he did was take action to make sure that Northern Ireland students were not disadvantaged in the UK.

We all want the best education system, the best opportunities, the best qualifications and the best skill sets for our children, our pupils, our students; indeed, that has characterised Minister Weir's tenure. We want the best examination results, and we want students to be tested against the best. We want that because we know that Northern Ireland students do extremely well. They have done extremely well this year and have done so in the past. I have no doubt that they will do extremely well

in future. Their abilities compare very favourably with any other set of pupils.

As I said, Minister Weir has attended the Committee unstintingly, but we need to move on to where we go next. I welcome two comments that were made, one of which was by Mr Alan Hutchinson, the principal, I believe, of Glaslough College, in today's 'Belfast Telegraph' today. Commenting on Mr Weir, he said:

"I think it is only proper that recognition is given to the Minister for Education, Mr Peter Weir, for doing the right thing. I appreciate that he was under considerable pressure to change his position on the grading system employed by CCEA and, in such circumstances, change requires great courage."

That comment was followed by another educational professional, who tweeted:

"It's a sign of strength and leadership to be able to reverse such a decision and I acknowledge and admire that Minister and I am grateful. Integrity is about doing the right thing no matter how hard it is. This decision shows integrity and leadership."

There are those who have criticised the Minister in the debate. Ms Mullan, the Deputy Chair of the Education Committee called the situation a "debacle". She said that students were failed and deserved far better. Our students deserve the very best, but there are other people in society who also deserve the very best, and a judge made a decision on that yesterday.

Ms C Kelly: At the heart of the past few days has been the future of a generation of young people unfortunate enough to be coming of age during a pandemic, a future that, it appears, the British Tory Government and the DUP were prepared to wantonly discard. I can understand a privately educated, privileged elite such as the British Cabinet having no regard for the hopes and aspirations of ordinary young people, but the DUP needs to open its eyes and start representing the people who vote for it.

Peter Weir waited until a British Minister in London gave way on the issue. Why? Why are children in the North of Ireland being held to ransom by decisions taken in England? Almost as soon as the results were known — first in Scotland and then in other jurisdictions — it was clear that something had gone very wrong. The education system is supposed to deliver equality of opportunity: last week, it delivered postcode discrimination.

Let us put on record what the British Government and the DUP were prepared to preside over: more than a third of results downgraded by algorithm; pupils studying in large schools located in disadvantaged areas most harshly treated; pupils from our black, Asian and minority ethnic communities likely to be more disadvantaged; and pupils with disabilities faring less favourably. In the end, it was political pressure, not conscience, that moved the British Government and the DUP. "Sorry" is not enough: the damage has already been done. University and college places have already been lost, and young lives have already been disrupted. A month that should have been filled with celebrations and preparation will for ever be remembered as an anxious and distressing time. A month that should have been filled with excitement for the future was replaced by uncertainty and confusion.

I call on DUP Ministers Peter Weir and Diane Dodds to work together to ensure that all of the young people who lost out when they were denied proper grades last week are helped to find a university or college place to meet their needs.

The British Government should play their part by removing the cap that they imposed on university places this year. We have already seen young people take to the streets to express their anger and demand their right to be treated fairly. Get them the places and the future that they deserve.

12.45 pm

Mr Stalford: Mr Speaker, first, I welcome you back to your place. I declare an interest in this matter as I have a niece who received her A-level results last week.

It is important that all Members consider how it is that we came to this pass. We are in this position because we are in the middle of a global public health crisis. Little over five months ago, the Executive decided that schools should close. The decision was also taken to put vast swathes of our economy into deep freeze until the crisis passed. Young people affected by these decisions will be paying for them, through their taxes, for a very, very long time. It is therefore vital that they are in the best possible position to attract and secure the best possible jobs and establish the best possible careers for themselves going forward, because the better that our young people do, the better that all of society in Northern Ireland will do.

Nobody could have foreseen the circumstances that are confronting us today. COVID has impacted on almost every aspect of every person's life in this country, and our young people undertaking GCSE, A-level and AS-level examinations have been hit particularly hard. It is also worth putting on the record in the House the extremely difficult situation facing students in fourth form and lower sixth as they go into a new school year. They will have to overcome significant challenges brought about by a loss of so much classroom learning time. It is in that context that we meet today.

People should always remember that we are living in unprecedented times. Formal school examinations were not stopped for the duration of World War II. They were not stopped for the three-day week. They did not stop for the winter of discontent or for the miners' strike. That should give us a sense of the scale of the challenge that we are tasked with dealing with.

In order to allow people to progress in their educational careers, a model of awarding qualifications that did not involve sitting formal examinations was going to be necessary because of the decisions taken to combat COVID. That, I assume, is accepted by everyone. Had the Minister, for example, suggested reopening schools to allow for the sitting of exams, I assume that there would have been widespread opposition in the House to such an idea. I am happy to give way to any Member who wishes to contradict me, although I urge the Chair of the Education Committee, who has been here longer than I, to cease chuntering from a sedentary position. It is not very becoming.

No model would have been without its flaws, and any Member pretending that they had the answer all along is engaging in a fantasy. The model that was in place had significant drawbacks, as does this one — grade inflation

being the most obvious. The Minister is right to respond to the concerns expressed, and I am pleased that no student from Northern Ireland will be placed at an unfair disadvantage in relation to their peers elsewhere on these islands.

I also welcome the Economy Minister's announcement in relation to securing additional university places, and I urge all colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive to get behind her and give her the support that she needs to secure the funding for those additional places.

These are unprecedented times. Problems with one system have been identified and a new system has been put in place. Concerns first raised on a Thursday were addressed by the Minister on the Monday. That is reasonable and proportionate, and no one should ever doubt the Minister's commitment to ensuring that every young person in Northern Ireland, whether at primary school, secondary school or going on to university, gets the best start in life.

Ms Kelly referred to people from a working-class background. I am from a working-class background. I was born in Annadale Flats and reared at the bottom of the Ravenhill Road. The best start in life that I had was in education at Wellington College Belfast. I am very proud of my roots. I was sent here to represent working-class communities, and I assure her that I would never want to preside over a situation in which such communities were treated unfairly or disadvantaged. By the actions that he has undertaken, the Minister has ensured that all students, regardless of their background, are not placed at an unfair —

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he agree that COVID has exacerbated existing disadvantages in the system, given that just over half of pupils in non-grammar schools scored at least five GCSEs at A* to C in comparison to grammar schools, where that figure was nearly 95%?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Stalford: I absolutely do accept that, because people from the sort of background that I came from had parents who could not pay for tutors. My parents could not pay for tutors. They could not pay for supplements to their education beyond the classroom-learning experience that I had, so I absolutely accept that. That needs to be addressed because every child, taking my constituency as an example, whether they are born in the Markets or the Malone Road, should be given the most ample opportunity to make the best start in life. I know that the Minister is committed to that.

Miss Woods: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: I have only 20 seconds left.

We are all trying to feel our way through the biggest national emergency that we have faced in a generation. We should be doing so with a view to securing the best outcomes for young people, not securing headlines on radio shows.

Dr Archibald: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome you back to your position.

Over the past few months, we have used the words "unprecedented" and "extraordinary" an awful lot, and Mr Stalford has made that point by using those words in his speech several times. While, obviously, the pandemic

and the crises in our health system and in our economy and society are unprecedented in modern times, we have had to try to deal with these things and the outworking of them as best as possible. However, for this particular scenario, in relation to the awarding of grades, there was a precedent from the week before in Scotland. Instead of being proactive and learning from the mistakes that were made elsewhere and taking an approach that was based on the well-being of our young people, the Minister stuck with a position that seems to have been much more about protecting the system. This should never have been about defending an algorithm; it should have been about the well-being of our young people and giving them clarity and confidence in their grades.

Instead, we have had almost a week of additional stress and anxiety for young people, their families and their teachers, and that will now be further compounded by additional delays and uncertainty around university admissions. Instead of taking a decision a week ago when it was clear from the Scottish example that we would face the same issues, the Minister dragged his feet and seems to have waited on the English Minister adopting a position before doing similar. Of course, it is not the first time in this crisis that a Minister has slavishly followed the lead of London rather than doing the right thing for citizens here.

The reality now unfolding is that there may be several hundred more students who, on the basis of this amended approach, obtained their conditional offers from universities. While that will definitely be a positive thing for those young people, our universities and colleges are unclear about what the implications will be for them. Universities normally have almost a week to prepare their admissions and are now in a position where they do not have the students' grades and are, of course, receiving calls from students and their parents enquiring about places. I hope that the new amended grades will be speedily communicated to the universities and the young people, and I hope that the Minister can perhaps clarify the timeline around that.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. A number of schools are already in a position where they can indicate to young people. Indeed, a number of schools have made representations and made themselves available to make that known to young people. Regarding universities, this morning, UCAS convened all the awarding bodies and, indeed, the regulators to ensure that all information goes to it. I do not believe that that process had concluded by the time that today's Assembly meeting had started. Legally, all information has to go to UCAS. I understand that the intention was to ensure that that happened within the next couple of days so that everybody would be dealt with, but CCEA and others have to directly give that to UCAS, which will then forward that on to all universities so that the position will be uniform for all students in the university system.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for clarifying that, and, hopefully, there will be a statement on that later today to give some clarity to universities and to the young people. We all know that our universities are allocated maximum students numbers each year and that, in a normal year, if they go over that number, they are fined. So yesterday, understandably, they were asking questions about what this would mean for them this year. Would they be able

to take all the students who obtained their conditional offer, and would they be funded for this? What about the impacts on courses that have quotas, such as medicine and nursing? What will the impact be on the intake for next year if those courses are filled up this year? Did the Education Minister consult Executive colleagues on all that, in particular the Economy Minister, about what this decision would mean and how they would deal with it and, more importantly, communicate it? What about the Health Minister? Did he talk to him about courses such as medicine, dentistry and nursing? What about teacher-training places? Have all those things being considered in taking this decision?

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for giving way. She rightly referred to the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Health having important roles to play as we move forward. Would it be right to expect a collegiate approach from the Executive, from a Sinn Féin perspective at least, in addressing these issues?

Dr Archibald: I am coming to that.

For every decision, obviously, there are consequences, but instead of planning and having the answers to these questions, we are now faced with further delay and distress. I very much welcome the fact that the Finance Minister has this morning said that he will work with Executive colleagues to identify the additional resources that may be necessary to deal with the outworkings of this decision.

Ms McLaughlin: Mr Speaker, you are very welcome back to the House.

I support the amendment. I concur with the sentiments, passion and dogged determination expressed by my colleague Daniel McCrossan and, indeed, with the comments of other Members across the House.

There is no doubt that we have done our young people a great disservice. We must learn from our mistakes. If you see a train coming down the track, it is best to get out of the way. The First Minister of Scotland set the precedent, but we did not follow.

I wish to concentrate my comments on maximum student numbers. Northern Ireland has a unique educational disadvantage across the four UK nations: the MaSN cap. This cap on student numbers holds back our economy by depriving it of the skills that we need. It has been a noose around the neck of our economy for years. This situation not only damages our productivity and decision-making but adds momentum to the Northern Ireland diaspora, breaking up families as children leave home to study in Great Britain, typically never to return. As a mother, I have seen my daughters leave Northern Ireland to study, and, indeed, they are both away at the moment. That is fine. However, when students want to stay at home and are not able to do so, we are forcing them away because we do not have enough university places. That splits up families, and it is heartbreaking. A few days ago, an OECD report concluded that it is not providing the next generation of graduate talent that our economy needs for the future. Also, we are not doing enough for those students who do not go to university; they need high-quality apprenticeships and a future in well-paid, emotionally rewarding work.

Today, however, is about the ongoing failure around the MaSN cap, which has become a crisis.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for giving way briefly. I absolutely agree that maximum student numbers need to be adjusted in these circumstances. Does the Member acknowledge that abolishing the MaSN cap would have significant funding implications and that any assistance that is provided to third-level education must be based on additional resources and not increased student fees?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms McLaughlin: I agree that we need to restructure our education and skills provision in Northern Ireland because the current system is inadequate.

The farce around A-level grades has forced our two universities to breach the MaSN cap imposed by the Department for the Economy. Last week, they offered places that they are bound to honour to students with the required minimum grades. This week, however, they are also bound to honour previous conditional offers to students who, with revised grades, now meet those conditions. This mess is not of the universities' making, yet it potentially creates a very serious financial situation for them. It is not a one-year problem. The universities will be breaching the MaSN cap this year and perhaps for the next three or four years for some courses because of the length of undergraduate programmes.

1.00 pm

Do we really expect the universities to pick up the financial cost of the A-level fiasco? Yesterday, the British media reported that the Education Secretary for England, Gavin Williamson, had promised that UK universities would be released from the student number cap to allow students with sufficient A-level grades to be accepted. That is, no doubt, a misreporting, because the British media does not understand the difference between the UK and Great Britain, but it allows us to consider an important point. This mess is not entirely of the making of Peter Weir, the Department of Education and CCEA; it is also the mess of the British Government. The answer is clear. We must lift the MaSN cap for Northern Ireland and allow students with sufficient grades to study at universities in Northern Ireland. We must not expect the two universities here to pick up the bill for that and, given the role of the UK Government, we expect the Education, Economy and Finance Ministers here to very robustly make the case to the UK Government that they should pick up the bill for that.

I have one final point. As a Foyle MLA, I urge Ulster University to allocate an additional MaSN to the Magee campus. It remains a scandal that Northern Ireland's second city does not have a full-sized university campus. The SDLP will not rest until that is achieved. That is a pledge that we make in memory of John Hume.

The Minister for the Economy and the Executive have an opportunity today, not just to deal with the latest result of what COVID has done to our society but to reset the future and provide a better future for our children's generation. Let us not allow that prize to slip from our grasp.

Mrs Barton: Mr Speaker, I also welcome you back. Having listened to the debate in the Chamber this afternoon, I feel that it is paramount that we move forward to try to mitigate any fallout that there has been from the issuing last Thursday of the so-called results using an unseen algorithm, an unseen algorithm that obviously had not been trialled previously.

Receiving results of any kind is particularly stressful, but that is even more the case when our future careers depend on those results. This year, our young people, along with their parents and teachers, have had a particularly stressful time since the abrupt ending of the school year and the worries that lockdown imposed on their education. They have now had to deal with another stressful situation. Last Thursday brought about nothing but disappointment for our young people, their parents and their hard-working teachers, particularly as the day advanced and they learned that the results that they were awarded had nothing to do with the work that the teachers had done in assessing their grades. No consideration was given to the long and tedious task that teachers had in putting together evidence to support their predicted grades for each pupil.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does she agree with me that, given what has happened, it is vital that the Minister and CCEA produce for the public the algorithm that was used that overrode the judgement of teachers? In the interests of transparency, it is vital that that is the case. Does the Member agree?

Mrs Barton: Yes, I do. I would have liked to see the algorithm. I think that we need to see it to —.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute. Sorry about that.

Mrs Barton: Now, a U-turn has taken place and teacher-predicted grades have been accepted as an option for the final grade. There must be a concerted effort to ensure that our A-level students are not disadvantaged further, in any way. First, there must be an assurance that help will be available through our health service and our mental health agencies to support those who have really suffered as a result of the fiasco and who may continue to suffer. Secondly, those frustrated young people must be given the opportunity to accept their places on their original first choice of course, whether those are in further education colleges or universities, and be permitted to start immediately. Those students must not be asked to defer until next year. This situation is not of their making.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with you about the need for the Health Minister to provide support where it is required. Will you also agree that, as we move forward and young people take up places in universities, the Minister for the Economy, Diane Dodds, will also need support and that there should be a collegiate approach from the Executive to address the issues?

Mrs Barton: Yes, indeed. I agree that there must be a collegiate approach, and I will deal with that in a few moments. With the larger numbers now having the opportunity to take up a university place, funding must immediately be sourced by the Minister for the Economy and be put in place to resource the universities for not only next year but the next three to four years, which is the average length of a university course that many of those extra students will be allocated to.

I am aware of some universities that have particularly popular courses, such as medicine, that have already raised concerns about the lack of capacity, staffing, accommodation and facilities if numbers are increased, especially when they are also trying to ensure that staff and students are kept safe as they reopen and need to continue to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

While most of the debate today has been around A-level results, and rightly so, we must not forget about those still waiting to receive their BTEC grades. To date, there has been no clarity about how those students will be affected. With universities filling up, there is growing anxiety among those students. I appeal to you, Minister, to try and resolve this situation post-haste.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for giving way. In relation to BTEC grades, I understand that part of the problem there has been with awarding bodies, such as Pearson and Cambridge. The regulations of boards that are outside Northern Ireland lie with the English regulators, similar to A levels that are awarded by bodies outside Northern Ireland. Obviously, we will make representations, but BTEC lies outside any actual direct control that I or the Economy Minister have. So, at best, we can act like others to try and push the issue, but we do not have control over it.

Mrs Barton: Minister, thank you for that clarification. I urge you and the Minister for the Economy to get going post-haste and make sure that there is no more damage done to our young people.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus fáilte ar ais. Welcome back, Mr Speaker, and I also welcome back other Members who have been isolating over the last number of months.

I am not going to rehearse all the events of the last week. Nor am I here to bash the Minister because I have been there, done that, worn the t-shirt and have a full head of grey hair as a result of it. I know the burden that the Minister carries, I know the burden that other Ministers carry, and I do not envy any of their roles at this time because they are carrying additional burdens as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. By and large, our Executive have responded well to that pandemic, so I am not here to criticise but I am here to challenge. It is the role of the Assembly and Committees to hold our Ministers and the Executive to account.

I want to start with one of the last points that the Minister made in relation to the English and Welsh awarding bodies, and this frustrated me when I was Minister as well. I am of the view that any examination board plying their wares here should be held to account by the Minister here and by the accreditation bodies here. It is ridiculous that we have organisations selling exams to our schools, but yet there is little and, in some cases, no accountability over them. This crisis has exposed that as a failing in the examinations system. I am of the view that we should have one examinations body that is accountable to our Minister, our Education Committee and our Assembly. That is something that we should look at moving forward.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member accept that there is a wide choice of subject areas, and if we are going to provide examinations for all the possible subject areas, it would be inordinately expensive to manage and unpractical?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr O'Dowd: Scotland seems to do very well at it. That brings me on to a comment from Mr Newton. We do not have a world-class education system. We have world-

class educators. I think that our pupils have the potential to be world class, given half a chance in the classroom and in the home, but we do not have a world-class education system. That is not the fault of this Minister, the previous Minister or the Minister before that. Since the power-sharing institutions were established, we have been starting to see an education system develop here, and the challenges and support that the local Executive can put in place are moving us forward — incrementally and slowly at times, but we are moving forward.

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Very quickly.

Mr Newton: I want to support your comments. Is it not always the case that we talk about the charges for and the cost of education rather than investment in education and the outworkings of that investment in education?

Mr O'Dowd: OK. Thank you for your comments.

I want to touch on how the Minister and CCEA put in place a mechanism, which, I accept, although quotes have been thrown back and forth, most people welcomed because it was seen as a solution to there being no exams. However, once that solution was seen to have failed, you had to move to an alternative, and that is what concerns me about the response of the Minister and CCEA. This matter could have been resolved on Friday. The Education Committee worked collectively on Friday — I accept that there was also some politicking outside the Committee — to bring forward a solution. That could have been adopted. The matter could have been resolved on Saturday, or on Sunday, when my party was engaging with officials from the Minister's party. There could have been an intensification of that engagement.

My concern is this: the Minister, or people close to the Minister, did not see that there was a problem until late on Sunday night. Then, on Monday morning, they acted in relation to GCSEs. At that stage, they should have realised that only one solution was left to them, which was to move in relation to A levels as well. The Minister has said that he did not want to move — I am not directly quoting him — because he did not want to disadvantage our students in comparison with students in England and Wales. However, by failing to move at that stage, did he not disadvantage our students because he did not give them an advantage? Had the Minister stepped forward and led, as our Education Minister and the Education Minister for our schools and for our pupils, he could have given our pupils an advantage, whereas many of our students are now fighting for places in Scottish, Welsh and English universities, and, indeed, in universities across the border, which are being filled by Scottish students, by Welsh students and, now, by English students as well. The Minister, by not giving our students an advantage, was actually disadvantaging them.

I want to move on to what has to happen next. Our Minister's copybook is blotted. His leadership has been questioned. In the days and weeks ahead, we need to see decisive leadership because our schools now face the bigger challenge of reopening. As a parent and as an elected representative, I want to ensure that we have a Minister who is leading from the front, a Minister who is giving confidence to me as a parent and as an elected representative, and to our school leaders and pupils, that those schools are reopening safely and that all

measures that can be taken are being taken to ensure that they open full time and safely over the next weeks and months, because that is where parents' minds are at now. Yes, university is important, but, Minister, you have an opportunity to step forward and give decisive leadership on the reopening of schools. That is what is needed from you and your Department now.

Ms Armstrong: Mr Speaker, it is good to see you back in your Chair. I know, from the number of meetings that we have had through the Business Office, that you have been working quite hard throughout this time.

I would like to take the opportunity, very quickly, to take a moment to say this to the SDLP: you lost a giant; we all lost a giant, and I have been thinking of you during those sad times, then and now.

On 12 August, which was the day before the A-level results came out, it was United Nations International Youth Day. The United Nations said that the day was:

“an opportunity to celebrate and mainstream young peoples' voices, actions and initiatives, as well as their meaningful, universal and equitable engagement.”

At this stage, I pay tribute to our young people across Northern Ireland. It has been an extremely stressful time for them and their parents, and I declare an interest as the mummy of an AS student who received grades last week.

I pay tribute to those young people. They were dignified in their response to what they were going through. I pay particular attention to the Secondary Students' Union of Northern Ireland, the various students' unions across the area and the teachers' unions because they have shown us that, with a singular voice, they had strength. I am glad, as Daniel McCrossan said, that those concerns were heard and finally taken on board by the Minister, but the job is not done yet.

1.15 pm

Today, I will not talk about the good work of the Education Committee or any of the Members here; I will talk as a parent. The job is not done yet. There are many, many questions on which parents and students need to have clarification. One of the ways out of the debacle would be to answer those questions. For example, saying that CCEA will get the grades out soon is not good enough. We need to know the date on which they will be received. We need to know when UCAS will receive those grades so that we can finally find out what will happen to those young people who want to move forward into higher education. What communication has there been from Northern Ireland to UCAS to identify those students who will still lose out on a place because of the late changes to grades and perhaps some places have been filled?.

Today's amendment calls on the whole Executive, but we need to hear from the Minister for the Economy on what is happening with the money for university places. We cannot take away the cap on university places. We are potentially looking at an additional 1,000 students for Queen's University and probably the same number for Ulster University. That could equate to an additional £10 million per year for each year going forward for three or four years.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member for giving way. Those of us who are Committee Chairs will have seen a letter from the Minister of Finance that suggests that in the region of £35 million may be available in-year. So, maybe, if we are looking for a collegiate, cross-Executive approach to deal with the problem of a cap on university places, all the political parties here today could commit to using that money.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you, Mr Aiken. That is absolutely the collegiate approach that we need to pull Northern Ireland out of this. In-year funding of £35 million solves one year. Can we have that across all the years so that children such as my daughter and her cohort, who have completed AS levels, are not impacted next year when they might find that there are not enough places available? We know that Minister Dodds has been under extraordinary pressure because of the issues that we have with COVID, but she cannot delay on this. Unlike the excluded in Northern Ireland, we cannot see any delays on this.

I turn, then, to the Minister for Communities. Another issue has come forward from parents: are there enough student housing places available at our universities for those students? Will landlords see this as an opportunity to raise already exorbitant rent even further?

We need to think about the wider implications and what will happen going forward. If we are going to increase the number of university places, there are more things that we need to consider. What about student loans? Will the Student Loans Company be able to cope with the additional requests that will come through?

Mental health services are an issue. We have young people who have just completed their A2, who are not going back to school and who will not have that teacher support. Will the Minister of Education look to Youth Services to provide mental health support to young people to ensure that what they have gone through, and the awful COVID situation that we are all going through, are considered?

The BTEC results were mentioned by Rosemary Barton. Those students need their results. We are leaving those students behind, and I encourage the Minister of Education and the Minister for the Economy to get in touch with Pearson and the other bodies to find out what is happening.

I will not discuss the school restart programme because I know that the Education Committee will deal with that later today. The restart is another huge job that must be done.

In closing, however, I would like to say that, while all this is going on, special educational needs students are still being ignored and their supported employment programme might be closed down. Those young people have just left school, too, and I wish that the House and the public were as vexed about their future as we are about A-level students. Some of our students need assistance, some of our students need to know what their future is, and we cannot leave them behind.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Agus mo bhúochas leat, agus is deas tú a athfheiceáil ar ais sa chathaoir. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am glad to see you back in the Chair. I am delighted.

All of us have been inundated with the queries, questions, problems, issues and raw emotion of students and families generated by, as people are calling it, the A-level fiasco.

I have to compliment the Minister for realising that it was definitely going in the wrong direction, because I was contacted by schools facing an absolute avalanche of appeals. Frankly, all you would need to have thrown into the middle of that — the Minister will be well acquainted with this from his legal background — would be a judicial review or two. That would have left us, maybe at Christmas time, still sitting and nothing resolved.

Minister, thank you for realising the situation that we were in and making the decision that you made. It was not an easy decision for you, I have to say, Minister. I watched your performance at the Committee last week, but you did what you needed to do when you were faced with the reality of that situation.

Yesterday, I had a young mother in with me, who was very emotional. That was at about 2.00 pm and I said to her to wait until about 4.00 pm because an announcement was to be made in GB, more specifically in England, that may have had consequences for us.

We are at this point now, however it has created a lot of distress among young people. We have to emphasise the point that university for young people is not the be-all and end-all. Many young people will go on to have very successful careers. I know many who have never gone near university but who have gone on, adapted and moved to very successful non-academic careers. Many of them are in my constituency in the field of manufacturing and they are being absolutely creative with the skills they have been gifted.

However, the message that I am still receiving is that this could have been done much, much better. The school principals with whom I have been tic-tacking about this have been trying to manage this emotional and professional roller coaster. Some of the schools are deeply resentful. One principal wrote to me:

"This year CCEA requested centre-assessed grades and detailed guidance be provided, and how this was to be carried out. Staff took a minimum of two weeks to complete this exercise. There were several Zoom meetings and moderation meetings to reach the decisions. Then the provisional grades were sent to principals. Further deliberation took place before the grades were finalised and the data entered into the new system set up by CCEA. Each principal had to sign off on every subject. I keep asking myself in what other profession would the decision taken by the person who is most qualified to make it be totally disregarded?"

That was from one principal. Another principal referred to the little consideration that was given to teacher-predicted grades — I will not go over that again — no consideration being given to pupil performance and improvement, especially with pupils taking resits, and there always being a significant percentage difference between AS and A2s in that specific school. That factor does not seem to have been considered.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGlone: Yes, surely, Minister.

Mr Weir: On a point of accuracy, in relation to resits, where they had been planned that is part of the formula which was taken into account for A levels where there was a resit of an AS. That is not simply those that took place as a resit, but for those that were planned, because there is a recognition that where there are resits, though it differs from subject to subject, generally speaking there will be some rise in the results as a result of a resit within each subject. That was part of the formula that was applied to A levels.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for that.

Another point raised by the same principal was:

“English examination boards did not change any of our grades, and CCEA changed 65% of the grades. Why? The other aspect of this that we are moving into is does CCEA hold data on pupils in receipt of free school meals and pupil outcomes, so that an impact assessment can be carried out as to what demographic factors of candidates have been most impacted by the use of a flawed system, that is gender, free school meals and ethnic groups.”

The other point raised was whether there is any differential in the algorithm or model devised by PwC for £100,000, between grammar and non-selective schools.

There is, of course, as I referred to, the impact on the mental well-being of already stressed pupils and their parents.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Just very briefly, yes.

Dr Aiken: Just for clarity. Was it PwC that was paid £100,000?

Mr McGlone: That is my understanding; I read that in the media somewhere. However, I suggest that those matters are best dealt with through an inquiry at the Committee, or possibly the Public Accounts Committee; it may well be best referenced there.

We are in the position now — I am sure that this has been repeated, so give me a wee bit of forbearance — where CCEA must get those results out as soon as is humanly possible.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McGlone: There are special educational needs to be addressed. There is a requirement for schools to reopen, but there is also a need for additional university places to accommodate those who have been left out so far.

Mr Beggs: I, too, welcome you back, Mr Speaker, to chairing the proceedings in the Assembly, and I welcome Deputy Speaker Patsy McGlone back to the Chamber. I, in turn, will be freer to speak from this side of the Chamber where I was, perhaps, curtailed in the past.

I, too, support the motion as amended. The original motion reflected the community's concerns about the awards that were originally made by CCEA in a process that was approved by the Department and the Minister. It was, clearly, a flawed process.

Awaiting an A-level result is a stressful time at the best of times, but even more so when you have not sat an exam

and there is the uncertainty of an algorithm that governs the final results. There was a huge responsibility to ensure that due diligence was carried out, but it appears that that was not the case. It was governed more by restricting increases to 2%. As a result, many students were downgraded who, clearly, should not have been. That has been incredibly stressful for the students and their families. Many thought that their future careers were lost. I am pleased that there was a dramatic U-turn yesterday and that sense was seen.

Why do I say that there were flaws? I will give examples of some of the students who have been reported to me. One history student got a C at AS level. In their mock A level, they got a B. They were predicted a B, but they were awarded an E. They had been improving, but the result was significantly worse. Another student was predicted a B and a C in double-award science, but they got a D and an E. Perhaps the most surprising one that I have come across is a student who studied government and politics. All along, they reached A-grade attainment levels; they got an A in their mock, and their teacher predicted an A. They were awarded a C. Anyone who looked at the individual assessments would have questioned what was going on. It was not right.

Another student who got an A at their GCSE examination and was being predicted a B was awarded a D. There is clear evidence that there were obvious flaws that should have been spotted. There was, potentially, an appeals mechanism, but why did all those students have to go through that trauma when there were obvious flaws in the system? There was a fault at the core of what was happening.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member across the Chamber stated that the Minister acted on Thursday, once he was aware of the issue. In fact, CCEA contacted principals on Wednesday; it knew about the flaws. Scotland should have been a red alert. Does the Member agree that the Minister waited too long to rectify the situation?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Beggs: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I agree entirely; it should have been apparent even before the community were up in arms about the results that were happening, which caused undue stress to students and their parents. It appears that the algorithm was governing it. I have a tip for the Education Committee: use the 1998 Act to get the algorithm. You are entitled to it.

It is important that there is transparency about what went on. It appears that some students were assessed on previous school groups that may not have reached the same level of attainment. It is also a fact that they were ranked in their group, irrespective of where the group level was. They were being marked down; the mark did not reflect their personal situation and track record.

1.30 pm

Turning to the amendment, it is clear that we now need to move on. I am pleased that the Minister did his U-turn, but the job is not finished yet. Students are now being given their new awards, and I am pleased, but all students must get those final predicted awards from their teachers as soon as possible. When will that be? It is not over then. The problem then moves on to our higher education facilities.

Who are they going to accept? Sadly, some conditional offers have been withdrawn. What will happen to those students? There needs to be clarity. Will the universities be able to accept and fulfil those original awards? It will be totally unfair if students are awarded the grades that they think will get them into university for their desired course but do not then get in. It is essential that the Department of Education, the Department for the Economy, the Executive and our universities work closely together to give clarification, as quickly as possible, so that each of these students can learn and get to the course that they wish to, as soon as possible, and move on in their careers.

We must learn from this and ensure that it does not happen again. I hope that the Minister is already putting processes in place to ensure that students will have examinations next year and that we will not be relying on such a flawed system that has caused so much controversy. I would have thought that, in hindsight — hindsight is a wonderful thing — when schools were empty during the pandemic, it would have been possible to have had examinations and, undoubtedly, that would have been better than a prediction.

I welcome the fact that the position has changed and I ask the Minister, the Executive and the universities to move forward, as quickly as possible, to finalise what our students are going to be doing.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Like everyone else, I welcome you back to your place. It is good to see you back.

Like other Members, from my party and across the House, I support the motion and the amendment. Obviously, we proposed and have worked with other parties to develop them so I will support them.

I congratulate the Minister on making this decision. I understand that, in politics, it can sometimes be difficult to change your position under extreme pressure, so I welcome that he had the maturity to do that. It worries me that it took the Minister so long to do that and that his decision came only after the increasingly chaotic Secretary of State for Education in England, Gavin Williamson, made a similar decision. As others have said, it simply cannot be the case that public policy outcomes for our young people, or anyone else in Northern Ireland, are dictated by what the Conservative Government in London do first.

I will try to be brief in my remarks. The Minister has said over the last few days, and several DUP MLAs have repeated today, that one of the primary motivations for this decision was to ensure similar treatment to students in other parts of the UK. Yes, it is important to ensure that our young people are not treated worse than those against whom they are competing for university places. I speak as someone who went to university in Scotland. I repeat, as others have, that if the Minister thinks that the only good reason for performing this U-turn is to give us consistency with England, Scotland and Wales, with the greatest of respect — I mean respect, given the enormous pressure he has been under for the past few days — he has not understood the intensity of feeling on the issue. This was not just about being treated the same as English, Welsh and Scottish students; it was about addressing a very profound sense of injustice felt by individual students at being downgraded, not based on work that they had done,

but on an algorithm that they had never seen. Indeed, most of us had never seen.

I understand, and it is worth acknowledging again, that there was never going to be an ideal or easy outcome when schools were closed and exams cancelled, but the truth is that absolute statistical consistency and a focus on stopping any grade inflation — as it is called — was the wrong approach in such an anomalous and unique year. Christopher Stalford, who has now left the Chamber, was right in saying that we have asked a huge amount from our young people during the COVID-19 crisis, particularly those who were going through exams. That is why it was all the more important that we did our absolute best for them through the examination process.

I acknowledge that the Minister will have made his decision based on what he believed to be best for the system and the students. However, given that they faced the extraordinary injustice of being denied schooling — the first generation since the introduction of universal second-level education to be denied schooling en masse — it was all the more important that we did the absolute best for them. The truth was that a sense of random injustice was created by the COVID-19 crisis, which has limited life for all of us. It is an extraordinary imposition on life and has created extraordinary disruption, and they have felt that more than any. That is why it was, in a sense, even worse to create the random injustice of an algorithm rather than judging them on work that they had done and the judgement of their teachers.

I am glad that various parties in the Assembly came together, inspired by and as demanded by young people and their families. As I said, this is not a perfect solution, in part because there are no perfect solutions. There is no good outcome in these circumstances. That said, lots of young people and their families will be relieved and will have been relieved over the last 12 or 24 hours to be in a better position. However, this throws up significant short-term challenges that I know that the Minister will be working on. Those have been covered by other Members and include ensuring that we get the updated grades — the predicted grades — to students as quickly as possible and that the transition process to university works as quickly as possible. There are lots of other challenges that the Education Committee and the Economy Committee will have to examine.

This also throws up stark, long-term lessons about our education system and how it fails our young people. Robin Newton, the former Speaker, said earlier that we have one of the best education systems in the world. To put it bluntly, that is not true. Some of the inequalities thrown up by this process have underlined inequalities that existed in the past. The Minister has commissioned a group to look at educational inequalities, and I welcome that. However, if this process is to do anything, let us make it look hard at what we want to get out of our education system, from 11 through to university, including the cap on student numbers —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — because that leads to unfortunate outcomes and dampens our productivity.

In welcoming today's motion, I say that we have short and long-term challenges to focus on.

Dr Aiken: I join my party members in welcoming you back. I also say to the SDLP that John Hume was, indeed, a colossus on the Northern Ireland and global political stage. His advice and guidance will be very much missed by our party as well.

Many Members have talked today about the implications of what has happened with the A-level debacle and fiasco. I do not wish to join in an attack on and criticism of the Education Minister. It is vital that we get to the bottom of what happened. The first thing, which our learned friend from South Belfast talked about, is the importance of the need to recognise that we are in the midst of a COVID pandemic. We are not in normal times. However, despite the fact that we are not in normal times, we have known all along that the GCSE, AS and A-level results were going to come out. We have known for many months that the situation was going to occur. Indeed, as we have heard, we probably spent a considerable amount of money with PwC in creating an algorithm to look at these problems. This did not happen over just one or two days. This happened over a considerable time.

We are in a situation here in which the Assembly is being asked to look at a system that, until the changes happened on Monday, meant that our young people would have been significantly disadvantaged, not just for now or for the coming year but for the rest of their life. I am at the tender age at which I am still asked, if I put my name in for a board or a board position, what my A-level and GCSE results were. I did not do AS levels. That is an example of the implications of the problems that we have had in Northern Ireland. There are substantial questions of leadership here that must be answered. Our party will join in the process of asking to make sure that there is a full and thorough investigation of this.

Some fundamental questions need to be asked, and I want the Minister to answer them. We know that our universities ran a model in July to look at the likely number of students that they would have. It used A levels, AS grades and teachers' predictions. It was fundamentally different from the model that CCEA was using. Why were the alarm bells not ringing at that stage, Minister? Why were your special advisers and members of your Department not saying that there was something fundamentally flawed and wrong?

This did not come out of the blue, given what happened in Scotland, where the Education Minister there, even though they had been given advice two weeks beforehand that it would be a substantial problem, realised that that was the case and did a U-turn. The fact that we had to wait so long for a U-turn to occur has meant that there are students right now who do not even know whether they will go to university this year. Some had already received a conditional offer but cannot go now. Students who had received a conditional offer and were about to go to university do not know whether that will be overturned or potentially overturned by some form of judicial process. This has been a fundamental failure. I know that we do not seem to hold anybody accountable or responsible for anything in Northern Ireland, but, on this occasion, somebody must be held accountable and responsible for what has happened to our students, to our parents and to our teachers.

In my last minute, I would like to talk about teachers. Teachers were asked, because of COVID and all the difficulties that there were, to use their best professional

judgement. They were asked to look at what grades their students were likely to get in their AS levels and A levels. They were told that they had to be especially rigorous and to look at everything in significant detail. They had to make sure that everything that they did in their process was rigorous. They were also asked to look at a merit order of where pupils sat in their various subjects. When that went to the algorithm to be run through the computer, the universities used what the teachers said, based on their best professional judgement, to get the qualifications, but CCEA used the merit ranking system. We do not know any more details about that because, a bit like the emails about PPE that have mysteriously never arrived, it seems to be some form of secret.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much indeed. We will support the motion.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I welcome you back. I share in offering my condolences to the wider SDLP family.

All this could have been avoided today. Yesterday's decision is a welcome result for the voices of teachers, parents, pupils and students, and credit to them for demanding an equitable resolution. Recent events have brought incredible distress. There will not be one MLA here who has not been contacted by someone asking for help. Every summer, we deal with students who are not treated fairly by the system, so this is not a new issue. We have the worst levels of students leaving education with no qualifications.

The grades, the algorithms and the workings out that have been discussed for the last couple of days and here today are actually children and young people's lives. Let us take a moment and think about the educational journey that they could have been on. Hopefully, our child gets a nursery place, with good-quality, funded childcare. However, without proper early years provision or a childcare strategy, maybe our young person's start in life is not as good as it needs to be. Then, our child attends school, at age 4, separately; the earliest in Europe. Some will be able to get into their first preference primary school; others will not. Maybe our young person has recognised special educational needs, or maybe they will spend years trying to get statemented. They will receive a uniform and a free school meals payment. Maybe the school is underfunded and under-resourced.

Then on to big school. Maybe our young person did not do the transfer test or did not do well enough in it to get into the school that their friends go to. Maybe they get a place in their third or fourth preference school or whatever place they can get because all the others were oversubscribed. Maybe they face other barriers. Maybe they do not feel like they fit in and are subject to bullying, like nearly half of students in Northern Ireland. Maybe they have freckles, or maybe, like me, they are not as tall as their peers. Maybe they are LGBTQ. Maybe they have a disability. Maybe they do not have English as their first language. Maybe the young person is a carer, too, has additional at-home responsibilities or is in care themselves. Maybe they are one of the 25% of children who are growing up in poverty in Northern Ireland, from one of 103,000 families struggling to make ends meet, impacted by austerity and by the horrific so-called reform of social security. Maybe

the young person does not get a nutritious meal at the end of the day. Maybe they are one of the 15,000 children who were fed using an emergency food package last year alone. Maybe they have additional needs. Maybe there is abuse in the home. Maybe there is drug or alcohol addiction. Perhaps our young person is one of the 35,000 who went to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services for mental health support in 2018. Perhaps they are one of the one in 10 in the classroom who has a diagnosable mental health illness.

Despite all the barriers that our young person could have faced, they managed to get to the examination stage this year, working hard to deal with COVID, lockdown and adapting to the new normal — that is if they have the technology in place to do so or the support networks at home.

1.45 pm

On top of everything else that we as a society demand from our children and young people and regardless of COVID, an unjust system is imposed that standardises them and bases their academic performance in part on the basis of other people, some of whom they have never met, and not on the individual's work. Some defended a system that most of us did not understand, let alone got sight of, rather than defending our children and young people. We talk much about aces, supporting our young people and educational underachievement, but the current approach is embedding division and disadvantage further, ensuring that the divide continues. Our job as public servants is to serve the next generation, not to destroy it, and I remind our young people that exam results do not make you as a person. They are not the whole picture, and they will not wholly determine everything that you do in your life. There are certainly no exam qualifications needed to be in this Chamber.

Last year, 158 young people left school with no GCSEs, and 131 left with no formal qualification of any kind. How many will there be this year? How many will there be next year? Those who are entitled to free school meal payments are twice as likely to be recorded as unemployed after they leave school. If the Minister's prime concern remains that young people in Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged, why were we dragged through this mess, and what are we going to do? What are the Executive's plans to address the inequalities that are evident in the figures for our school-leavers? Will there be a review of what happened this year? Will an impact assessment be published? Will there be an inquiry? What about next year? What about the AS levels? What about university places and clearing?

This is not just about grades; it is about a totally unfair system and the need for the long-term transformation from assessment and qualifications that must happen and an Executive who actually do something practical about it.

Mr Allister: It has been interesting for me to observe the internecine blame game between the Executive parties. However, make no mistake about it: this is a shambles made in Stormont. It is not the first, and, I fear, it will not be the last. I welcome the fact that the Minister eventually came to the point of U-turn. I remain critical, however, of the blindness and deafness of the Department and the Minister to the problem for so long.

What everyone else could see on Thursday the Minister denied. What everyone else could see on Friday the Minister denied. Eventually, on Monday morning, he came to the realisation that he was on untenable ground, which was also, of course, shrinking ground, and that he had to make the U-turn on GCSEs. Even in making that U-turn, he compounded the insult to teachers in our community. He accepted that teacher grades for GCSE were the appropriate benchmark and decider but persisted in saying, "Not so" about the same teachers' grades when it came to A levels. Then, belatedly, on Monday, when the ground was removed totally from below him, he came to accept that as well. It was that deafness and blindness to the problem that was the greatest weakness that the Minister showed in all of this. I commend the very many pupils, parents and teachers who campaigned to great effect and eventually secured what was rightfully theirs from the beginning. I commend them for that and for the vigour and determination that they showed.

Now, of course, we are at the halfway point of the crisis. We are at the point where university places that had been dangled before students were, because of the perverse CCEA results, snapped away from them. The question now is whether they can be returned to them. Of course, it is vital that those who have now got the rightful grades that they were first denied also get the university places that, to this point, they have been denied. That will take extra funding. Yes, Sinn Féin, which ridicules following the GB examples, will, of course, be the first party with its hand out for the funding to enable that to happen, because I suspect that it will be on the back of Barnett consequentials that extra funding will be provided. That will not be for just this year — these are three- and four-year courses — but for future years. That must be done if some degree of equity and fairness for our students is to be salvaged from this.

It is not just a matter of leaving it there. How did we get here? Is CCEA fit for purpose? That question needs to be asked, because it was not just the Minister who defended CCEA: the chief executive of CCEA could not have been more bullish in his defence of this indefensible system.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr McCrossan: Does the Member agree that there are serious questions to be raised about the secrecy that surrounds the CCEA process, particularly on this occasion, which has shone a bright light on how it functions?

Mr Allister: I agree absolutely.

Mr Speaker: The Member will have an extra minute.

Mr Allister: Thank you. I trust that the Education Committee will take up the cudgels on the issue and conduct an investigation of how we got here, whether CCEA is fit for purpose and what lessons are to be learned. It is not a matter that can be let rest. The Minister was effusive in his support for CCEA. Did the Minister have complete sight of the algorithm that has failed — if he did, it compounds his folly — or did he leave it to CCEA and, in leaving it to CCEA, was he let down? Those are questions that we need answers to. There is blame in various quarters, and I certainly do not exempt CCEA. It is not the first time that CCEA has messed up on exams.

It was on a far lesser scale in the past, but this is not the first time. A long, hard, vigorous look needs to be taken at CCEA to see exactly where things went wrong.

Fundamentally, in all of this, we should think about the students and the pupils and the unnecessary distress that they were put through last weekend. It should have been rectified before Thursday. It should, at least, have been rectified on Thursday. Instead, students were hung out to worry —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Allister: — and their parents left to despair over what all their efforts had been for. That was wrong.

Mr Carroll: Mr Speaker, I welcome you back and wish you good health in the period ahead.

I thank the Members for bringing the motion to the House. Many have acknowledged the recent U-turn on A level and GCSE results as a good decision. We in People Before Profit recognise it for what it is: a forced decision. Of course, a "Well done" is in order for forcing the U-turn but not for the Minister. I say, "Well done" to the pupils who gathered in protest, not just here but across the water. I say, "Well done" to the parents and teachers who used every platform available to them to rebuke the disastrous situation that we saw last week and to stand up for young people and their futures and to organisations such as the National Union of Students - Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI), the Secondary Students' Union and many others.

As has been alluded to already, this situation has exposed many deeper problems in our education system, whether it is the division of children on the basis of academic ability or the state's expectation that children in impoverished areas should underperform compared with their counterparts in more affluent areas. Those issues and others, such as the outdated division of pupils on the basis of their religion, remain. However, I am encouraged that those in the education system are up for the fight for a better system with proper investment, even if those in charge of the system are not.

I am sure that many of the people who are rooted in our education system recognise that the COVID crisis has had an incredibly challenging impact on the sector and that navigating the crisis was never going to be easy. I am sure that many of those people, including the pupils, would have understood if the response to the situation had been a humbled Minister who recognised the gravity of the error that was made and moved swiftly to rectify it. They did not deserve a doubled-down response, but that is exactly what they got. I was appalled, as, I know, parents, pupils and teachers were, to hear the Minister say that, if teachers' predictions were used alone without standardisation, the results would have no credibility. What disdain for our teachers and teaching staff.

That level of arrogance has been thematic in the approach to schools during the crisis. Initially, the Assembly refused to shut schools down to protect communities, forcing principals and teachers to act. Then, it totally disregarded the planning and experience that were put into designing the phased return in the new school term to minimise the spread of the virus by commanding the full opening of schools with little consultation. Now, this latest example has undermined the intensive work put in by teachers to

guarantee to the best of their ability that their pupils would get the grades that they deserved by deeming their efforts to have no credibility. It is no wonder that there is a lack of trust in the intentions or ability of the Minister among the many teachers who have spoken out publicly. I, too, am unconvinced that the arrogance that was displayed during the crisis befits an Education Minister. The unwillingness to listen to or consult properly those in the system who best understand the needs of pupils is inappropriate for the person responsible for making decisions about their future.

I tried to table an amendment today calling on the Minister to resign after what, I believe, was a series of disastrous decisions during this crisis, most of which were a result of blindly following the path of Boris Johnson's Government rather than creating a response that was based on the needs of people here. This most recent disastrous decision should be the final nail in the ministerial coffin. It is time for a new chapter in our education system that recognises the problems and mistakes of the past, seeks to invest properly in its future and that of all our young people and gives primacy to the needs and experience of those who are rooted in the education system. I ask other MLAs to join me in kick-starting that new chapter today by calling on the person responsible for the disastrous handling of this crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic to have the good grace to step aside. Unfortunately, I have not been allowed to debate that today, but I make the same call and hope that others will join me in calling for the Minister's resignation today. It is not just me saying it: I want the House to know that a school principal has been in touch and has said the following about the Minister:

"His disgraceful handling of this whole crisis has caused school leaders more stress than the actual health crisis itself. His arrogance, flippancy and clear disdain for the education workforce has left us feeling unsupported and at constant loggerheads with a man who was elected to give us support and guidance. Peter Weir is not worthy of his brief and school principals do not trust him with the safety and well-being of our pupils and staff. He needs to go."

Indeed, Minister: do the right thing and step aside.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Education and advise him that he has 25 minutes to respond.

Mr Weir: Before we get into the meat of the debate, Mr Speaker, I welcome you back from your isolation. I also pass on to the SDLP my condolences in relation to the passing of John Hume. I appreciate that there will be an opportunity at a later date for that to be dealt with in a much longer and more appropriate manner, but I felt that it was important to put that on record.

It has been useful to know that, largely speaking, given the advice that the Speaker gave at the beginning of the debate that many young people would be watching the Assembly, perhaps for the first time, the tone of the debate has been calm and sensible on what is, potentially, a very emotive issue. There may be some exceptions to that tone, but, broadly speaking, that has been the case across the Chamber. That is important. We will talk about systems, numbers and statistics, but I think that all of us acknowledge that, behind anything that we try to do, there are individuals. In particular, we are dealing with young people and their futures, and that has been foremost in my mind. Irrespective of whether different people here have

disagreements about what I have done or whether they have taken a different point of view, I think that that is the case for the vast majority of people in the Chamber and beyond. I welcome the opportunity to deal with the issue and to debate it today and to look at the decisions that have been made.

2.00 pm

Let me say at the outset that the COVID pandemic has inflicted much suffering and hardship on our society, and many of our young people have had to face difficulties across different aspects of their lives. I understand those anxieties, and I can see that, for some, the A-level results process has been very upsetting.

We need to put this in the context of the results, even prior to the changes that were made, and it is important to put a few facts on the table. It is important to note that, when the A-level and AS-level results were announced last week, they were up from 2019. There was a rise of 1.6% in those achieving A* to C in A levels and, similarly, a rise of 2.2% in those achieving A to C in AS levels. Members have talked about the long tail of underachievement: in A levels — there was a similar drop in AS levels — the percentage of students who were awarded a U grade has gone down, even before the adjustments that will take place as a result of yesterday's announcement, from 1.7% to 0.9%. Fewer than 1% of people got a U grade.

There has been mention of the impact from a socio-economic point of view. While data on the particular impact on individuals who receive free school meals is not directly held, we saw last week, even on the basis of those results — there will be changes as a result of yesterday's announcement — that, in A levels, non-selective schools performed, relatively speaking, better than the grammar schools in terms of closure of the gap. Similarly, there was a very dramatic increase in the AS-level results, where the selective schools improved by 1.7% and, in the non-selective schools, there was an improvement of 7.3%. The gap closed from about 17% to about 12%. It is important that, while we deal with the difficulties that have arisen in this year's examinations, we do not downplay or diminish the anguish of young people, but it is also important that we acknowledge the successes for our young people, where they have happened, and pay tribute to the work that they have done.

In March, we faced unprecedented challenges as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. I know that the word "unprecedented" has become a cliché, but being a cliché does not make it any less true. Among many other decisions, the Executive decided that it was necessary to close our schools for an unspecified period. There are some who accuse me of simply following what is done at Westminster in terms of the schools. Let me make it very clear: when we were keeping schools open, when the decision was taken to close, when advice was given on partial reopening in June and when the Executive passed that further advice in August, the advice was, on every occasion, in line with what the Public Health Agency said and in line with the position of the Chief Medical Officer. If we are to decide things on health grounds, we have to go to those experts.

With schools closed, it was not possible to continue with the summer examination series, and therefore it was vital that consideration was given to how best to provide our

learners with certainty about the way forward as soon as practically possible. There was the possibility of holding off until closer to exam time to take a decision, but that would have created uncertainty. The worst possible scenario would have been to start examinations and, in the middle of those examinations, have to take a completely different route. That meant that, in a very short window, we had to develop alternative means of awarding qualifications that would serve the long-term interests of our young people and ensure that they were able to progress this year into further or higher education or employment. We set out to provide a system that was fair and credible, and, as I will come to later, any system that we could have put in place would have had problems with fairness. Indeed, any action that could be taken in any direction to be fair to one group of individuals in the system may well ease the particular problems that that group faces but may have a corresponding and correlating action that makes it less fair for others, so, as much as possible, it was based on well-established examination processes, including standardisation to maintain standards over time.

It was also the case that the cohort from 2020, while facing very different situations, has to stand in a position that enables comparisons to be made with other years and also with future years, which will face some level of disruption. COVID meant that there was no established process for how to achieve this, so all processes had to developed at a pace.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Minister giving way. At the conclusion of this debate, Mr McNulty will rise to address the House. I think that it is worth putting on the record what he had to say about the model. Mr McNulty said:

"The words that you used ... were "unique" and "unprecedented". I think that is certainly true. We are in completely uncharted waters. It is a bold model that you have put forward, and the way you have managed to devise it in such a short time deserves major credit."

Mr Weir: I am sure that Mr McNulty will probably be working that statement into his concluding remarks.

Alternative arrangements were put in place after careful consideration from a wide range of options put forward by CCEA, and that took account of the views of education stakeholders and experts. Those included head teachers, the Education and Training Inspectorate and the teaching unions. Everyone recognised that there was no perfect solution, but the arrangements were the best available given the circumstances. I wanted young people to have a solution that gave them an outcome to move to next stage of their lives in September but which also protected the integrity of our qualification system and past and future cohorts.

This is not simply an abstract concept. Northern Ireland is a small region. If our qualifications are not seen as having any level of integrity, given our scale, that would put our students in a particularly difficult situation. The standardisation process at A level differed from England in that pupils' prior achievements at AS level provided the central focus of the standardisation process. It is important to point out that, in the majority of cases at A level, 58%, and 62%, I think, at AS level have ended up being the grades that students were issued with last week. Indeed, in 96.6% of cases, the students received either the same grade or there was one grade of a difference.

Understandably, we have seen a focus on the roughly 3% where there has been a major divergence.

Our examination system is important not just to young people's future but to the future of the economy, so employers need to have confidence in those qualifications when recruiting staff. Therefore, there is a responsibility to ensure that the qualifications awarded this year are recognised as robust, reliable and as an accurate reflection of the abilities of our young people. That was why standardisation was part of the awarding arrangements developed.

Moderation and standardisation are important features of the qualifications awards process every year. Moderation and standardisation are not new processes; they are annual processes that are widespread across all countries where examinations take place. That has happened in Northern Ireland and elsewhere for many, many years, so the concept that this has been simply grafted on this year would be inaccurate. They help to ensure that standards are maintained over time and that outcomes are fair and comparable across jurisdictions. In the UK, they have operated across the three jurisdictions that share GCSE, AS and A-level brands. Scotland has always adopted a different examination system, and, for instance, does not offer A levels. Importantly, standardisation ensures that qualifications awarded in Northern Ireland are recognised as comparable to the qualifications awarded elsewhere, and it is also the case that, when development of the processes was happening, all of the qualification bodies came to a very similar position on how awards were made.

Mention has been made specifically of the algorithm, and I think that one of the problems that has arisen is that, when an algorithm is applied, particularly as part of a standardisation process, where it tends to fall down is when it is applied to very small groups. In England, they tried to artificially rectify that problem, with the end result that action was taken to apply standardisation to small groups, and the impact of that was to unfairly favour independent schools. In England, one of the criticisms that has been made is that the levels of improvement in results have been much greater in the public school or independent school system than across comprehensive schools. We have to be careful because, when interventions take place, they can sometimes create circumstances that lead to undesirable results.

A Member: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: The issue may be dealt with in my next few remarks.

The proposer of the motion and other Members referred to the algorithm being published. On Friday past, I committed to doing that, as the Member acknowledges, and I gave instructions to CCEA. I can confirm that the algorithm has now been published on the CCEA website. Anyone is free to download, print out or examine it. I am sure that not only members of the Education Committee but others will want to do that.

Rank order, which was provided by teachers, was used in this system. If the argument is that we see teachers' predictions as being the critical element, we cannot, on the one hand, say that we regard those as being completely watertight, but, on the other hand, rubbish rank orders, which have come from the same teachers.

The aim throughout has been to try to create something that preserves not only the integrity of the exams but the greatest fairness. The problem is that any system being adopted has flaws and drawbacks. In the application of this process, we have seen that, on a broader system-wide basis, it probably produced the overall results that were anticipated and created an overall position for Northern Ireland. Where it clearly fell down on some occasions was with individual schools, with individual cohorts and particularly with individuals themselves. That was unacceptable. Indeed, it was a similar position in other jurisdictions, and different approaches were taken. In Northern Ireland, my initial approach was to ensure that we had a widened appeals process. The appeals process is normally conducted on procedural grounds, but it was directed so that any individual could show their work. If they had a certain level of prior attainment and showed evidence of that, an appeal could be taken. That would have allowed every individual to be treated on merit rather than there being a blanket solution.

There was some over-hyping in England about the "triple lock", where the only evidence that was offered was mock results. We went much wider than that. While it had been indicated that a mock result would simply overturn a result, when the fine detail was published, Ofqual had to withdraw it. As elsewhere, it was simply one aspect of evidence that may or may not have led to a change. We put forward an opportunity for everyone to do that.

Members mentioned the number of appeals. I appreciate that, given the circumstances, while appeals continue, there will not be the same need for appeals. I will give Members some figures. Before any decision was finalised yesterday, out of about 24,000 CCEA A-level awards, 948 had been appealed, which is a little under 4% of the overall total. That has to be put in context. While a process has now been adopted for GCSEs, A levels and AS levels — I am not in any way attacking anybody — that system also has flaws. If you do not have standardisation, there is grade inflation, and it has been shown that, as a minimum, the numbers of A* to C at A level will go up by more than 10% in a single year. At AS level, I think that the figure is 17%. I think that the figures will be lower at GCSE level, but obviously those results are not yet out so I am not at liberty to say. It will undoubtedly be the case that, while very good professional judgements have been made, if you do not have standardisation, you cannot guarantee that one pupil in one school will be treated exactly the same as a pupil in another school.

2.15 pm

That is simply human nature. It would be the same if anybody were applying professional judgement in any situation: some people will be more strict and others will be more lenient and you do not have that level of fairness. I also appreciate Mr O'Dowd's position about bodies outside Northern Ireland. I disagree with him, but that might well be a debate for another day.

One of the factors that was also of particular relevance to A levels and AS levels and in providing that level of equality is that around 97% or 98% of GCSEs are set by CCEA and we have, with a very small exception, a largely internal market in Northern Ireland. Around one in five A-level and AS-level qualifications are given by boards that are mainly English; a small number are Welsh. If

changes were to be made and Northern Ireland was to go entirely in a solo direction, I would have had the power to make a change that could have affected the vast majority, 80%, including those within the 80% who had maybe not got the grades that they had deserved, but that would have meant that there was no equality between them and the 20% that lay outside my hands. That also had to be borne in mind.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for giving way. Setting aside the broader debate of whether there should be one or multiple examinations boards, is the Minister not concerned that he, as the Minister, has no authority over those who are plying their wares to our schools in this jurisdiction?

Mr Weir: It is about a legal position. I am sure that we will come back to the wider debate on another day, but it is also the case that there is an inextricable link. I appreciate that not every Member will share the same level of concern about that linkage, but, for our students, we have always tried to create a three-country equivalence between England, Northern Ireland and Wales. That is of significance to the examinations boards, the results and because such a large percentage of our students go to universities across the water. Therefore, having some level of linkage is very important. If we were seen simply to be, if the Member forgives the pun, "ourselves alone", and took a view that entirely deviated from everything, in the longer run the people who would suffer would be our students.

Before I move on to discuss A levels and AS levels, I want to set out the rationale that I have announced for GCSEs. Over the weekend, I carefully considered advice from CCEA about the imminent award of GCSEs. I decided over the weekend and announced on Monday that it would be in the best interests of our young people to change the original decision and directed CCEA to award all candidates with the grades that had been calculated by their teachers — the centre-assessed grades.

A number of factors led to that decision. I have mentioned the internal Northern Ireland market, but there was also the fact that, while there was a clear remedy that could be used for the A levels and AS levels in the form of a robust appeals system, a lack of evidence of individual achievement meant that could not be used to the same extent with GCSEs. That would have rendered an appeals systems very difficult and time-consuming and created a risk that many students would have found themselves without results before, perhaps, decisions would have needed to be made and, in some cases, students would not have received their results until September or into the autumn. Also, the methodology for GCSEs could not bring in the prior performance of individuals, because there was no robust comparable data.

Turning to AS levels and A levels —.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: Well —.

Mr Lyttle: It is an important point to clarify.

Mr Weir: I am happy to speak to the Member afterwards. He will appreciate that I have only four minutes left.

Turning to AS levels and A levels, Members will be aware that I directed CCEA to review all awards issued last week and issue a fresh set of results that were based on the

higher of the original standardised grade or the teacher-assessed grade. Those that received standardised grades that are higher than the centre-assessed grades will retain the higher award. While I believe that that is the right thing to do in the current circumstances, I recognise that there is still an importance in standardisation and comparability of grades across centres. That will be something that we will have to bring into play.

Whatever concerns I had and have in relation to the fairness or equality in any of these things, my principal concern was on the basis of ensuring that our young people were not treated in a disadvantaged manner compared to their peers elsewhere. There were discussions between ourselves and England. Wales was seeking a similar approach. It was not simply a question of us following England, but whenever we have a situation where the English market represents about 85% of students in the UK as a whole, we simply could not go in some solo direction. So, yesterday, we ended up announcing at exactly the same time as England. Wales announced roughly about an hour before us, but all three nations were kept in step. Whatever other concerns there are, we now have a situation where all parts of the United Kingdom are in exactly the same position as regards all the qualifications.

I will mention briefly the implications. There are implications that have not been mentioned that may be of a less substantial nature than higher education. There will be implications because of the increase in the grade awards that will create issues for post-primary schools and further education colleges because there is likely to be a shift in where pupils are looking to go. That is something that will need to be addressed. The principal problem has been recognised within higher education particularly. Let us make it very clear that that will be a challenge to the Executive. There will have to be a UK-wide solution as part of that because that level of funding cannot simply be plucked out of the air.

Let us be very clear: had a different system been put in place in March and had we ended up with 95% A* to C, there would have been massive pressure around the number of additional places at university because a larger number of students would have been in a position here to seek those places. That will have an implication for the cap, and all of us, from whatever party, will need to work together to be able to change that cap and provide that additional funding.

I will deal briefly with a couple of other points. Mr O'Dowd mentioned the reopening of schools. One of the unfortunate aspects was that while all the focus was on examinations, a revised restart paper was sent out last week to all schools. It was comprehensive in nature, covering 70 pages, with the advice and guidance provided absolutely consistent once again with the health advice from the Public Health Agency.

One of the lessons that has to be learned here and elsewhere is that there is no substitute for having examinations. It is the only thing that can be seen to be entirely robust and fair. Going with that, as we move ahead, underlines the absolute necessity of having a full, safe return to school, five days a week, so that we can ensure that all our pupils, battered and bruised as they will be by the COVID situation, are given the best possible chance to progress into the future.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Minister. Before I call Justin McNulty to make a winding-up speech on the motion, I remind Mr McNulty that the convention is that Members or Ministers who seeking to amend their own motion are invited to address the motion and the amendment together when moving and winding. The Member will, therefore, have 10 minutes.

Mr McNulty: Welcome back. It is good to have you in the hot seat. Hopefully, conditions around COVID will remain the same to allow you to stay here. We all have our part to play to ensure that people remain safe in our society, and I take responsibility in that regard.

I will start by paying tribute to a hero of mine, John Hume, whose funeral it was a huge honour for me to attend. I was a member of the guard of honour, but we were not even able to be at the service because of the COVID conditions and the circumstances around that. It was sad that John did not get the send-off that he deserved, but the family was so strong about following the guidelines. It was a really dignified, beautiful send-off for a hero to me and to so many people on this island and someone whose legacy we can all be proud of in the Chamber and on this island.

I will make a winding-up speech on the SDLP motion and amendment as tabled and debated here today. I thank all Members for their very informed, passionate and measured contributions throughout the debate. As I see it, there are three groupings of pupils who have been impacted in different ways by this grading. For some, it has been a crisis; for others — those who did well — it has not. There are pupils who did well. Their grades were not reassessed, and they will not need to be regraded. They got the marks that they expected and for which they worked diligently. Well done to those pupils. Congratulations. There are those who were disgruntled when they received their downgraded results — some 11,000 pupils. Thankfully, those grades will now be rectified. Well done to those students for their forbearance and patience and for voicing their disillusionment. Well done to their teachers, principals and parents for supporting them. The last grouping is those students who did not do so well and will not be regraded. They did not apply themselves to their course, for whatever reason. Guys, I am with you. My A levels were downgraded, not by an algorithm or an anomaly but because I did not fully commit myself to education in school. I was more focused on football and messing around. I say to those students that some of the most successful people I know did not get their A levels or their GCSEs. Other options are open to you. You can take a further education approach.

Mr Catney: It is good to have you back, Mr Speaker. Thank you very much, Mr McNulty, for giving way to me. Today, we are having an incredibly important debate that impacts on our young people, and we stand resolutely with those young people. I asked you to give way because we need to send out that clear message: that their futures do not depend on the exams set when they are 16, 18 or 11 years of age. I left school at the age of 15, and I was very lucky that I was able to go to a public house in Moira called the Four Trees, where I served an apprenticeship, as it was then. I now represent Moira as an MLA. With good, hard work, there is plenty of opportunity out there. We need to send out a clear message to our young people across Northern Ireland. I will not be long, Mr Speaker, but it is important that we embrace the young people who have

not done as well as they would have liked. The future will not be mapped out for them by exam results but by good, hard work and dedication. I ask the House to commend the entrepreneurs who are able to start their own businesses. They are the wealth creators.

Mr McNulty: Thank you. I absolutely agree that results do not define these young people; these young people define themselves.

I will try to quickly go through as many of the points made today as I can. Daniel McCrossan, who tabled the motion, talked about the impact on young people, teachers, principals and parents, and how they came together to force this volte-face. He raised his frustration with the flawed system, the delays in recognising its failure and blindly following London's lead. He wants visibility of the algorithm, is thankful that the Minister has said that it is now available, and he questioned the anomalies. He talked about access to university places, UCAS and how all of that will be synchronised and coordinated to ensure that all the issues are addressed. He thanked teachers, pupils and those with specific expertise in the area for their efforts.

Cara Hunter made a very important intervention on the impact on young people's mental health. Maurice Bradley spoke about "unprecedented times" forcing unprecedented actions, and he thanked teachers for their efforts in the process. Karen Mullan talked about students being "failed" in a system where 11,000 grades were downgraded, and teachers' knowledge and expertise were dismissed.

Robbie Butler applauded the strong voice of pupils, parents, teachers, principals and even politicians in coming together to force this outcome. Some 11,000 grades need to be changed, and CCEA must act with haste. Robbie also referred to the strong impact of the anomaly on a student who had previously been a looked-after child, and we have to recognise that there are young people who do not have an easy pathway through education and need all the help and support that they can get.

Chris Lyttle referred to "startling inconsistencies" in the grade-awarding system.

Mr Lyttle also referred to the Minister's following of London's lead in school closures and the awarding of grades. He sought clarification on timescales and considerations in relation to when CCEA will award results, which will impact on access to universities.

2.30 pm

Robin Newton said that the education system here is second to none. I do not think that the midst of a fiasco is an appropriate time to say that. Although I concur with other Members who commented that our educators are world class and second to none, this situation obviously demonstrates that there are serious major challenges within our education system. We export so many of our young people every year, building only a diaspora instead of the knowledge pool here.

Catherine Kelly questioned why children in the North of Ireland are held to ransom by the decisions of a British Minister in London.

Chris Stalford said that no one could have foreseen the circumstances that we are facing today, given the global pandemic and its impact on pupils through reduced class

time. Well, lots of people foresaw it, including my colleague Daniel McCrossan.

Caoimhe Archibald criticised the Minister for defending an algorithm [*Pause*] instead of defending the hopes and dreams of our young people. Sorry, I cannot even read my own writing; I need to go back to school.

Sinead McLaughlin said that we have done our young people a great disservice. She put a major emphasis on the MaSN cap, saying that it is a noose around the neck of students here, benefiting only the North's diaspora, breaking up families and draining the talent pool. We need to restructure the system here because the system, as it stands, is not fit for purpose.

Rosemary Barton referred to the impact of an unseen algorithm on the lives of pupils and young people. John O'Dowd empathised with the position of the Minister of Education, saying that he had been there, done that and bought the t-shirt. He referenced external exam boards setting examinations for our schools and proposed having only one exam board here.

Kellie Armstrong paid tribute to pupils and teachers and to the students and teachers' unions and their dignified response to the crisis.

Patsy McGlone queried why CCEA changed 65% of grades. He asked whether an equality impact assessment would be carried out to establish whether pupils from non-selective schools or disadvantaged areas have been discriminated against as part of the process.

Roy Beggs questioned the awarding system as it is clear to anybody that there are obvious flaws in the system.

Matthew O'Toole said that an approach to prevent any grades being inflated in this year of all years was the wrong approach to adopt. He said that the random injustice of an algorithm was very unfair.

Questions remain, including when will the results be revised by CCEA? Will all students be accepted onto their first choice course when they get their grades? Will the MaSN cap be lifted to allow universities to accommodate greater numbers? Numerous questions remain, but most pertinent in my mind is that this is an outlier year. We have all talked about the unprecedented nature of the virus and the impact on education and exams. Let this be an outlier year of opportunity for our young people, where they see and remember this year as the year that gave them the leg up to go and achieve their dreams and achieve special things. That is not necessarily just down the educational path, but let this be an outlier year where our young people get a leg up. Let it be an outlier year for opportunity.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly is deeply concerned that the modelling used to calculate grades for AS levels and A levels has awarded incorrect results for students across Northern Ireland; welcomes the Minister of Education's decision to reverse the unfair model used for awarding grades to ensure students now receive the higher of their teacher-predicted or CCEA grades for A levels, AS levels and GCSEs due to exceptional

Covid-19 circumstances; recognises the immense stress, anxiety and disruption this has caused many students; further recognises the resultant implications for local colleges and universities; and calls on the Minister to work urgently with Executive colleagues to provide clarity and guidance to students and educational institutions."

Mr Speaker: Before I put the Question on the Adjournment, I remind Members that the next plenary sitting is anticipated to be on Monday 7 September. The Business Committee will meet on Wednesday 2 September and Order Papers will issue after that.

During the remaining recess period, meetings of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response may be scheduled. If that occurs, Members will be notified in the usual way.

Adjourned at 2.34 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 7 September 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Executive Committee (Functions) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform the Assembly that the Executive Committee (Functions) Bill received Royal Assent and became law on 25 August 2020. It will be known as the Executive Committee (Functions) Act (NI) 2020.

Housing (Amendment) Bill: Royal Assent

Mr Speaker: I inform the Assembly that the Housing (Amendment) Bill received Royal Assent and became law on 28 August 2020. It will be known as the Housing (Amendment) Act (NI) 2020.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: I want to make some remarks, mainly of thanks, before we commence the formal business this afternoon.

While I have been dealing with business remotely for the past few months, I want to record my thanks to Christopher Stalford and Roy Beggs for their assistance and cooperation in managing the Chamber in my absence. I also want to express my appreciation to Members Gerry Kelly and Jim Wells for stepping in and providing additional support in order to see the Assembly through this period.

I also take this opportunity to note the thanks of the Assembly to Assembly staff for their efforts during a very challenging period. I am acutely aware from all my contacts with them that countless issues had to be dealt with, and I acknowledge the long hours, flexibility and creativity that they have provided.

As we begin to return to a normal pattern of business, I have written to all Members in relation to a number of issues that I have been raising with the Executive in order to have them on the record. These have been very unusual times, but the scrutiny and accountability role of the Assembly is, of course, paramount and continues. Issues around the normal courtesies and conventions expected from Ministers towards the Assembly are therefore important, including being available on sitting days and bringing major announcements to the Chamber to take questions from Members as appropriate.

Ensuring that time is provided for the Assembly to conduct legislative scrutiny is also crucial, and the First Minister and deputy First Minister have agreed with me that we must return to the position that accelerated passage should be used for Bills only on an exceptional basis. I have therefore made a new ruling that, if Ministers seek to shorten the passage of a Bill through the Assembly, separate to the accelerated passage procedure for Committee consideration, they are required to provide a statement when submitting the Bill for introduction. That will provide more information for Members in considering these issues.

Finally, last week, I suggested to the Business Committee that, as the Assembly intends to resume two settings each week, that should provide sufficient opportunity for Ministers to make statements and, therefore, we should have less need of sessions of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response. Therefore, while the Ad Hoc Committee will continue to be available in emergency circumstances, I have written to Ministers to indicate that

sessions should no longer be held routinely. The return to being able to use a Thursday afternoon will be particularly helpful in scheduling Statutory Committee business.

Let us move on.

Matter of the Day

Implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

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

Mr O'Toole: Mr Speaker, I welcome you back to your place. I am glad to see you there.

Mr Speaker, thank you for granting this urgent Matter of the Day. It is in many ways fitting that the Northern Ireland Assembly is first to debate some of the stories that have emanated from the press over the last 12 hours in relation to the implementation of the Ireland protocol. For three years, this place was in abeyance so, when the Brexit process happened, which dramatically and fundamentally affected Northern Ireland more than any other part of these islands or Europe, we were unable to have our voice heard. That has now changed.

The Ireland protocol, which was signed by Boris Johnson's Government in January of this year, exists only because of the unique nature of our society and the unique political institutions that have grown up, and been agreed, in order to protect and preserve its stability. That is why it is particularly disappointing to see suggestions that the UK Government will repudiate elements of the protocol being briefed late on a Sunday night, ahead of new negotiations between the UK and the EU.

It is deeply worrying and disappointing, but perhaps not surprising, that the UK Government, not only a signatory to the withdrawal agreement with the European Union last year, but a party to the Good Friday Agreement and the international treaty between itself and the Republic of Ireland that underpins that agreement, would seek to use what looks like legislation in the House of Commons to undermine core tenets of the protocol.

Businesses and society here have been calling for clarity for months over the implementation of the protocol, but, more broadly, over trading arrangements that will exist between the UK and EU at the end of the transition period. The Assembly passed a motion in June calling for an extension to the transition period. The UK Government have not even acknowledged that that motion was passed, let alone reacted to it. Their attitude to Northern Ireland and our institutions, throughout this process, has been little better, I am afraid, than contemptuous, certainly since Boris Johnson became Prime Minister.

The protocol is no one's ideal situation for Northern Ireland. It is not something that any of us, five years ago, before the Brexit process, would have asked for. However, it is now lodged with the United Nations in international law. It is there to protect our society and island from a hardening of the border. It is necessary. It is essential. It becomes all the more essential when the UK Government signal that they want to strike the hardest possible Brexit and that they want to break all —.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: Mr Speaker, thank you very much for taking this Matter of the Day. I hope that other Members will join me in acknowledging that this is a deeply concerning time for Northern Ireland, and that we join together to get the best outcome for all our citizens.

Mr Stalford: It is precisely because I want to get the best outcome for all our citizens that I am opposed to the provisions of the protocol. For 25 years this place has been governed by the principle of dual consent. Mr O'Toole mentioned the motion that passed in favour of seeking an extension to the Brexit period. What he did not mention is that not a single unionist Member of this House voted for that motion. The guiding principle of dual consent, which has been the cornerstone of the institutions here and that he talked about, went out the window with the passing of that motion, and he knows it.

There have been ongoing discussions between the Executive and the Government on a range of these important matters, and, for our part, we will be doing all that we can to act in the interests of Northern Ireland within the United Kingdom. It is precisely because we are acting in the interests of Northern Ireland that we as a party are opposed to the protocol. It will damage our economy because it hives us off from our largest market: the GB market.

I must underline that what we are talking about here is mere speculation, but as a sovereign and now, thankfully, independent country, the United Kingdom has the right to legislate on the regulation of its own internal market. It is to be hoped that this is what is about to be undertaken this week by the Government. The DUP position is, and always has been clear about this, and the First Minister said:

We must remain in the UK's customs union, it is a principle that we have and that will for ever be there, we have to secure the integrity of the United Kingdom.

Sir Jeffrey Donaldson, a Member of Parliament, said:

There is not another country in the world with an internal customs arrangement — this is unacceptable.

I absolutely agree with both of them. It is because we care about the prosperity of our people that we are in favour of ensuring free and unfettered access for Northern Ireland businesses in their own country and to their own country, and anyone opposing that should explain to those businesses how the provisions of the protocol would benefit them, because I have yet to hear any defence of them that demonstrates that that is the case.

So there we have it. The dual consent principle went out the window the minute the pro-Europeans had a majority. The provisions of the protocol will damage our business and we are running to defend it. Why? It is because of speculation in the 'Financial Times'.

There is great rejoicing over one sinner that repents, and for the sake of our country, our small businesses and our economy as a whole, I hope that the speculation is correct.

Dr Archibald: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, and thank you for accepting this Matter of the Day, which I also had submitted.

Last night, with fewer than 16 weeks to the end of the transition period and ahead of the latest round of negotiations, we had reports of the British Government preparing to abandon the withdrawal agreement and the Irish protocol and to introduce their own legislation, without any regard for its impact here. That would be a betrayal of what has already been agreed and would inflict irreversible damage on our economy and on the Good Friday Agreement.

For some time now, the outlook and mood music on the future arrangements negotiations have been pessimistic, with little positivity, but the British Government are now playing a dangerous game. It is hard to see this as anything other than a deliberately provocative yet desperate attempt by the British Government to sabre rattle on the eve of a crunch round of negotiations this week. It is worth reflecting, however, that, this time last year, the British Government also engaged in similar jingoistic theatre to try to rally all the Brexit zealots around a no-deal fantasy, before going on to compromise significantly, with Boris Johnson doing a U-turn to do a deal with Europe, which included the protocol.

Over the last few days we have seen British Ministers talking about the positives of a no deal, with George Eustice this morning going as far as saying:

It will be a good outcome in that we will have regained our independence as a country and we'll be making our own laws again.

Which, of course, is utter nonsense.

12.15 pm

Of course, we need to see the internal market Bill that is referred to in the speculation, which will be published on Wednesday, but whether this is an effort to gain some leverage in negotiations or a malign attempt to undermine the protocol, it will do little to make progress in the negotiations. Sinn Féin's priority, as it has been since the referendum four years ago, is to avoid any hard border in the island of Ireland to protect the peace process, the Good Friday Agreement and the all-island economy. That also needs to remain a top priority for the EU and its member states. They must ensure that the full and urgent implementation of the protocol, which provides the safeguards, is paramount. We will continue to defend the foundation stones of the Irish peace process, including the Good Friday Agreement, and work with those who share those priorities wherever they may be, whether they are in the Assembly, the Dáil, the EU or the United States Congress.

Mr Dickson: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to speak on this matter, and I thank Mr O'Toole for bringing it to us today.

It is vital that, even if these are speculative rumours in the press, the matter is debated in the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is vital to ensure that the protocol that was and has been negotiated and that is an international agreement is carried through by the UK Government on behalf of everybody in Northern Ireland. That is not to say that it is a perfect agreement — it is far from that — but it is there to protect the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement and to protect the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland, who voted to remain in the EU. It is the

best of a bad job for all of us. It is also vital that we have an opportunity to scrutinise the proposed Bill. In reality, it will only be when that Bill is presented, which will, hopefully, be later this week, that we will have a real opportunity to work through whether this is just pure speculation and posturing by extreme Brexiteers in the UK Government or whether it will actually be a reality — a very serious reality — for citizens in Northern Ireland and for businesses large and small.

We are not in a perfect position with regard to Brexit. This part of the United Kingdom has been dragged out of the EU by a UK Government and their supporters, predominantly members of the DUP. This is not an issue to be welcomed by any party. It has put us into a very difficult situation, and, as far as the Alliance Party is concerned, it is important that we take every opportunity to question and to ensure that Northern Ireland gets the best out of what will be, inevitably, a very bad Brexit deal for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr Speaker: On behalf of all Members, I take the opportunity to welcome you back to the Chamber and the Assembly, Stewart, after your period of serious illness. I send you ongoing best wishes, and I have no doubt that you will continue to make your voice heard and your presence felt. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr Allister: I do not know how many times in the House I have heard Members from all sides proclaim their concern about business, workers, consumers or jobs and affirm that they will do anything to advance those causes. Yet, the protocol is the one thing that poses a considerable long-term threat to business, workers, consumers and jobs, and it is the one thing that they clutch dearly. Make no mistake about it: the protocol cuts us off from our primary market, which is the United Kingdom. It fetters our trade in both directions, most particularly from GB to here but also from here to GB. Yet, when a proposition is mooted — whether it is mere speculation we will see — that some of that fettering could be loosened and that, for example, you would not have exit declarations, which is a preposterous proposition in the first place, to trade internally in the United Kingdom and that you could have the facility for the United Kingdom Government to look after business by providing aid to businesses in need, when those two propositions are mooted, who is up in arms? The very people who tell us that they care about business and about jobs. Two measures that would greatly assist the retention of business are suddenly anathema. Why? Because their ideology is more important to them than anything else.

Mr McCrossan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: I do not think that I can.

Take the issue of state aid. There are many socialists on this side of the House. State aid is the essence of socialism. It is about government propping up business; it is about government with handouts. Yet, when you have a Government, possibly in a Bill, wanting to give themselves the freedom to do exactly that, who are the first people up in arms? The mighty socialists. What a sham this is, and, of course, it is all dressed up, most disingenuously, as being about supporting the Belfast Agreement. The Belfast Agreement, I remind the House, never had anything to say about trade across the border in terms of whether there should or should not be a border.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Allister: It has been the biggest con of our time that the protocol was necessary to protect the Belfast Agreement.

Ms Bailey: Mr Speaker, it is great to see you back in the Chair.

I do not know why anybody is even surprised by Boris Johnson coming out and saying what he has. This is not the first time that he has made the threat to break the protocol. The protocol is a legally binding international agreement and one that he has continued to threaten to break, but what surprises me more than Boris's threats today is that anyone would still believe what this Prime Minister says. I will give you a bit from his track record. Let us remember that the Prime Minister was sacked from his job with 'The Times' newspaper for making up quotes from his godfather and that the Prime Minister, when he was Mayor of London, promised to eradicate street homelessness in London by 2012, when it actually doubled under his mayorship. The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, back in December 2019 told us:

"There's no question of there being checks on goods going NI/GB or GB/NI,"

Look how that is turning out. Probably most famous of all is the Prime Minister's lie on his bus during the Brexit referendum campaign about saving £350 million a week by leaving the EU that would be spent on the NHS instead. Even last week, Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, claimed that he was not even aware of Marcus Rashford's food poverty campaign the very day after he had issued a gushing press statement on the footballer's efforts. Let us remember that, during the Conservatives' 2005 election campaign, the Prime Minister, Mr Johnson, said:

"Voting Tory will cause your wife to have bigger breasts and increase your chances of owning a BMW".

Why is anybody in the House surprised, shocked or dismayed to hear anything coming out of this Prime Minister's mouth? What we should be doing is being left in no doubt that this UK Government will act in their own best interests and not in the best interests of people. If there is anything to be held onto, it is the fact that there is no good Brexit for Northern Ireland. All that we can hope for is that the EU will step up and step in and make sure that it holds the Prime Minister accountable.

Mr McGrath: Mr Speaker, I was not expecting to be called, but thank you. I want to add to what my colleague said. It is a deeply worrying turn of events. Regardless of what has been said here today, a lot of businesses are very concerned about what will take place and are looking for the security and the understanding of having processes put in place. They were beginning to interact with the protocol. They were beginning to find the methods to ensure that their businesses would not be impacted, and, at the eleventh hour, that has been completely railroaded by what we have heard over this past day.

I worry, too, about the scrutiny role that this place will play. The Committee for the Executive Office has, after a number of false starts, been able to try to hold Ministers and their involvement in the negotiations to scrutiny. Now that that has been completely eradicated and there is a threat to everything that has taken place so far, the scrutiny role that we have played to this stage has been

rendered pretty much useless. It means that we have not been able to have input by making requests of Ministers. That is all so that Boris Johnson can flex his negotiation muscles. It shows the real contempt that he has for people in the North that he will use us in that way. People, businesses and communities here are all being used as a bargaining chip. That is absolutely disgraceful. It is absolutely unacceptable. We cannot have tampering with the protocol.

Dr Aiken: I apologise for not being in the Assembly earlier for the Matter of the Day.

In many respects, coming to the Assembly to debate a matter that is, frankly, press speculation at this stage shows the degree to which it is unsettling to many people across Northern Ireland and beyond. One of the most interesting things that we have to deal with is the fact that many items and parts of the Northern Ireland protocol are disadvantageous to our businesses and consumers and very disadvantageous to the economy as we go forward.

The Ulster Unionist Party has always stated that we do not want to see any borders north, south, east or west. However, we do want to see free and open access with the rest of our country, which is our biggest trading partner. That is what we want to see. If the discussions come to fruition and bring more certainty about what is in or is likely to be in the protocol, particularly with regard to goods at risk, the level playing field or any of the raft of issues that will affect Northern Ireland significantly come 1 January 2021, we need to be in a position to act. If that means that the EU and London Government actually sit down and agree what those changes are likely to be and how they will be made so that they do not affect Northern Ireland, every political party in the Assembly should push for that and try to make it happen.

There is another issue here. We keep talking about the implications of the deal for the Belfast Agreement. We need to emphasise that the Belfast Agreement is about the principle of consent. To have Northern Ireland, in some way, managed by a specialist Joint Committee, with the implications of that, is not democracy. Again, Members of the Assembly should push against that.

My party will continue to call for clarity, both from London and the EU, on the necessity to make sure that our businesses and consumers are not disadvantaged by the deal. If we get to the point, regrettably, where there is no trade deal between the United Kingdom and the EU, what is left for Northern Ireland should not create disadvantage for all of us. If that is what the discussions are about — again, I must emphasise that we have not seen them — it is appropriate that we see that.

Again, Mr Speaker, I apologise for not being here for the start of the debate. I thank the Member for South Belfast for bringing forward the Matter of the Day.

Mr McCrossan: I welcome Stewart Dickson back to the House and wish him well for the months ahead.

I find it astonishing that some unionist Members in the House would become and continue to be mighty defenders of the British Government: Boris and his Tory cronies. Have they learnt nothing from the fact that, not that long ago, he threw them under the big, red bus and, in fact, reversed over them to make sure that he did not miss? Since then, that bus has gone missing, along with its

message, painted right throughout the campaign, of great reassurances for those who were persuaded to vote Leave. The reality is that in the North, in Northern Ireland, the majority of people voted to remain. Whether some in the House like it or not, people from their background also voted that way because they realised that, as Ms Bailey rightly articulated, Brexit is bad for Northern Ireland and bad for our people, our businesses and our farmers. It is bad for everybody.

12.30 pm

Yes, Mr Aiken is right: we do not want to see any borders across this island. However, the reality is that this British Government — Boris Johnson — cannot be trusted. Mr Allister, who is a very sharp, articulate gentleman, must realise that Boris is a blundering buffoon who cannot be trusted with the affairs of this place. He will go down in history as the Prime Minister who ignored NI and who ignored the interests of this place. It is our people and our children who will be expected to recover and to pick up the pieces of the madness that is being defended by the Members on the opposite Benches. This is not good for Northern Ireland; it is not good for our children, our businesses or our young people. To sit there and defend Boris Johnson is pathetic.

People you represent in your own community — farmers and businesses — have said to me, and to other Members across the House, that they do not consider this an orange or green issue; they consider it an issue of their livelihoods, of the economic stability of this place, of their children's future. It is not something that we should be playing fast and loose with. The Prime Minister needs to get the message.

The House was gone for three years, but it is back. Our voices will be heard, as will those of the majority of people across the North of Ireland, Northern Ireland, who voted Remain. No matter how strong the voices in opposition to that reality, it remains a fact that the majority of people here voted to remain. We will make whatever moves necessary to protect their interests, and our interests, as European citizens.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the discussion on the Matter of the Day. I ask Members to take their ease for one moment.

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

Assembly Business

Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards: Appointment

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members to leave the Chamber quietly. Thank you.

The first item of business in the Order Paper is a motion from the Assembly Commission to appoint an Assembly Commissioner for Standards.

Mr Butler: I beg to move

That this Assembly, in accordance with Section 19(1) of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, appoints Dr Melissa McCullough as the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have up to 10 minutes to propose the motion and up to 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who wish to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Butler: The Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 provides for the role of Commissioner for Standards. It also provides for the commissioner's independence and powers, which includes the same powers as the Assembly to call for witnesses and documents. The primary role of the commissioner is to carry out investigations into complaints that a breach of the Assembly's code of conduct has occurred and to report the outcome of those investigations to the Assembly. Therefore, the role of commissioner is important in ensuring that MLAs uphold high standards of conduct in public life.

The 2011 Act that provides for the office of the commissioner requires that the person to be appointed as Commissioner for Standards has been identified by a fair and open competition. The Assembly has delegated that function to the Assembly Commission, along with the responsibility for making arrangements for determining any criteria for appointment and for determining the terms and conditions under which such an appointment is made.

Members will recall that the tenure of the last commissioner, Douglas Bain, ended in September 2017. I would like to thank Mr Bain for his committed and professional service in what was, at times, a challenging role. While the Assembly Commission had undertaken a fair and open recruitment exercise in advance of Mr Bain's tenure ending, it was not possible for an appointment to be made at that time, as the Assembly was not sitting and could not, therefore, pass a resolution, as required by the 2011 Act.

The recruitment panel comprised two members of the Assembly Commission of the time, Alex Maskey and Stewart Dickson, the Clerk/Chief Executive, Lesley Hogg, and the former Commissioner for Standards for what was then the Welsh Assembly, Gerard Elias. I place on record my thanks to all the panel members, but I especially want to thank Mr Elias for his insight and expertise, which was of tremendous assistance to the panel.

As the Committee on Standards and Privileges was not in place, the approach adopted for the previous recruitment competition, whereby the Chairperson of that Committee sat on the recruitment panel, could not be replicated. The Speaker, in his role as Chair of the Assembly Commission, has kept the Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges updated on the matter.

While there have been some delays between the date of the recruitment competition and the date of today's motion, the Assembly Commission is satisfied that drawing from the merit list for this recruitment competition remains valid. The Assembly Commission is, therefore, delighted to nominate Dr Melissa McCullough as Assembly Commissioner for Standards for a period of five years as set out in the 2011 Act.

Given the importance and significance of the role, it is important that we appoint a person who has the experience and expertise to undertake the duties with skill, wisdom and judgement. Dr McCullough has worked as an academic in law, ethics and professionalism in the UK and Ireland since 2005. Between 2009 and 2020, she served as a ministerially appointed non-executive director for the Health and Social Care Board in Northern Ireland and as a member of the governance, reference and remuneration sub-committees. She is a visiting academic at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, an assessor and chair for undergraduate medical programmes for the Medical Council of Ireland, and she acts as a law and ethics specialist on the clinical governance board at Synergix Health in London. Dr McCullough's published work and research interests include professionalism, organisational ethics, applied ethics, equality and justice in policy and practice, diversity and inclusion and public health ethics.

I am certain that Dr McCullough's background and wealth of experience will enable her to carry out the important functions of the Commissioner for Standards robustly and effectively. The Assembly Commission recognises the importance of filling this key position. I commend the appointment of Melissa McCullough as the Commissioner for Standards to the House.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I call Ms Sinéad Ennis, the Chair of the Standards and Privileges Committee.

Ms Ennis: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I rise to speak as Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. Although the motion has been tabled by the Assembly Commission, I will point out that, given the hiatus since the previous postholder's five-year term of office ended in September 2017, the Committee has maintained a close watching brief on the issue. Whilst I am aware that it was not possible to appoint a replacement Commissioner for Standards prior to the resumption of Assembly business last January, the Committee has been mindful of the crucial role of the Commissioner in providing the external and independent element of the Assembly's ethical standards framework.

The process for investigating complaints has been designed so that allegations of breaches of the Assembly Code of Conduct go directly to the Commissioner for assessment of admissibility and, where applicable, for investigation. The Committee then considers the Commissioner's investigation reports and determines whether or not a breach of the Code has occurred and,

where appropriate, recommends to the Assembly a sanction to be imposed. Therefore, the Commissioner, the Committee and the Assembly exercise the complementary functions of investigation, adjudication and sanctioning respectively. Each plays a key part to ensure that proper standards of conduct are upheld by Members of this Assembly. Clearly, the absence of the independent Commissioner hinders the work of the Committee and the wider Assembly in implementing and enforcing the ethical standards regime, and that is why the Committee has taken a keen interest in the appointment of a new Commissioner.

Since the return of a fully functioning Assembly earlier this year, the Committee received a number of updates from the Commission. Members noted that the Commission had agreed on the need to appoint a Commissioner as a matter of urgency, and had examined the options for proceeding in a timely and pragmatic manner. I expect that the other members of the Committee, like me, will be pleased to see this appointment being made today. I look forward to engaging with Dr Melissa McCullough to progress the vital work of implementing the Assembly's ethical standards system. On behalf of the Committee, I, therefore, support the motion. Go raibh maith agat.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. I am glad to stand here today. Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I thank you for your support over the past number of months when circumstances meant that I could not, unfortunately, be here.

I am delighted that, after such an extensive period, we have eventually got there. It is very important that such a highly qualified person as Dr Melissa McCullough, who has extensive experience from different walks of life in the public sector, from her work in law and ethics and indeed from her published works, will take up the role of Commissioner for Standards; she is the appropriate person. It is good that she will be there because it is an integral part of the work that we, as MLAs, all do. I am glad that the Chair of the Committee has outlined the role of the Committee in working with the commissioner and overseeing the work that will be produced and presented to the Committee in regard to the openness, transparency and ethics that are expected of us all as public representatives. I am delighted to see us get there eventually and look forward to working with the commissioner on the way forward for the Assembly.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the appointment of Dr McCullough. It is another of the many legs on the stool that keeps this place balanced. It is a precarious balance that is required for us all to function. I hope that I never have to come under Dr McCullough's attention, but I wish her well in her work.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Members. No other Member has indicated to me that they wish to speak in this debate, so — *[Interruption.]* Mr Blair? Sorry.

Mr Blair: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, thank you. I have the role of winding on the debate. I will do that and respond to the small number of responses that we have had. Before I do so, I will add to the comments that were made in welcoming my colleague Stewart Dickson back to the Chamber. I am very glad to see him here. Principal Deputy Speaker, you will, of course, understand that some of us saw more of him than he might have wished in the past

number of months. We thank him for his contributions then and are glad to have him back.

I thank Members for their contributions. While neither me nor my Assembly Commission colleague Mr Butler, who moved the motion, were on the original recruitment panel, we, as members of the Commission, are assured that an effective, rigorous and fair recruitment competition was undertaken. I repeat Mr Butler's thanks to Mr Gerard Elias for the assistance that he provided to the recruitment panel. The role of Commissioner for Standards is crucial to how we are perceived as MLAs. Having a credible and experienced person undertake this role is hugely important. In that regard, I again pay tribute to the former commissioner, Mr Douglas Bain, for his work, which covered the investigation of a number of high profile and contentious complaints. I will now turn to comments that were made by Members. Sinéad Ennis spoke as —

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member's giving way. I will just put on the record something that the Committee on Standards and Privileges may want to look at in due course now that a new commissioner has been appointed. The Speaker is responsible for the conduct of Members in the Chamber but not for the proceedings of Committee meetings, which come under the purview of the Commissioner for Standards. I know that, in the past, the commissioner has been brought into how members have interrogated witnesses and so on. I have always felt that there is a conflict there because privilege extends to Committee proceedings, yet the commissioner has a role in looking at how members interrogate witnesses. Witnesses do not always appreciate the way in which members engage in that interrogation process. I speak from experience in that a complaint was made against me in my chairing of the Justice Committee. Douglas Bain dismissed that but that did not stop the media from having headlines about complaints being made to the commissioner. The Committee may look at, in conversation with the new commissioner, how exactly that will be managed. I think that Members would find it beneficial if there was some kind of protocol for how Committee meetings will be conducted and how the commissioner will engage in that process.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I refuse to believe that any person could find anything to complain about in the Member for Lagan Valley.

Mr Blair: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I am delighted that you were able to make that response before I had the opportunity to. I am sure that the Member's comments in the intervention will be picked up by the Chair of the Standards and Privileges Committee, who is here and who I thank for supporting the motion. I do not think that I need to go into much detail, but I thank Patsy McGlone for his support too. He spoke of the openness and transparency expected of Members in their work both here and outside this place.

John O'Dowd also spoke in support of the motion. On behalf of the Commission, I thank Members for their support.

12.45 pm

I trust that Melissa McCullough will be a highly successful commissioner. In fact, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I very much hope that she will have nothing to do at all during

her term of office, once, of course, outstanding matters are progressed. It has been mentioned already, but I say to all Members that adherence by Members to the code of conduct is entirely in our own hands. It therefore falls to us to ensure that Dr McCullough does not have too much to do.

I hope that Members from across the Chamber will support the motion, and I commend to the House the appointment of Dr Melissa McCullough as Commissioner for Standards.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly, in accordance with Section 19(1) of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, appoints Dr Melissa McCullough as the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards.

Private Members' Business

Custodial Sentences for Attacks Against Emergency Workers

Mr Givan: I beg to move

That this Assembly supports tougher custodial sentences for those convicted of attacks against emergency workers in Northern Ireland, including police officers, prison officers, firefighters, search and rescue workers and front-line healthcare staff; welcomes the campaign led by the courageous widow of PC Andrew Harper in favour of whole-life sentences, which reflects widespread public frustration with the current outcomes in such cases; acknowledges the recent UK Government commitment to increase penalties applicable under the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018; notes that, in the Republic of Ireland, there exists a set tariff of 40 years for the murder of a police officer, whilst, in Northern Ireland, the starting tariff in equivalent circumstances is between 15 and 16 years; and calls on the Minister of Justice to bring forward, as a matter of urgency, a revised sentencing framework that better reflects the seriousness of these crimes.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Mr Givan: One of the main responsibilities of any Government — indeed, I would suggest the most important responsibility — is to ensure that law and order prevails in their society. In having that responsibility, we empower and mandate those who serve in our criminal justice agencies to enforce the law that parliamentarians, on behalf of the people, set. It is with that in mind that this motion has been brought forward in my name and in that of my colleague Mr Mervyn Storey, who leads for our members on the Policing Board.

That responsibility was brought into sharp focus this summer when it came to the sentencing of an individual for the murder of Detective Garda Adrian Donohoe. He was killed in County Louth in January of 2013: murdered in the line of duty. He was 41 years of age and married with two young children. Of course, in referencing his killing, we remember his family today. As a result of that murder, a sentence was administered to a citizen of this country, Aaron Brady from New Road in Crossmaglen. He was found guilty of capital murder. With that conviction in the Irish Republic comes a mandatory minimum sentence of 40 years. Quite rightly, a response to that sentence came from a number of quarters and drew into sharp focus what our sentencing framework is here in Northern Ireland when it comes to the murder of police officers.

Our First Minister rightly responded to the sentencing decision, saying that victims deserve justice in Northern Ireland. We have often heard the anguished voice of those who have been left bereaved as a result of a loved one being taken from them. The First Minister rightly said that there must be a strong deterrent when it comes to those who would consider shooting or killing by whatever

means those who serve in our criminal justice agencies. The Police Federation in its response said that there is an urgent need for the sentencing framework in Northern Ireland to be addressed in order to recognise the situation that prevails in this jurisdiction.

We also have the case of PC Andrew Harper, again killed on duty. Of those who were sentenced for that killing, one received 16 years and two who were aged 18 got 13 years. Of course, there were pleas from the widow about how the injustice has been felt. That is because early release, in those situations, could be granted after two thirds of the sentences have been served. A campaign is now taking place, called Andrew's Law, that is seeking to have a minimum sentence put in place for the killing of a police officer.

Whenever we look at those two examples, we in this part of the world can think of countless police officers in the past who lost their lives and who were killed in the line of duty. We can think of soldiers and prison officers who were killed, and then we can think about the sentence that was administered to them. Of course, it is one of the reasons why my party opposed the Belfast Agreement. One of the most immoral decisions and injustices inflicted upon the victims of those who were murdered was to have the perpetrators granted early release. That was one of the reasons why I wanted the Belfast Agreement to be defeated. It was because of the injustice that was carried out upon those who were victims and those who lost their lives because of the decision to grant early release to those perpetrators.

Therefore, when it comes to sentencing, there is an impact not just on the immediate family, but on the wider community. There is also a distinction to be drawn between those who serve our community as public servants, and police officers and prison officers and those who serve in the forces of law and order. With it comes a particular risk for them because of the individuals who they have to go out and face. I think of the excellent operation that has been carried out recently against the New IRA. I think about those police officers who had to go through the doors and the premises to engage in all of that, and who have had to gather the evidence. Obviously, as that case goes through, I am mindful of those family members who worry because their loved ones have been involved and therefore I believe that they deserve to have the protection of the law when it comes to how people are sentenced.

Whenever we look at our sentencing framework in Northern Ireland, we have the lowest starting tariff of any region in the United Kingdom for murder sentences: it starts at 12 years. When we look at the lowest starting point, where a victim is in public service, it is 15 or 16 years. That represents half of the penalty in England and Wales. It is also lower than the 20-year tariff that is operated in Scotland, and, of course, the 40-year mandatory minimum sentence in the Irish Republic. That is why we need —

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Will the Member take a point of intervention on this matter?

Mr Givan: I will, briefly.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for drawing this out. I will also point out that it is not a mandatory minimum sentence served, but it is a mandatory minimum tariff of 40 years. However, there is actually an automatic 25% remission of

that sentence for good behaviour whilst in prison, so the end point is 30 years, which is more comparable with our end point, which is 25 years.

Mr Givan: I am sure that the Minister can elaborate later when she has got considerable time to deal with this.

In due course I will get to the role of the Department of Justice and the Minister's. However, I will again highlight why those who serve in our criminal justice agencies require additional protection. In the past three years, there have been 166 attacks on prison officers in prison establishments. How many have been brought through the court system and what has been the penalty when it comes to the punishment for them?

Whenever we consider where we are with the current sentencing framework, former Minister Claire Sugden, who I see here, commissioned a review in 2016. Then we had a public consultation in October 2019 that

was completed in February of this year. The consultation process was completed six months ago, some four years after the then Minister commissioned a review into the sentencing. That is regarded as the most significant review of sentencing since 2005 and it covers a wide range of areas that need to be considered as part of a review of the sentencing framework.

We are not keeping up with the pace of the changes elsewhere. We have had the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018. I know that colleagues are going to mention our hospital staff, our NHS workers and other emergency workers, who I have not touched on in my contribution. However, we know that, in every year for the last number of years, over 400 ambulance staff have been subjected to attacks. We think of the reports of incidents that take place in our hospital settings, where our nurses are being subjected to attacks. My colleague Mr Frew will speak further on that. The motion deals with the wide ambit of sentencing that we need to have in place for our emergency workers.

When I look at the process that we followed, I see that, some six months later, we are still waiting for the Department of Justice to come forward with the new sentencing framework, and that is why I regret that the amendment removes the call for tougher sentences. Why not? I appreciate that the amendment recognises the seriousness of these offences, but why is the Alliance Party not able to call for tougher sentences? Why did that need to be removed? I am sure that the party will elaborate on that.

The amendment also highlights the sentencing review process that has been taking place. I accept the substance of the amendment; the issue I have is that, six months later, we are still waiting for a conclusion. With this motion being the catalyst for the Department to look at this, we will hopefully see a positive announcement from the Minister of Justice in her contribution later as to when the review will be carried out. It needs to be carried out.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I have only one minute left, so I will not. It needs to be brought forward as a matter of urgency so that this issue can be dealt with.

There is then the debate on minimum sentencing and allowing judicial discretion. I have no difficulty with judicial discretion, but it should always be within the parameters

of the legislative framework that we have set down. We need to send a very powerful signal that we back our emergency workers, that we have their back when they are being attacked and that we have an appropriate legislative framework in place that reflects the gravity of the offences committed against them so that the sentence that is administered gives them the support that I believe they should have.

I hope that, today, we will send the right signal and support those emergency workers and that we will see movement from the Department of Justice and the Minister to bring forward, as a matter of urgency, the outworkings of that sentencing review. We will then consider the substance of what is proposed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call John Blair to move the amendment.

Mr Blair: I thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker, and I rise, on behalf of the Alliance Party, to move the amendment. I hope that I will also —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Blair.

Mr Blair: — be able to clarify —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Blair.

Mr Blair: — the reasons why, as we have been challenged on previously, we do not —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Blair. Order. I am sorry. You just have to move the amendment and then I can tell you how much time you have to do that job.

Mr Blair: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert:

"recognises the seriousness of attacks against emergency workers in Northern Ireland, including police officers, prison officers, firefighters, search and rescue workers and front-line healthcare staff; further recognises the important contributions by victims, campaigners and respondents to the sentencing review consultation that closed in February of this year; and calls on the Minister of Justice to bring forward proposals for a revised sentencing framework after consideration both of the outcome of that important consultation and sentences available for equivalent offences in other jurisdictions in these islands."

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. You will have 10 minutes to propose the amendment and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members will have five minutes.

Mr Blair: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. Apologies for that.

As I said, I rise, on behalf of Alliance, to move the amendment. I hope also to clarify the reasons why we, in this group, cannot support the motion.

Like others in the House, I fully understand the sadness, anger and frustration when a police officer is killed whilst carrying out their duties, and I cannot make it any clearer that I sympathise sincerely with the widow, family, friends and colleagues of the late PC Andrew Harper. In Northern Ireland, we, of course, need no lessons on the risks presented to our police service on a daily basis, not least

in the context of the ongoing and severe dissident terrorist threat.

We have also seen all too regularly in public-order incidents attacks on fire crews and Ambulance Service personnel, but we should, at this juncture, acknowledge that, when recognising risk to what we have come to call our emergency or front-line services, there is also risk to others in public-facing roles. A few such roles come readily to mind, including retail-sector workers in the context of robbery and other offences. There are similar risks to taxi drivers and bus drivers, and civil servants carrying out investigatory roles have faced threat of or actual physical attacks in the course of their duties.

The amendment, while trying to overcome the limitations of the prescriptive list in the motion, nevertheless addresses the concerns raised on behalf of the listed sectors, and it also tries to address those concerns in the context of a sentencing review that is already under way. I suggest to the House that, in addition to overcoming those limitations, the amendment also deals with practical challenges presented by the original motion, two of which I will go into in some detail.

First, there is, as I have already referred to, an existing sentencing review process, the consultation on which closed in February this year and on which it is reasonable to expect there to be a response in the near future.

Good practice, I suggest, should not facilitate predicting or undermining the outcome of that review consultation, to which interested parties, possibly including victims and their representative groups, will have responded and taken time to do so. Politicians, including those represented in the House, will know themselves whether they have responded to that and have raised points that they may also raise or have previously raised and are repeating here today.

1.00 pm

Secondly, on the detail, there is the challenge of the perception of disparity in sentencing, when, in fact, the neighbouring jurisdictions on these islands all provide for a mandatory life sentence for murder. There is the additional factor, of course, of different recommendations on the time spent in prison — no one seeks to deny that — although those are determined by guidance given to the judiciary, whose independence we value highly. It is also fair to say that there is currently specific Northern Ireland provision. The most recently created offence — assault on ambulance workers — emerged from work in the Assembly following an attempt, as I understand it, to introduce an offence that recognised all emergency workers. With the collapse of the Assembly in 2017, the subsequent private Member's Bill to introduce an offence against hospital workers fell. I do not think that the current Minister or her immediate predecessors can be held responsible for the lapse of the previous legislation or the current consultation or for a lapse of time that was created solely by the absence of an Assembly. While we make specific provision for offences of assault on police, fire and rescue personnel and ambulance workers, we should aim to encompass a wider range of emergency workers such as nurses, midwives, prison officers, social workers and mental healthcare professionals. Those outstanding matters can surely also be dealt with in the current consultation. The amendment calls on the Minister — it makes it clear — to bring forward a revised sentencing framework based on

both the recent consultation and the sentences available for equivalent offences in other jurisdictions in these islands. It seeks, therefore, to address any perception of disparity.

In closing, I caution against any move or request to move towards any process that would replace the perception of disparity around sentencing with the perception or reality of a hierarchy of victims set out in law. For example, that disparity would differentiate, I imagine, between the sentence for the killing of a police officer or other services officer in a public incident and that for the killing of a civilian bystander, possibly on the same day, in the same street and in the same overall circumstances. That creates, without doubt, a hierarchy of victims such —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Blair: I am almost finished, and I really do not see the moment. I have about 30 seconds to go.

Such a move as is described would be a disservice to fairness and victims alike. There should be no difference in the sentence for murder. I urge the House to support the amendment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I remind the House that I have plenty of names on my list. Further down the list are a Queen's Counsel and a former Justice Minister, and I think they will have a valuable contribution to make. It is important that we — *[Interruption.]* Now, Mr Storey, do not chunter from a sedentary position. You will get in too. It is important that we try to keep the debate moving and let people make a contribution.

Ms Dillon: I intend to make my contribution brief, so hopefully that will assist in letting other Members in.

It is unfortunate that Mr Givan made some remarks about how he was against or voted against the Belfast Agreement because it allowed people who had killed police officers and others out of prison early with no thought for the families who lost loved ones at the hands of police officers through collusion and directly. I agree, therefore, with Mr Blair's comments about a hierarchy of victims. I will leave that aside for now, because that is not really what we are talking about today.

I support the amendment. First, I would like to place it on record — it is stating the obvious, but it cannot be said enough — that we support all of our front-line workers. Any attack on our front-line workers, particularly those that result in serious injury or death, are completely unacceptable. Those staff, whether in our hospitals, our prisons or on our streets, need to have maximum protection measures put in place to prevent and reduce such attacks and to ensure that they do not happen in the first place. That is really where we want to be. Punitive measures are OK, but the harm is already done. We really need to look at what we can do to prevent such attacks from happening in the first place. In that regard, I welcome some of the Minister's actions so far on what can be done to reduce attacks on prison officers in prisons.

The Department of Justice (DOJ) recently carried out a public consultation, and I am sure that many Members will have responded to that. I am certain that many of the remarks that will be made today will be fed into that consultation. In our response, we asked that a sentencing council should be established to look at the sentencing

tariffs. The original motion removes the ability of a judge, who will have all of the facts of the individual case at their disposal, to look at mitigating and aggravating factors when applying the sentence. That concerns me deeply. There is no doubt that those who attack our emergency services and front-line workers should most definitely be brought to justice. As in all cases, we want to see that the sentencing reflects the crime. In that, again, we say that we cannot have a hierarchy of victims. The life of a person who is attacked or killed as a result of domestic violence has no less value than that of any other member of our society, and we need to acknowledge that.

We also need to look at all of the mitigating factors where people have mental health or addiction issues. I am not saying that they should get away with attacking members of our front-line services, but there are many incidences where front-line workers would not want to see the book thrown at those people. They work with such people day and daily and understand the challenges that they face. There are people with all types of learning and social disabilities who have great difficulty in communicating with others. We need to acknowledge all of that, and we will not do so if we do what the original motion asks us to do. I support the amendment and thank the Members who tabled it.

Ms S Bradley: At the outset, on behalf of the SDLP, I place on record our sincere gratitude to all the emergency service workers who courageously put on a uniform and step forward for the good of society on a daily basis. It is not their uniform that sets them apart from other individuals but their commitment and courage in playing a part in society.

I acknowledge the sentiment articulated in the House by Mr Givan and Mr Storey in the motion, and, given its contents, I also acknowledge the horrendous death of PC Andrew Harper as being the catalyst for its timing. The voices of PC Harper's wife, Lissie, and his mother, Deborah, have resonated with many people. Serious questions surrounding the determination of murder versus manslaughter and consequential appropriate sentencing have legitimately been raised. However, I support Mr Blair and Mr Dickson's amendment, which cuts right to the heart of the debate in a Northern Ireland context. As we know, a sentencing review is under way here, and the consultation closed in February this year. On behalf of the SDLP, I add my support to the words in the amendment that express gratitude to all the victims who courageously engaged with the consultation.

It is fair to say that, since March of this year, nothing in the House or outside it has been business as usual.

It is reasonable to give some latitude to the speed with which the matter has moved in the Department to date, as resources were hastily, temporarily and correctly directed towards the united fight against COVID-19. However, as business as usual begins to resume, albeit in a period of COVID coexistence, I urge the Department to build momentum into developing the sentencing review. Mindful that a flow of information into the review may have been hampered, I also welcome the wording in the amendment that calls on the Minister to look beyond the consultation and consider sentences:

"for equivalent offences in other jurisdictions in these islands."

I further urge the Minister to consider options for sentencing in cases that sit within that fine margin of a determination from murder to manslaughter.

The question raised before us in the House today is this: do we task the Minister of Justice, who already has limited time remaining in the mandate, to begin to explore the possibility of creating legislation that looks specifically at the sentencing of those convicted of attacking emergency workers, or do we, as a House, unite behind the broader sentencing review that has already started? The rigours of the legislative process will facilitate the level of discussion, deliberation and debate required when considering a proposal to break from the principle that all lives should have equal protection from the law and be equally subject to the law. The public and victims are all too often left rightly outraged that sentencing does not reflect the horror of the crime committed. We, as a House, have a duty to remedy that wrong as quickly and effectively as possible. The SDLP, therefore, believes that, if the Minister is allowed to continue undeterred with the comprehensive sentencing review, we will have the opportunity to explore in detail all the issues raised in today's motion.

Three years of absence, COVID-19 and Brexit have stripped our Departments of time and resource. It is critical, where possible, that we get behind a focused way of moving such an important issue through the House. The SDLP, therefore, acknowledges the motion and recognises the sentiment behind it, but it supports the amendment as the solution to getting things done.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Members for tabling this important motion for discussion.

I fully understand the spirit of the motion and what it is trying to achieve and will support it, as does the Ulster Unionist Party, but I am uneasy about categorising any sort of victim. We must protect our blue-light services — the police, the fire service, the Ambulance Service and the army operating under Operation Helvetic, which is a blue-light service — as well as our nurses, paramedics and prison officers. An attack on them is utterly reprehensible, and any sentence must match the crime to act as a deterrent. However, what about school teachers, bus drivers, taxi drivers, the old, the disabled and our children? Are they less deserving of stiff, strong deterrent sentences? Each year, 50% of mainstream teachers and 90% of special needs teachers are attacked, and 45% are verbally abused. Everyone, not just emergency workers, expects and is entitled to go to work free from the threat of physical, mental or verbal violence.

The issue is not about sentencing for attacks on emergency services; for me, our sentencing framework is of genuine concern. Death or injury through drink- or drug-driving needs to be treated with severity so that it acts as a deterrent. I know that some people say that deterrents do not work: I do not agree. Attacks on children must be seen as an aggravating factor. It is the same with older people. The sentence must reflect that. Terrorism sentencing must be addressed.

Former Royal Marine Ciarán Maxwell, who was found guilty of committing terrorist offences in Northern Ireland but was tried in Great Britain, got 18 years in jail. Had he been tried here in Northern Ireland it is likely that he would have got 10 years and would have been out after five. That

is unacceptable. The 50% licensing, or 50% parole, for extended custodial sentences is partly the cause of that.

1.15 pm

The Ulster Unionist Party fed into the sentencing review, and we noted the five purposes of sentencing, which are listed as punishment, protection of the public, deterrence, rehabilitation and reparation. We do not see prisons as a warehouse for offenders, but we do believe that rehabilitation seems to have trumped everything else. At times, sentencing must be about the protection of the public, and it must be about deterrence. The principles of sentencing — proportionality, transparency, fairness and the use of punishment sparingly — inject a bias against harsh custodial sentences. We have a concern in regard to that last principle.

What am I saying? I am saying that deterrents work. I am saying that deterrents against attacks against our police officers, prison officers, emergency services workers and nurses do work and must be seen to work. People want to see that. They want to see our front-line services protected, but they want to see teachers, young people, disabled people and older people protected as well. We really have to deal with the sentencing framework.

I also note the First Minister's call for those who disappeared their victims to be refused parole unless they disclose the whereabouts of their victims. I absolutely stand by that. That is something that we must address now, and it should be retrospective, so that the people who disappeared Columba McVeigh and Robert Nairac should be returned to jail, if they are still about.

Sentencing is always going to be emotive. We know that. We know what we are trying to achieve here. I am happy to support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Frew: I support my colleagues' very worthy motion. It is reprehensible that our public servants and their families are not given the protection in law that they and their jobs merit. For police officers, soldiers and prison officers, jobs do not begin at 9.00 am and finish at 5.00 pm. Their whole lives are wrapped around protection, worry and sincere measures that they have to put in place to protect themselves and their families, even children, from terrorist threat, as has always been the case here in Northern Ireland.

I suppose there is one thing that I can say to appeal to the party opposite. The party opposite has a horrendous past, like no other party in the House. Whilst we cannot change the past — you cannot change your past — we can make a difference to the future by protecting those people and their families as we go forward. To do the right thing by those people would be an enormous benefit and a recognition of the sacrifice of the past.

I will speak, if I may, on the other aspect that is bound to be neglected here. We are going to focus on murders. There is no doubt about that, because, obviously, those are the most horrific crimes and loss to families and the biggest sacrifices made. However, there is also an issue around assault and the damaging of people. That goes right across the spectrum of people who serve. It affects nurses and ambulance workers. We have always differentiated between different people's jobs. Our job is to try and find that differential and try to be fair. We have made exceptions for police officers, firefighters and, a number

of years ago in the Justice (No. 2) Bill, my amendment for assaults on ambulance workers was successfully passed in the House. That made a difference to those workers who serve the community, help vulnerable people and, at times during their service, fall under circumstances where they are assaulted — some of them very grievously — and damaged in the course of their actions.

Mr Blair alluded to the fact that I had a private Member's Bill in front of the Assembly on the same protections for emergency workers in relation to assaults. That private Member's Bill proved to be a challenge for a number of reasons, one of them being about who you extend the protection to because social workers also go into people's homes, where they could be vulnerable and could be attacked. There is a wide range of healthcare workers and people who work in mental health hospitals who have very challenging scenarios to deal with on a daily basis. That all had to play in the mix and should play in the mix.

One thing that is important when looking at this is the impact of a crime on an individual, how they suffer pain, how it affects them and the role that they play, their job, their sickness and when they can return to their jobs. Not only that, but the impact on other people if you take somebody out of service. If you assault an ambulance worker or an accident and emergency nurse, doctor or worker and they have to take time off work — even on the night that they are assaulted — that could have ramifications that could mean the death of someone else, indirectly. We should be mindful of that when looking at these sentencing laws in relation to assaults. If a nurse or doctor is assaulted and they have to leave their place of work for an hour, that could have massive ramifications for someone's life because that nurse, doctor or healthcare professional is then not there to administer first aid to somebody. That could have massive ramifications and deprive people of their family members and their loved ones. That is something that we should be mindful of when we pass these motions and this legislation.

Ms Dolan: I stand to support the amendment. There is a view that sentencing for attacks on people providing front-line public services does not reflect the gravity of the offence nor act as a sufficient deterrent. It emerged, earlier this year, that there were 36 attacks on ambulance staff in the North in January 2019 alone. In the 12 months leading to 30 September 2016, 4,382 assaults on nurses were recorded in the health and social care sector. Additionally, in April this year, a survey by the shop workers' trade union suggested that incidents towards shop workers has doubled. One in six, of the almost 5,000 workers surveyed, said that they had been abused on every shift; almost two out of three, of those questioned, said they had suffered verbal abuse; and around a third had been threatened by a customer.

I am not downplaying the challenges that our emergency workers face, but, as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on workers rights, I found it horrific that any worker should face increasing abuse and violence. That should never be a part of any job. Yes, whilst the punishment of the perpetrator needs to be a priority, so too does the support provided to the victims of these attacks. Therefore, in the process of the sentencing review, it is paramount that the contributions of victims to the consultation are fully taken into account, moving forward.

Mr McGrath: The motion that we are debating today is, indeed, an incredibly emotive issue. There can be no doubt in anyone's mind that we must have a societal attitude, where people on the front line of our emergency response teams feel safe in the work that they do, and that they are assured in the knowledge that they can go about their essential work without fear of injury or their life being taken. Likewise, it is incumbent on us to ensure that everyone in our society who is in their workplace, community, home, school or streets to feel safe. The violence witnessed throughout the North for all too many years serves as a reminder to us that violence will only breed further violence.

That assuredness of safety is underpinned by a societal response to someone who takes another's life with little or no motivation other than the job that they are doing. Such a person must be assured that they will face the full consequences of the law of the land for their actions. A key component of that is a custodial sentence that is commensurate to the crime that is committed.

All too often, we hear of people who have been charged with murder who then receive a sentence that seems wholly inadequate and does not reflect the horror of the crime committed, the pain that is felt by the family left to grieve or the moral outrage felt by a society that has witnessed it.

Whilst I support the sentiment of the motion, I say to the proposers that I worry that, if we pass it, we will set a precedent that says that if you murder certain people, you will get a particularly long prison sentence, yet if you murder others, you will get a shorter sentence. In truth, there is a danger here, albeit, I accept, unintentional, of creating a hierarchy of sentencing and a hierarchy of victims.

I believe that that is a dangerous message. I believe that we need to send a clear and unequivocal message that if you set out to commit a murder, you will receive a sentence that reflects that. Obviously, I do not want to detract from the judicial process that will take each individual circumstance into consideration, but I refuse to accept a situation where someone's life is less or more valued based simply on the job that they do.

I am happy to support the Alliance amendment because it reflects all that I have said. It recognises the contribution and heroic work of our emergency services and accepts that they should not feel that their life is valued less than others or face the peril of murder when they are carrying out their work; nor should their families live in such fear. However, I will say that the motion correctly references the sentencing review consultation that took place recently, and I think that it is important that we allow that consultation to conclude and then consider its recommendations before we prejudge and suggest changes to the current system.

Many people believe that the system is too soft, and that is a view that I am sure will be encompassed in the sentencing review consultation. I think that it is best that we wait until we hear from that consultation, and I look forward to hearing its recommendations.

I support the amendment to the motion and hope that it can receive the support of the House and that, at the conclusion of the consultation, we will send out a clear

message that all murders will be considered equally and have the same rigours applied equally too.

Mr Butler: I was not minded to speak in this debate, but I have to, and I also declare an interest. I have 20 years' experience both as a prison officer for four years in the Northern Ireland Prison Service and 16 years as a firefighter. So, if anybody wants to have a conversation with me with regard to what it feels like to work as an emergency worker and live under those threats, I can tell them that it is a job like no other. I have never been a nurse, but I have nurses in my family.

Many of those roles are not ordinary roles. They are exceptional roles, and I pay credit to each and every one of those people, whether they are in the police, the Prison Service, our hospitals, health centres, fire stations, paramedics and many others. Some of those have been named by Members today.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: Absolutely.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member also acknowledge in that list of jobs that he is setting out that we have a very committed and dedicated workforce in domiciliary care who are out there every day working in homes and who are also vulnerable to attack and dealing with complexity?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Butler: Thank you for that. I absolutely will acknowledge that. For anybody who works in the community, there is domiciliary care, mental health nurses who are working on their own in complex environments and social workers, which is the Member's own background, I believe. All those workers step into areas where there is increased risk. It is not the same as working in a shop. The risk is already there. It is slightly increased. In fact, we have these peculiar circumstances in Northern Ireland where, for instance, if you are in the police, the Prison Service or any security job, guess what, you are not on social media as your normal self. We are still not there yet. There is still an increased pressure in Northern Ireland, so there is a conversation to be had.

1.30 pm

I welcome the spirit of the motion. I also welcome the amendment. As my colleague said, we will vote for both. However, there are a couple of things that perhaps did not sit right with me with regard to the total conversation that we are having today. The Member for Lagan Valley and I agree on about 90% of things: issues such as abortion and so on. The one that we do not agree on is the Good Friday Agreement. In 1998, I was 26 years of age, and I was a prison officer. I voted for the Good Friday Agreement because I wanted something better. Everything that went on before that was absolutely wrong, and it was vile. I had to see some things that stuck in my throat, but I knew that it was the best thing for peace. I would vote for it again. I will have a discussion with anybody on that again. However, we are not in 1998; this is 2020.

This is a complex debate. I recognise the victims' campaigners, such as the widow of PC Harper. The pain that that lady will go through for her life and the impact on her family needs to be recognised when we have appropriate sentencing for premeditated murder.

There are many types of violence that can be inflicted on each of the people whom we are talking about today, whether that is through social media, the coercive piece or just not being treated the same and being slightly outside society in Northern Ireland, which is mostly relevant to our security forces and the unique way in which they have to live. It is unjust and intolerable.

While I believe in a strong deterrent, I am also a keen advocate for rehabilitation and justice. I cannot look at one without looking at the other. If you are involved, as I am, in the field of mental health, you will know that we cannot neglect the high rates of poor mental health and addiction that we have in Northern Ireland and the correlation between excessive drinking, drugs and mental health and acts of violence.

I will support the motion and the amendment, but this conversation needs to be an adult one and the deterrent and rehabilitation pieces need to go hand in hand.

Mr Allister: This House significantly lacks credibility in discussing these issues and in propositions about tougher sentences being required, because four of the parties that make up the Government in this House were advocates for opening the prison doors and letting out the murderers. Whether those murderers were child killers or police killers, the unanimous view of four of the parties in this Government was, "They are different; let them out".

I listened to Mr Blair say that we cannot have a disparity, a hierarchy of victims. It is a bit late for the Alliance Party to think in those terms, because, in 1998, that is exactly what it endorsed. If you killed a policeman, you got out of jail. If you killed your neighbour or your wife in a domestic, you stayed in jail. It really is stretching credulity to hear people in this House talk about not creating a hierarchy of disparity, when they, through their political parties, have done exactly that. That is why I say that this Assembly, peopled in the main by folk from those parties, lacks credibility on this issue. Of course, it lacks it, particularly, on the Benches of Sinn Féin, which, to this very day, not only campaigns for the release of IRA murderers but refuses to call them murderers and to condemn their acts as terrorist acts and still justifies those acts. They come here today, nitpicking about whether we will be creating a disparity, when they are the living, walking illustration of hypocrisy and disparity on the issue of criminality and yet cannot say that it was wrong to kill. Nay, they celebrate; they glorify the killers. I, therefore, stress the point: the Assembly starts from a very low base when looking to pontificate about sentencing for all. I recognise that there is an issue about picking specific sectors for a particular format of sentencing, but there is a bigger issue, which is the issue that I have been talking about.

There is an issue that the Justice Minister needs to look at seriously. The 50:50 practice of half probation and serving half the time in non-homicide cases is rightly regarded as the soft option, because that is what it is. Putting criminals on probation is what causes most of them to laugh as they walk away from the criminal justice system. The idea of a 50:50 process in sentencing is one of the issues that is bringing the whole criminal justice system into serious disrepute. That is an issue that needs to be addressed in a vigorous way.

It is unfortunate that we are having a debate on an issue in which there is an attempt to —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the Member to conclude his remarks, please.

Mr Allister: — set up straw men about disparity, when the creators of the disparity are the people sitting in front of me.

Mr Carroll: I rise to speak against the motion, for a multitude of reasons that I will try to outline, but I begin by being clear that the policy and approach set out in the motion is straight out of the right-wing playbook. The motion references the fact that Boris Johnson's Tory Government are considering a similar move, but it is also the preferred approach by Hungary's Viktor Orbán, who was elected to power by pandering to a right-wing base with promises that he would introduce mandatory minimum and whole-life sentences. Bolsonaro has long advocated for harsher punishments in Brazil's penal system, and last year, spoke of plans to introduce whole-life sentences, which are advocated in the motion. When Donald Trump, whom, I know, has fans across the Chamber, first sought election, he won support from the right for advocating mandatory minimum sentences for people who tried to cross the US-Mexico border. It is the preferred approach by those on the right who view the issue of criminality as an individual problem rather than a societal problem, and who rely on retribution rather than seeking out the root causes of crime in society. That approach has been criticised and opposed the world over because it completely overhauls the principles of proportionality and rehabilitation.

The motion references the South of Ireland as having desirable mandatory minimum sentences. I refer Members to the Irish Council for Civil Liberties who, as far back as 1996, opposed such sentences. It said:

"The ICCL has always been opposed to mandatory sentencing on the grounds that it doesn't leave sufficient discretion to take into account the individual circumstances of the offence and degrees of culpability."

The concept of proportionality has been recognised by the European Court of Human Rights as constituting an essential part of human dignity, and grossly disproportionate sentences can be found to breach article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The detrimental impact of mandatory minimum sentences on first-time offenders is also well-documented and can be clearly linked to instances of reoffending. Most relevant of all, there is little evidence that tougher sentences deter potential offenders from committing the specified serious offences. It is also worth acknowledging that this approach would row back on a series of reforms that sought to remove political interference in the courts and lessen the long-term detriment faced by those serving mandatory minimum sentences.

This is not a proposal that seeks to end reoffending or change behaviour in order to protect those emergency workers whom it references. The evidence shows that the approach proposed in the motion does not work. The motion is simply an attempt to pander to those who view offenders as simply incapable of change.

I want to speak to the hypocrisy that I see with the approach often taken in the motion. There is already massive disparity and treatment in the punishment meted out by state forces and those who are not state forces.

That is summed up well by the tragic murder of Mark Duggan at the hands of British police in Tottenham in 2011. Unsurprisingly, Mark's murder has been on many minds since the murder of George Floyd by US police, and many other innocent black people have been tragically killed. Not only were the media and wider public misled by the police, who lied and claimed that Mr Duggan had opened fire on them, but even after that was deemed false, the murder of Mark Duggan was judged to be lawful. No mandatory minimum sentences, no consideration of a whole-life sentence. Those who took aim and took the life of Mark Duggan were, effectively, given a free pass.

Obviously, there are countless other examples, including those that happened locally, of the police and other state forces acting with impunity and without a sentence of that kind. This motion, if it were to become policy, would serve to enhance that disparity.

I find it galling that those emergency workers referred to in the motion, including firefighters, search and rescue workers and front-line healthcare staff, have found themselves standing on picket lines begging the Executive to pay them fairly — and, in the case of search and rescue, which carries out some of the most essential and worthwhile roles imaginable, it is not funded properly and has to rely on volunteers, donors and the goodwill of many people.

The way that the Executive have treated those workers has been appalling for over a decade —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up, I am afraid.

Mr Carroll: — and the motion does not even acknowledge that.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Claire Sugden, but would remind her that she has five minutes. If she gives way, I am afraid that I cannot give her an additional minute.

Ms Sugden: Thank you. I might just do that, given that it does not happen very often.

I support the motion and the amendment. That is my first preference. If the House does not accept the amendment, however, I am content to support the original motion.

My support for the amendment, however, is on the basis that the Minister of Justice does review the consultation responses urgently, formulates new policy and brings forward legislation, if necessary, before the end of this mandate. If that is not possible, I am not sure that we can support the amendment. I do not think that victims of that type of crime can go another two years without getting the proper justice that I sought to achieve when I announced the sentencing review in 2016.

I do not accept that the delay in the sentencing review was because we had no Executive or because of COVID, because, more than four years later, we are still in the consultation stage of the review. As Minister, I instructed the Department to get on with the work. That process should have been allowed to happen. The Northern Ireland Executive did not sit but Departments continued to work, so why has it taken nearly four years to get to where we are now?

I am not blaming or laying the fault at the Minister. She has not been in the post for very long, but I encourage her to progress this as soon as possible. This is a significant

piece of work. There will have been many responses to the consultation. However, if it is not possible to have a wider piece to address what has been raised by stakeholders, maybe we need to look to succinct pieces of legislation that address elements of it.

I sought to review sentencing in 2016, mostly because of a lack of public confidence in our justice system. It was felt that sentences were not fit for purpose and did not reflect the crimes. I have heard many arguments that we, as legislators, should not be guided by the emotion of the public but should look at this from a judicial and fair justice perspective. We are legislators. The sentencing framework within which the judiciary will act will be in legislation. We create the law; they interpret it. If we, as representatives of the general public, are being told by our constituents that the framework is not fit for purpose, we have to listen to them. I fully recognise and support the independence of the judiciary. They are far beyond being qualified and experienced enough to be able to give their opinion on how we do this. Indeed, they are a major stakeholder, and we should be listening to what they say. So, however, are the general public and victims.

1.45 pm

The sentencing review that I announced was, in part, led by the case of Enda Dolan. It would be remiss of me not to mention it. His father, even in the last four years, has continued to pursue a change in the sentences for dangerous drink-driving, and I fully support that. Whilst I am happy to acknowledge and support what the proponents of the motion have said, I think that this must form part of a wider sentencing review.

Also, there is the parity issue and the practical implications of that. Other jurisdictions within the United Kingdom, and, indeed, the jurisdiction of the Republic of Ireland, operate differently in this area, as do we, which causes difficulty between regions. If anything, we need to look at that as a practical concern and one that means that we have to address this quickly.

I have heard some people talk of a hierarchy of victims. I do not accept that. I look at the context in which crimes are committed. Evidence might suggest a hierarchy, and I would really like to see that evidence if we are to pursue this type of motion. Prison officers, police officers and front-line service workers are disproportionately targeted because of the work that they do. That is an important acknowledgement. These people are not targeted because they are sitting at home with their family; they are targeted because of the job that we, the public, expect them to do to keep us safe. That is an important distinction when looking at crimes like this. However, it might not be about pursuing this through new legislation or changing the sentencing framework. People talked about everybody being equal, but there are circumstances in which other contexts and different types of victim are considered. For example, the new Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill includes an aggravating factor that, if children are present, the sentence may be longer. So, there are opportunities to look at this in different ways.

I support the sentiment, but I think that we need to do this as part of a wider sentencing review. If anything, it should be an end-to-end justice review, but maybe that is for the next mandate.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, Question Time commences at 2.00 pm, and we need to allow some time for Members to change places, and to sanitise the Benches. As we do not have time for the Minister's full 15-minute contribution, I propose, with your leave, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The sitting will resume at 2.00 pm with questions to the Minister for Infrastructure. This debate will follow the question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Health, which will be taken after questions to the Minister of Justice.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.48 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Infrastructure

Bicycle Strategy: Targets

1. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline how she intends to meet the targets set out in the bicycle strategy for Northern Ireland. (AQO 550/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): The bicycle strategy that the Member refers to was published by one of my predecessors in August 2015. The strategy was based on three pillars: to build a comprehensive network for the bicycle; to support people who choose to travel by bicycle; and to promote the bicycle as a mode of transport for everyday journeys.

There were no specific targets set out in the strategy, but there were a number of Ministerial ambitions related to significantly increasing the proportion of shorter journeys made by bicycle. That desire to increase cycling journeys is reflected in the Programme for Government, and my commitment is to increase the proportion of journeys made by walking, cycling and public transport.

In order to achieve that, I want to ensure that in all transportation interventions my Department includes measures to improve walking and cycling as key components of the project, particularly in urban areas. I want to build infrastructure that makes walking and cycling journeys easier, safer and more convenient to undertake, including segregated and separated lanes and paths on the road, quiet streets where motor traffic is not allowed to predominate and traffic-free paths away from roads. Finally, I want to support councils in their development of greenways across the North.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her response. The Belfast Bicycle Network, which arises from the strategy, has targets that to be met would require 12,500 metres of cycleway being created each year. In 2019-2020, only 120 metres of cycleway was created. The Republic of Ireland's Programme for Government has committed to allocating 20% of its transport capital budget to active travel. I declare an interest as I was previously an employee of Translink. Will the Minister commit to making a similar allocation in the budget for the next financial year?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. One of the positives from COVID is that we are seeing an increase in people engaging in active travel, particularly cycling. As the Member will know, I have appointed a walking and cycling champion in my Department to demonstrate that this policy area and commitment is at the centre of the work of my Department. The Member will also be aware that I have allocated a new blue/green fund of £20 million, and we are very keen to see more cycling infrastructure and the further development of greenways.

The Member referred to the Belfast Bicycle Network. I hope to publish a document on the Belfast Bicycle Network before the end of the year, which will set out the priority

cycling routes for Belfast. I am very keen to see that agenda progressing across council areas and would be very keen to see that replicated in towns and cities across Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next questioner, I remind Members that questions 7 and 9 have been withdrawn. I call Trevor Clarke. Oh, sorry, I am way ahead of myself — I need to bring back Roy or Christopher. *[Laughter.]* I call Michelle McIlveen.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for her responses. As she will be aware, momentum is growing in certain areas to move greenway projects forward. Will the Minister commit to contacting councils to encourage them to fully consult with landowners, with a view to reaching agreement for routes to avoid vesting land?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. My walking and cycling champion wrote to all of the councils in July, if recollect correctly, asking them to submit proposals on greenways. So, we are very keen to work in partnership with councils to address the areas that you highlighted.

I would like us to be a much more advantageous situation with greenways, but there is money in my blue/green fund to work on design and feasibility and to work in partnership, which is really important, with landowners, local communities and councils to try to address and pre-empt any difficulties that might emerge so that we can make as much progress as possible.

Ms Mullan: Minister, the Department's recent survey on student travel behaviour showed that only 3% of students cycle as part of their journey to school, even though 50% of young people live less than 3 kilometres from their school. What is the Department doing to encourage cycling as well as working to expand educational programmes such as Active School Travel?

Ms Mallon: The Member makes a very important point. The survey showed, as has almost every survey conducted on active travel, particularly on cycling, that more people, of all ages, would cycle if they had safer infrastructure and the space to be able to cycle. We are engaging in a number of pilot projects and working with Sustrans so that we can have cycling proficiency in schools, which is important for the required cultural change. We are looking at a number of schools to see how we can progress cycling routes.

The Member will be aware that I announced funding for a 20 mph speed limit to be rolled out around 100 schools in this financial year. That does not solve the problem, but, again, it is about creating an environment for children to be able to walk and cycle safely to school.

Miss Woods: How much funding is allocated to the bicycle strategy for this financial year?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. We have not allocated money as such to the strategy itself. Given that it is capital money, we are hoping to utilise it to advance a number of projects in the scheme and consider any ideas that councils or communities come forward with in terms of advancing the whole cycling agenda.

Arc21: Planning Application Update

2. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the planning application for the Arc21 residual waste treatment project. (AQO 551/17-22)

3. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the planning application for the Hightown incinerator. (AQO 552/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 2 and 3 together.

My officials are continuing to progress the application at pace, in line with planning policy, to a point at which a decision is ready to be made. When all consultation responses are received and all statutory processes complete, my officials will bring forward a recommendation. I am keen to bring a resolution to this long-standing application for the sake of all involved, but if a sound decision is to be reached, it is important that the planning process is completed correctly. At this time, my officials are liaising with colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) in relation to the updating of the statement of need for the facility in the context of the proposed development, the strategic and long-term needs for waste management and the circular economy in Northern Ireland. When that response is received, officials will complete their assessment of the planning application.

At this time, I cannot confirm when a recommendation will be made. In the interim, I hope that Members will appreciate that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the individual planning merits or otherwise of this application.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that, prior to her appointment, she was publicly supportive of the No Arc21 campaign, does she believe that she may be conflicted when it comes to following due process in decision-making and that she would have to abdicate that position and pass it to someone else?

Ms Mallon: It is well known that I supported No Arc21 in my role as an MLA for North Belfast. However, I am now the Infrastructure Minister, and, as such, I am guided by the ministerial code of conduct as well as the Pledge of Office that I took when I accepted the portfolio for the Department for Infrastructure. As Infrastructure Minister, it is important to me that any planning decision is robust and sustainable, and that it is taken in an open and transparent manner, based on its planning merits. As such, I will not come to any conclusions on the processing of this application until I have carefully considered the report and recommendations of my planning officials.

Dr Aiken: May I make a declaration of interest? Along with the Minister, in previous guises, I have stood on the platform for No Arc21 and believe very strongly that this incinerator is nothing more than a Ponzi scheme.

Bearing in mind the length of time that this has taken, will the Minister outline the costs that have been accrued by the taxpayer for the considerable amount of ongoing legal activity since one of her predecessors made it very clear that this project should not go forward? Will she furnish those costs directly to the Assembly so that we can review whether this has represented good value for money by her Department or, indeed, anybody else?

Ms Mallon: I do not have that information to hand, but I am happy to take that question away and provide information as required.

Mr Allister: Does the Minister agree that, whether it is this planning decision or any other, pursuant to the Executive (Functions) Act, she can now make that decision without recourse to the Executive, and without awaiting any amendment to the ministerial code? Does she agree with that?

Ms Mallon: I do. With the granting of Royal Assent to the Executive Committee (Functions) Bill on 21 August, the Executive Committee (Functions) Act 2020 is now in effect. This Act, through its amendment of the Northern Ireland Act, clarifies that any Infrastructure Minister, now and in the future, can take planning decisions which are the statutory responsibility of the Department of Infrastructure. I see the taking of planning decisions as an important component in assisting a recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. I intend to begin making decisions shortly on a number of planning applications which officials have been working on to bring to a decision point. Having considered legal advice, I am satisfied that the amendments to the Northern Ireland Act allow me, as Minister for Infrastructure, to take planning decisions from the period of Royal Assent.

Mr Carroll: Considering the weight and size of opposition to this application from communities and most parties in the Chamber, and the detrimental impact that it will have on the environment, does the Minister agree with me that this project should not proceed?

Ms Mallon: As I outlined in one of my previous responses, as Minister for Infrastructure, I have to ensure that due process is completed and, therefore, it would not be appropriate for me to comment any further on the application.

Mr Blair: Further to the questions that the Minister has answered, will any future decision-making process on this application take into full consideration, revisited and reviewed environmental concerns and consultation with the relevant environmental agencies, particularly with regard to air quality and whether it is a good idea to burn our waste rather than recycle?

Ms Mallon: I confirm to the Member that, in the consideration of this application and its analysis by my planning officials, all relevant information will be scrutinised and reviewed.

Ms Flynn: I would like to ask the Minister about planning applications. Obviously, a lot of people are waiting with anticipation the Casement Park decision. In one of your previous answers, you mentioned that you will be considering some of these decisions soon. Have you any timeline by which the public could expect the decision on Casement?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. As she points out, I have previously stressed the need for progression of this long-awaited application. My officials continue to work at pace so that it can be brought forward for a decision.

Officials have substantively completed their assessment of the application and are presently considering a recently submitted objection to it. It is important that due process is followed, if a sound decision is to be made, and it is hoped

that a recommendation on this significant application can be brought forward shortly.

Flooding: Newcastle

4. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the recent flooding in Newcastle. (AQO 553/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I was in Newcastle on Tuesday 25 August, visiting homes and meeting residents, and could see for myself the extent of the flooding, the damage and disruption to properties and the very understandable upset of people. My Department has developed very effective emergency planning arrangements and those worked well.

Following the weather warning issued by the Met Office, my Department's operational teams and multi-agency partners were in a heightened state of awareness from Monday 24 August, and were ready to respond to the threat of flooding. Subsequently, on Tuesday morning, a multi-agency response in Newcastle was quickly established, with operational teams and multi-agency partners present from early morning, distributing several thousand sandbags, pumping, and providing assistance to property owners. It is believed that approximately 40 millimetres of rain fell in just under six hours. That is roughly 50% of the monthly average. At this stage, a partial blockage to a bridge on the Bryansford Road, that occurred as a result of the high water levels in the Shimna River carrying debris down the watercourse, is also thought to have been a contributory factor to the flooding.

In order to reduce the likelihood of flooding in the area again I am committed to delivering the Shimna flood alleviation scheme in Newcastle. It is due to commence on site next summer, and I have asked officials to do all that they can to accelerate delivery of that important project.

2.15 pm

Mr Boylan: I also welcome you back, Mr Speaker. The Minister is well aware of the stress, concern and worry of the residents. In leading up to the storm there were reports to the Department of debris and trees along the river. Will the Minister clarify when exactly it responded and what she and her Department did in relation to that?

Ms Mallon: At 12:45 the Department received a report from the PSNI that debris had built up and was blocking the flow of water at the Bryansford Road bridge that crosses the River Shimna. Action was taken to remove that.

I would say to Members, because I know how close we are to our constituents, that we are always keen to learn in the Department. We put in measures in advance, but we could not foresee the exact location of the flooding or its extent. It was very much unprecedented, but we are keen to always learn and improve. If Members are aware of things that were brought to the attention of the Department or things that, they think, we should have done better, I would be keen to hear them so that we can try to implement any learning, going forward.

Mr Beggs: I find it strange that the Department is being criticised for a lack of preparedness for this, especially given that there were three years when we had no Minister in post and the difficulties that arose in that time were not overcome. Does the Minister agree that those who were responsible for those three years of delay and for

not removing the obstacles owe a responsibility to those who were flooded and should take responsibility for it and their contribution to it, rather than attempting to blame the Department for what resulted?

Ms Mallon: First and foremost, I feel for the residents, because they should not have had to undergo that horrendous experience. I also think of the front-line workers: Roads and Rivers staff in the Department for Infrastructure and the emergency response teams, who worked tirelessly to protect people and property. I understand that party politics sometimes comes into play, and I can understand why you have said what you said, but the residents just want to know when the scheme will be implemented to prevent a recurrence. When I was in Newcastle, I gave them my commitment that we would be on site with a scheme next year, and I said clearly to my officials and the senior director, in front of the residents, that I wanted everything to be done that could be done to escalate that and to bring that project forward as quickly as possible. Residents do not want to hear us bickering and fighting among ourselves. They want action, and that is what I have committed to doing as Minister for Infrastructure.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, I know from speaking to party colleagues that they very much appreciated your swift attendance at the scene of the flooding. Are there any other hotspot areas that have been brought to your attention where there may well be flood alleviation schemes already in the pipeline that, unfortunately, as Mr Beggs rightly pointed out, have been held up because there was no Stormont Executive and Assembly for the last three years?

Ms Mallon: In the area of flood alleviation and across all Departments, there are many things that would have been advanced and implemented if the Assembly had been sitting for the past three years, but, as I said, we are all in post now and our focus has been on the challenges that we have. Flood is a hugely challenging area. We have had significant underinvestment in our water and wastewater infrastructure for several years. We are also in the face of a climate emergency, so we see flooding incidents happening much more regularly. We need a concerted effort across all Departments, working with residents and local communities, to do what we can to prevent these situations occurring.

When I was in Newcastle, the sense of community spirit was overwhelming. Even when people were standing up to their knees in water in their own properties, they were looking out for their neighbours. Local businesses rallied around to provide free food for the emergency services and the front-line workers. Even in the midst of all that distress, I took heart from the fact that the community spirit was strong and positive, certainly in Newcastle and in Strabane, which also experienced flooding.

Active Travel: South Antrim Investment

5. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline any planned investment in active travel in South Antrim. (AQO 554/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware of my announcement about funding of £20 million for the blue-green infrastructure, which will support our communities through transformation, promoting active travel and

shaping our places to live in the new normal. I am keen to see progress on better walking and cycling infrastructure throughout Northern Ireland, and I am considering the basis on which funding may be allocated for cycling infrastructure. Specifically in South Antrim, my officials are developing proposals to improve walking and cycling in the constituency and have recently completed a shared-use path at Loughanmore Road, Antrim.

My Department is working in partnership with councils and stakeholders on identifying and taking forward schemes that deliver on our Programme for Government outcomes and ensure lasting change for people across the North. Greenways are an important part of that positive change, and part of the blue-green infrastructure funding has been identified to support councils in delivering more of their greenway schemes. I am keen to work with all councils and stakeholders in the development of safe active travel routes throughout the North, and I encourage councils to liaise with the walking and cycling champion in my Department on suggestions for projects in their area.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister not only for that answer and the detail therein but for the various replies to me from her and her officials on that issue in recent times. Will the Minister provide an update on greenway projects that were previously identified in consultations, specifically those in South Antrim from Ballyclare to Ballymena and from Doagh, Ballyclare to Draperstown?

Ms Mallon: As I said, I am keen to see progress, and it is important that we work in partnership with councils. They are well placed to lead on these projects, and I say clearly that I want to do what I can to support them. Under the Programme for Government, greenways are an important part of the positive change that we seek to achieve.

Under the small grants for greenways programme, Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council received funding to develop a feasibility study for the Doagh to Larne greenway, and, in 2018, further funding was provided to develop a detailed design. Following the announcement of the blue-green infrastructure fund, my officials wrote to all councils in July asking for details of greenway projects that are ready to be taken forward to construction. I understand from that exercise that further work is required on this scheme, but I reiterate to the Member that I am keen to do what I can to support it and will be happy to have further engagement with the councils to see how we can work together to bring it forward.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Minister tell us what her plans are to expand cycle paths in general as a key element of the active travel infrastructure?

Ms Mallon: I am keen to see the extension of cycle paths and separated cycle paths. I have also been clear, though, that, if we are trying to bring about positive and lasting change, we cannot impose change from on high and top down; we need to work with local communities, councils and local reps to understand what changes will work best in those areas. We have been engaging primarily with councils on that, but I also had a really positive stakeholder meeting with groups across the spectrum of active travel. I hope to announce shortly a challenge fund, and that will be for community groups and others to bid for so that we can bring the type of projects that the Member referred to in the right locations across the North.

Mr Clarke: The Minister referenced one of the paths on the Loughanmore Road, which is a good job. Some communities want to be active, particularly in the rural areas, where people have nowhere to walk, but the criteria for the assessments that her Department carries out for those communities to qualify have been fairly stringent over the years. Can the Minister give us a commitment that she will look at those assessments to make it much easier for those communities to qualify for those paths so that they can be active?

Ms Mallon: I am very conscious of the Member's point. I am caught in a bind where I have to have an objective matrix for assessments so that I can fairly assess proposals, going forward. Since I announced the £20 million blue-green fund, I have had correspondence from residents of rural areas talking about the lack of extended pavements for them to go out walking, so I have asked my officials to look at that. At the beginning, when I announced the fund, the focus was on urban areas because we were looking to see pilot projects in city centres and town centres that we could get up and running, but I am mindful that there are rural communities and that they need to be able to avail themselves of the fund. I do not know whether we need to look at the assessment criteria or, maybe through the challenge fund, try to do something more to encourage active travel routes in our rural communities.

Driving Tests: Update

6. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps are being taken to restore driving test services at the Craigavon Driver and Vehicle Testing Agency (DVTA) site. (AQO 555/17-22)

14. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the provision of practical driving tests. (AQO 563/17-22)

Ms Mallon: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 14 together.

The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) has reinstated driver-testing services where testing can be done safely in line with Public Health Agency (PHA) advice and guidance on social-distancing requirements. That includes motorbike driving testing from 6 July and tests for drivers of buses and tractors and module-4 Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC) tests for lorry, bus and coach drivers from 20 July. From 1 September, category B, which is private car, and category C — lorry — driving tests have resumed, initially prioritising requests from key workers, followed by customers whose tests were cancelled due to lockdown.

The DVA has directly contacted around 200 key workers and offered them a driving test. Officials are now in the process of contacting customers who had their driving test cancelled between March and June to arrange a driving test appointment with them. The DVA estimates that it will take between six and eight weeks to clear the backlog, after which the driving test booking system will be open to the general public to book a test. The DVA will continue to work with staff and trade unions in the coming weeks to ensure that testing is conducted in line with public health advice and guidance to ensure the safety of all.

The Craigavon test centre continues to be used for COVID testing, and, given the worrying rise in the spread of

the virus in the area, I believe that it is a very important service in the fight against the virus. While it does not greatly impact vehicle testing, driver testing services cannot be safely recommenced until the site is vacated. Candidates wishing to be tested at Craigavon will have a choice of other test centre locations, but I appreciate the inconvenience that this is causing to driving instructors and candidates. My understanding is that the centre will no longer be needed by the Department of Health from mid October, and, in the meantime, officials are working with the Public Health Agency to enable driving tests to be restored at the Craigavon test centre as soon as is practicable, once an alternative site for COVID-19 testing has been identified. Officials have also met a representative group of instructors from the Craigavon area to identify whether there are any alternative workable solutions for the temporary provision of driving tests in a different location in the Craigavon area in the interim.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Minister that she has two minutes to answer a question, but I appreciate that that was a double bumper.

Mr Irwin: The Minister will accept that Craigavon driving test centre is the second largest in Northern Ireland. Given that tests cannot currently take place there and that it covers a large area, the young people have to take tests in Newry, Lisburn or Armagh. That is totally impractical. Will the Minister assure me that, as soon as it is practically possible, the test centre will be up and running again?

Ms Mallon: Yes, and, as I said, I appreciate the inconvenience that it causes. While a case can be made that, if you are to pass your driving test, you should be expected to be able to drive on any road and be tested on any road, I accept that it adds nerves to the situation. It is not an ideal situation at all for people to be inconvenienced and disrupted in that way. As I said, we have been working with our colleagues in Health, and our understanding is that they will no longer need to use the grounds in mid October, but I recognise that there is still a difficulty in the interim. That is why we have been engaging with local driving instructors, and they have suggested possible interim solutions, which are being explored by DVA staff. DVA staff have committed to coming back to local driving instructors to update them on progress.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Minister, for your work on the issue. The rise in COVID at local level is of major concern to us all.

Minister, you said that there was ongoing communication with driving instructors.

I take it that they will play a key role in the consultation and agreement on alternative sites. Can the Minister give some idea of the time frame for when that might be resolved?

2.30 pm

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I know that she has championed the issue, along with local representatives in the area. Yes. We have engaged locally with driving instructors. They have suggested a number of alternative sites in the Craigavon area. Those sites are being explored. We also explored the possibility of being able to carry out both services on site. My Department's risk assessment found that that was not the right way in which to proceed. Our Health colleagues also felt that it was too risky. That risk has been heightened by the fact

that, with the increased spread of the virus, we have seen quite a significant increase in the demand for services there. As I say, the Department of Health has indicated that it will not need the site from mid-October, which will provide a lasting solution, if you like, to the issue. However, we are exploring what could be done in the interim. As I have said, DVA has met driving instructors and is committed to going back this week to update them.

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

Public Transport: Social-distancing Concerns

T1. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what assurances she can give that the concerns raised in recent weeks about a lack of social distancing and capacity on public transport, including on the Belfast to Dublin train service, are being addressed. (AQT 301/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I am aware of the incident on the Enterprise to which he refers. As I understand it, there were technical difficulties with another train, which reduced capacity. It was an unacceptable situation. It must not happen again. Learning has been implemented. I have to say that a number of measures were taken when the situation started to unfold. Passengers were advised that there was alternative bus provision. A number declined to take that up. We have taken learning from that and will implement it as we go forward.

I have to say, though, that while that situation was unacceptable, it is not a common occurrence, thank goodness. That is testimony to the fact that Translink has put on a number of additional contingency measures. For example, additional capacity is on standby if required when we can see that passenger numbers will make social distancing difficult. It is a very challenging environment, but we are keeping it under constant review and trying to implement learning as we go along.

Mr Gildernew: Does the Minister agree that the strongest possible messaging is needed in order to encourage compliance with COVID-19 measures on public transport?

Ms Mallon: Absolutely. I agree completely. We need a strong and uniform message. The Member will know that I moved to bring in mandatory face coverings on public transport. Prior to that, only around 10% of passengers were wearing face coverings. The most recent survey that has been conducted found that up to 86% of passengers are wearing face coverings. That is a positive sign. Absolutely. We have to be mindful. We can see what is happening in Craigavon. The virus is still very much amongst us. We are all still very much at risk of it. Therefore, it is very important that we follow all the public health advice. Some of us think that hand washing is a small, minor thing. It is actually critically important. Social distancing is critically important. The onus is on all of us to convey that message at every opportunity.

MOT Certificates: Paperless System

T2. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, after welcoming the Speaker back to the Chamber, and after explaining that she has now received a second

date for her MOT, which is perfectly fine and which she understands, why the issuing of MOT certificates has moved to an almost paperless system. (AQT 302/17-22)

Ms Mallon: We moved to the automatic issuing of temporary exemption certificates (TEC). There was a lot of confusion about the TEC process. People were not sure whether they had to apply, whether certificates were being issued automatically, and when they would get their certificate in the post. Therefore, we tried to move to an automated system in order to reassure people that when their MOT was due to expire, they would be issued automatically with a temporary exemption certificate. That was done to take some of the pressure off the customer and to reassure them that they did not need to do anything because DVA would do it on their behalf. The customer can also go onto the DVLA website — the Member is nodding, so she has done this — and put in their registration details to confirm that a TEC has been issued, which will then, obviously, allow them to tax their vehicle. It is always important to remind people that responsibility for the safety of a vehicle rests with the vehicle owner. That applies equally at all times.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. The Minister said that automation was to decrease confusion. However, I think that it has increased confusion, particularly among older people. My father has done my head in over recent weeks about his MOT certificate. People are used to seeing a certificate; it is called an exemption certificate. Many people have phoned my office saying that they were unaware that their MOT had been changed again. So, will the Minister look at the issue again for those more vulnerable people who may not have online access or who cannot navigate the system?

Ms Mallon: That is an important point. We are caught up in a very strong push to put all our services online in this digital age. However, as the Member says, there are people who cannot access services online. I will look at the issue, but I cannot see us reversing automation. However, there may be more that we could do to ensure that the message of automation is communicated accessibly to older citizens. As I say, I will take it away and think about how we might raise awareness in the community.

Sewerage System Problems: Gallagher Shore, Enniskillen

T3. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she is aware of the unacceptable sewerage problems that are facing residents in Gallagher Shore, Enniskillen. (AQT 303/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware of the unacceptable situation in Gallagher Shore. It is a very complex situation, as the water and sewerage system is not owned by Northern Ireland Water, although Northern Ireland Water has, on a few occasions, stepped in to pump when the situation was particularly bad. It is a very complicated issue, but it is one that I am looking at. I am very mindful that Northern Ireland Water does not have the resources to fulfil its statutory duties and obligations, and the situation in Gallagher Shore is outside those statutory obligations. However, I am willing to engage with the Finance Minister to see whether he might be able to assist in finding a financial solution to the situation.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for her answer. Would the Minister agree to accompany me on a visit to Gallagher Shore to reassure residents that the issues will be addressed?

Ms Mallon: I am always happy to meet residents. For that meeting to be as useful as possible, it would be important that I have engagement with the Finance Minister in the first instance so that, when I go to Gallagher Shore, I can update residents on the progress of the negotiations.

Active School Travel: DE Financial Contribution

T4. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the Department of Education contributes any funding to the Department for Infrastructure/Public Health Agency Active School Travel programme, given that the Education Minister recently referenced the need for an increase in the number of journeys to school that are made by walking and cycling. (AQT 304/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My understanding is that it is the Public Health Agency and the Department for Infrastructure that fund the programme, although I stand to be corrected if the Department of Education is contributing financially. However, the question demonstrates that if we are to address those issues, we need to come at them in a partnership approach. Public finances are extremely tight, and, when we pool our resources, we can make much greater progress.

I am happy to engage with the Education Minister, and with other Ministers, to see how we can work together on a common policy approach in those areas and also to bring resources and public messaging to ensure that we can make as much progress as possible. We are in a climate emergency, and active travel is an important element in addressing it. However, we also need to drive a cultural change. As the Eco-Schools initiative has proven very successfully, changing culture and behaviour in schools has a lasting impact, not just on young people but on their parents.

I am happy to work with any Minister, and with the all-party group on cycling as well, on the matter, Chris.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for her response and welcome her commitment to work with the Minister of Education to increase active travel journeys to school. As part of that engagement, has the Minister any plans to increase the on-road cycling proficiency training available to pupils?

Ms Mallon: As the Member will know, we are involved in cycling proficiency initiatives; we make a contribution to them. However, the challenge to my Department is that I have very little wiggle room when it comes to resource expenditure. I would like to do so much more, but it is a very challenging environment, and that curtails what I would like to achieve. However, I recognise the importance of the initiative, and I would like to do what I can to help it.

Schools: 20 mph Speed Limit

T5. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many schools in Newry and Armagh have been able to implement a 20 mph speed limit. (AQT 305/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As I referenced earlier, the Member will know that I have allocated £2 million for the roll-out of the

scheme to an estimated 100 schools in this financial year. The way that that has broken down in the 100 schools is that we have taken 25 schools per division and carried out an assessment, which is now complete. This afternoon, we should be publishing the list of the 100 schools. The list will cause some disappointment to schools, and I would like to be doing so much more. We are in a very constrained time for delivering on the scheme, but we are working at pace. I am writing to schools today to advise those that are included in the scheme that they will be, and also to those schools that were unsuccessful this time to assure them that I want to see the programme rolled out going forward. We hope to be in a position to commit further funding to the scheme to extend it to many more schools.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for her response. I, too, encourage the Minister to roll that scheme out as widely as possible. I am aware that the Minister has just recently announced a road safety community fund scheme. Will that scheme be available to schools?

Ms Mallon: Yes, that is a fund of £100,000. Individuals and groups can make an application for a grant up to £10,000. I am very keen to see this money spent. It is for people who have any ideas or initiatives about promoting road safety in their area. I am really keen to see projects coming forward that are very much focused on active travel and road safety. I appreciate any support that the Member can give to raising awareness of that grant scheme and to encouraging people in his constituency to apply.

Belfast City Centre: Bus Travel

T6. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that it is important to get the right balance between people being able to travel to Belfast city centre, the environment and the progress of the city centre, which has been devastated in recent years, with the fire in the Bank Buildings and, more recently, COVID-19, whether she supports the motion that was tabled by the SDLP at Belfast City Council on 1 July 2020 regarding buses coming from north Belfast and the greater Shankill area to the city centre, particularly Donegall Place, which has caused real concerns to her constituents and his, the Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce, the chief executive of which he met over the summer, and to Translink, the chief executive of which he also met. (AQT 306/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am willing to consider all proposals. However, as you say, we need to get the balance right. As part of the active travel work and transportation plans, we need to feed in to local communities and get their feedback on it. I am happy to take the issue up and discuss it further with the Member or any of the residents who have been contacting him with concerns.

Mr Humphrey: Have you discussed those concerns with the chief executive of Translink, an arm's-length body within your Department, and with Mr Simon Hamilton, chief executive of the chamber of commerce?

Ms Mallon: No, I have not. I have met Simon Hamilton, but we discussed a range of issues. This was not one of the particular issues that he raised. However, I am happy to engage with all partners and stakeholders on the matter. I am happy to meet with Translink as well. I am in discussions with Translink on a very regular basis, particularly as we respond to COVID. I am in very regular contact to get reviews and updates about how we are

managing that situation. Certainly, I am happy to have discussions with anyone to try to address any concerns that people might have.

Brexit: British Government/Executive Discussions

T7. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that she will be aware of the 'Financial Times' report that the British Government are planning new legislation to end the legal force of customs arrangements designed to avoid a hard border in Ireland, whether, as an Executive Minister, she can update the House on the Executive's discussions with the British Government on Brexit and the work of her Department in preparation for the EU exit and the implementation of the protocol. (AQT 307/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is clear that we need to ensure that both the letter and spirit of the protocol are infused into the negotiations themselves and reflected in the negotiated outcomes. The Member is correct. If reports are true, this is entirely unacceptable. Any threat of a hard border on the island of Ireland must be resisted by this Executive and, indeed, by this Assembly. The Executive meets weekly to discuss EU exit issues. However, it is clear to me, and to the stakeholders that I have been engaging with, that the British Government are not providing enough clarity to Ministers. I will be pressing, yet again, at the Executive and to the British Government directly for answers in light of these alarming reports.

2.45 pm

Businesses and communities face an unprecedented challenge, and they need answers. As my Department is working to do all that we can to prepare — I recently held sectoral meetings with the industries to discuss Brexit — it is really important that we work in partnership over the coming months. In addition, the Member may wish to know that, in the Department's EU exit legislation programme, there are eight EU exit-related statutory rules (SRs) at various stages of development that need to be made before the end of the transition period. It should be noted, though, that the number of SRs remains under review. The Department seeks to ensure that it addresses any emerging need for legislation, particularly in relation to developments in the UK/EU negotiations on future arrangements.

Mr Speaker: Members, time is up for this session. Before we move to questions to the Minister of Justice, I ask Members to take their ease for a moment.

Justice

Reducing Offending in Partnership

1. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her Department's plans for further development of the Reducing Offending in Partnership programme. (AQO 564/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Reducing Offending in Partnership (ROP) is a multi-agency approach, led by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), to preventing crime and reoffending that focuses on the most persistent and prolific offenders as identified by criminal

justice partners. It uses proactive engagement to prevent and reduce crime and delivers tailored interventions as part of individual action plans based on assessed risks and needs.

Within the PSNI, the work was initially developed as a specific project. It has now become mainstreamed and integrated in the organisation, with reducing offending units well established and designated officers in place. As this is an operational issue in the main, PSNI reports on ROP to the Northern Ireland Policing Board on a regular basis. My Department and its agencies continue to be engaged in the identification and assessment of individuals, along with the delivery of interventions and supervision.

I am aware that a review of the Police Service role in ROP and how it manages repeat offenders has been commissioned. It is essentially an internal PSNI review, undertaken with a view to recommending a way forward that reflects the broader change in crime trends, a changing operational environment and the impact of vulnerability in our communities. The Police Service views this as a maturing of the offenders programme and a move to a new level of collaborative service delivery. I look forward to hearing the outcome of that review.

Ms Flynn: What mechanisms are in place for reporting on the impact of work to reduce offending, sharing good practice and learning from experience?

Mrs Long: As part of its work, the PSNI first tries to identify offenders who are at risk of reoffending and then works with them alongside partner agencies and the community on the basis of the risk assessments that they carry out in order to try to prevent reoffending. I think that it is possible, therefore, using a managed set of interventions that are sequenced and tailored to respond to the risks and needs of the individual to have a measurable outcome in terms of whether or not that person goes on to reoffend. Of course, the interventions have a key aim of trying to disrupt the individual's criminal activity, but it is also about supporting compliance, reducing their offending and giving them the other support that they may need in order to be able to desist from offending and have more productive lives in the community.

Miss Woods: May I ask the Minister for an update on the delivery of a centre for restorative excellence in Northern Ireland to contribute to a reduction in reoffending interventions?

Mrs Long: There is ongoing work on the restorative justice element. We have already signed off on the new arrangements in terms of the basic plans for restorative justice. I have signed off on those to take them forward. We will, of course, continue to make progress in that regard.

Restorative justice, far from being an easy option, is an option that challenges offenders by having them confront the impact that their actions have on their victims, and that it is a good way for us to deliver the responsive justice that, I think, most people in the Chamber would wish to see. I therefore believe that, by properly adjudicating, measuring and quantifying the work that is done in partnership with other parts of the justice system, we can use restorative justice in a way that brings home to people who offend the seriousness of their crimes but also, hopefully, supports victims to see not just that the crime committed against

them has been acknowledged but that reparation for it has been made. The centre will go ahead as we previously discussed, and I am happy to bring an update to the Justice Committee in due course as we make further progress.

Mr Speaker: Question 2 has been withdrawn.

Sexual Offence Cases: Pilot Scheme

3. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the pilot scheme to fast-track serious sexual offence cases involving child witnesses under 13 years of age. (AQO 566/17-22)

Mrs Long: Although the operational responsibility for leading the pilot lies with the judiciary, I am grateful for the opportunity to place on record my thanks to Her Honour Judge Smyth for initiating the pilot to fast-track serious sexual offence cases involving children under 13 years old to the Crown Court. I also thank the NSPCC Young Witness Service and criminal justice partners for signing up to the voluntary protocol for their hard work and their dedication to improving the experience of child victims of serious sexual assault.

This judge-led pilot applied to cases received by the PSNI from 1 September 2019. It was a one-year pilot, and the multi-agency group that has taken the work forward is now reflecting on the application of the protocol. It will report back at its next meeting, later this month, to determine whether and how the protocol can be continued on a voluntary basis.

My Department will also wish to consider any lessons or best practice arising from the pilot, and we will continue to work with our criminal justice and voluntary sector partners to improve the experience of the criminal justice system for children at what must be an extremely traumatic time in their young lives.

Ms C Kelly: The Barnahus model of how child victims and witnesses are dealt with and assessed for serious crime or sex offence cases is an international gold standard for responding to the unique needs of children. Can the Minister tell us whether she plans to introduce a similar system here?

Mrs Long: I am pleased to be able to respond to that specific issue, because, as the Member will be aware, implementation of the Gillen review of law and procedures in serious sexual offences is a key priority for me and my Department. The Department, working with multi-agency partners, has developed a phased implementation plan for Gillen. It prioritises the recommendations that will have the greatest impact on complainants going through the system, including children. There are four strategic priority areas, which are remote evidence centres; separate legal advice and representation for complainants pre-trial; support for child victims, including the Children's House-type or Barnahus-type model; and committal reform. We are therefore in the process of bringing those work streams forward to set specific delivery dates for the change, and that will be monitored by the Strategic Justice Group on Sexual Harm and overseen by the Criminal Justice Board.

Victims' Payment Scheme

4. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice, following the Executive's announcement nominating the Department

of Justice to administer the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme, to outline any financial commitments she has received in relation to the scheme. (AQO 567/17-22)

8. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the process for the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQO 571/17-22)

9. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Justice what engagement her Department has had with the Department of Finance regarding the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQO 572/17-22)

11. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Justice when the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme will be open for applications. (AQO 574/17-22)

Mrs Long: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I want to answer questions 4, 8, 9 and 11 together.

I have consistently expressed my concerns around the delay in implementing the victims' payment scheme. We have waited too long to have that important scheme in place, and victims have waited too long to be provided with the support that they very much need as survivors of the Troubles. In seeking to avoid any further delays, I previously indicated that I was content for my Department to be designated to deliver the scheme. Following the recent court judgement, the Department of Justice was formally designated by the Executive Office on 24 August to carry out the administrative functions of the Victims' Payments Board on the board's behalf.

Work has already commenced in my Department, and a project team has been established to progress the development of delivery structures under the new scheme. A number of important operational steps need to be advanced to implement that scheme. This includes the development of an IT system, the deployment and training of staff for administrative preparations, the development of a medical assessment process and the appointment of members to the Victims' Payments Board. Not all of those issues fall within the direct control of the Department of Justice. However, subject to funding for the scheme being made available, it is anticipated that the scheme could open for applications by early March 2021.

The Executive have made £2.5 million available in this financial year to support the development of administrative arrangements for the scheme. A component of that funding will enable my Department to advance a number of key priority operational activities. At this stage, it is not possible to indicate when payments to victims may commence, as that will be a matter for the Victims' Payments Board, when it is established. However, every effort will be made to ensure that the scheme can open for applications at the earliest opportunity and that payments are advanced as quickly as possible.

Although the Westminster regulations came into force on 29 May, the important issue of longer-term funding for the scheme remains outstanding. I am strongly of the view that the UK Government have an obligation to make the necessary funding available, and I am committed to working with the Secretary of State, the Treasury and Executive colleagues to ensure that all of that is in place. In that regard, I am due to soon meet the First Minister, deputy First Minister and the Minister of Finance.

I know that delays have been deeply disappointing for many victims and survivors who need this important financial support. I share that disappointment and will do all that is possible to get that scheme delivered as quickly as possible. As progress is made on the development of the administration arrangements, in conjunction with the Executive Office, there will be ongoing engagement with key stakeholders, including victims and survivors groups, in order to keep them fully informed of progress.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Minister that there are two minutes for an answer to questions.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Minister for referencing the disappointment and frustration that is continually felt by those victims. I note your reference to the operational steps, which appear to be quite detailed, and the recruitment exercises etc that have to be gone through. Given that most in the House are, I think, in agreement about where a lot of the funding should come from regarding the finances, I ask the Minister if, within the capacity of building the operational systems that are required, she will give an anticipated timeline for when the structure will be in place, which would allow for applications to the scheme?

Mrs Long: As I have highlighted, there are important operational steps to advance before the scheme can open for applications and payments can commence. I remain committed to ensuring that the new scheme is operational at the earliest opportunity. We estimate that it could open for application by early March, although a number of the operational steps are outside our control. However, we are looking to see whether that timescale can be further shortened. There are critical steps that must be in place before we open the scheme for applications. The issue of when victims will begin to receive payments will obviously depend on how quickly all of the evidence can be gathered to enable a proper assessment of individual applications. Therefore, officials have been engaging with the PSNI, the Public Records Office (PRONI) and the Department of Health regarding the evidence and information retrieval systems that need to be put in place.

Mr Middleton: Obviously, we welcome the fact that progress is being made on the issue. Shamefully, it has taken much longer than was expected. Will the Minister give a view on the substantial legal costs that have arisen from the fact that the victims had to go to court to push this on? Where does she believe that that bill should be paid from?

Mrs Long: With respect to the Member, I was not party to the ongoing court case, and neither was my Department, so it would be inappropriate for me to give any opinion on whether and where those legal costs should be laid.

Mrs Barton: Minister, can you confirm that people who were injured as a result of their own malicious actions will not receive the victims' payment?

Mrs Long: Yes, I can: anyone injured by their own actions will be automatically ineligible for the scheme. Others who have serious convictions that may militate against them being able to apply to the scheme will be open to apply to the scheme and to have those convictions and any mitigating circumstances considered in the round by the panel, who will finally decide on the eligibility or otherwise of applicants.

From my perspective, it is important that the decision as to who will and will not receive the pension will not be a political decision for me but will be an independent decision made by the panel.

3.00 pm

Mr Chambers: Thank you, Minister, for your responses. Can the Minister disclose the specific eligibility requirements that will allow those with convictions of more than two and a half years to claim the payment?

Mrs Long: The eligibility requirements, including the regulations and the explanatory guidance, have been issued by Westminster. Those documents are in the public domain, and the Member is, of course, free to read them. It would not be appropriate for me to suggest how those might be interpreted by the independent panel that will be put in place, but, from reading them, the eligibility criteria are fairly clear. It is also clear that it is not eligibility to be able to apply but it is what will be considered by the panel in terms of how it will take it forward once the panel has been set up.

Mr Allister: The Minister will be aware of the great anger and frustration amongst victims that it took a judicial review to break the deadlock on this matter, with the resulting delay and cost to the public purse. What confidence does she have that there will not be further contrived delay when it comes to agreeing the funding and is there a risk of another judicial review? It would be quite shameful if that was necessary.

Mrs Long: First and foremost, whilst the judge did not rule on the matter of funding, he made clear his intention were a similar judicial review to be brought on that basis. He made it clear that the Executive Office has a duty under the law to fund the Department that is designated, which we now know is the Department of Justice, and, therefore, it is important that it is able to do that. There is a substantive point of difference here because, whilst the Northern Ireland Office is claiming that it is not for it to pay or that the money is already there as part of NDNA, that is simply not the case. The legacy money set as part of NDNA was set aside for specific purposes around the HIA, which is also under question at the moment, but it is not accessible for other legacy issues and was not, to the best of our knowledge, having previously approached the NIO about the matter, available for the pension. We will need to take a joint approach, as an Executive, to seek funding to see the scheme through to its conclusion.

In terms of my confidence in how well we will be able to do that, I can only say that the Finance Minister and the Executive Office have sought to meet me at the earliest opportunity to discuss how we can make that joint case to the Treasury and to the NIO.

Ms Dillon: Has the Minister had any direct discussions with the Secretary of State about funding and has he given any indication that they will be prepared to discuss funding? The previous Secretary of State said that funding would be sorted and that an approach would be looked on favourably.

Mrs Long: I have had those conversations. I have not had those reassurances, but I can assure you that those conversations are by no means concluded.

Mr Givan: The Minister will know that Sinn Féin continues to argue for the perpetrator to be eligible. Can the Minister provide an assurance that under no circumstances will the scheme be delayed because of the position that Sinn Féin wants to take forward in negotiations in the future? Furthermore, can she give an assurance that the Department for Communities — I have some sympathy with the Minister's position — which would have been better placed to deal with this, will not in any way frustrate the efforts of her Department in getting the appropriate structures in place for the application process to be opened?

Mrs Long: First, on the latter part of the question, there is no reason why the Department for Communities would be in a position to frustrate what we are trying to do. There is cooperation and collaboration in the Executive, and, whilst I agree with others that the judicial review was very unhelpful and difficult for the victims, it has at least brought clarity that this is a matter of law that needs to be progressed, and that will be helpful in progressing any future areas of dispute. I am also not aware of the Department for Communities trying to frustrate any engagement with the Department of Justice, and I want that placed on record.

The Victims' Payments Regulations provide that a person is not entitled to the victims' pension if they were convicted of conduct that caused the incident wholly or in part. That is as explicit as I can make it and that is from the regulations. The judgements that will be made in that regard will be up to the independent panel, and I believe that it is right that it should be independent of political interference and that the panel should be free to make decisions based on the regulations and guidance.

Fuel Laundering: Successful Prosecutions

5. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the number of successful prosecutions for fuel laundering since 2017. (AQO 568/17-22)

Mrs Long: There is no specific offence of fuel laundering. Offences associated with fuel laundering are generally prosecuted under the Customs and Excise Management Act 1979 in relation to evasion of duty. Prosecutions for these offences are brought by the Public Prosecution Service on behalf of Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. In the years 2017-18 to 2019-2020, there were 16 successful prosecutions in Northern Ireland for offences under the 1979 Act, which related to hydrocarbon fuels. I have a table that I will share with the Member after we meet here today, which provides the annual breakdown for each of the three years; it was four, four and eight in each of those years. Penalties imposed in relation to these convictions included custodial disposals, suspended custodial disposals and monetary penalties.

Mr Newton: I thank the Minister for her offer of providing that table and look forward to receiving it. I wonder if the Minister accepts that great success has been achieved by the PSNI and the National Crime Agency (NCA) over recent months in their fight against very serious criminal activity. Is it the case that the technology that has been used in those successes could in fact be used in the fight against those who are engaged in fuel laundering activity?

Mrs Long: With respect to the technology, clearly there are a number of factors to be considered, because there are

particular complexities in detecting fuel fraud. In the wider context, I think the important thing is that the relationships that are built between the NCA, the PSNI and indeed an Garda Síochána have been absolutely vital in disturbing the work of organised crime groups and preventing them from exploiting any industry where there is an opportunity to make profit. Fuel fraud has a far higher political profile in Northern Ireland because of the disproportionately higher level of fuel fraud when compared to the rest of GB, and because some of the organised crime gangs involved have links to paramilitary organisations, which brings them to the attention of the Police Service in more than one guise. I believe that addressing the harm caused by these crime gangs, including paramilitary groups, is a key focus for our Executive as we work together and a key part of creating a safe community where we can respect the law and each other.

Ms S Bradley: Can the Minister give an indication of how those figures for 2017-18 and 2018-19 compare with earlier years?

Mrs Long: I do not have that information to hand, so I will need to write to the Member to clarify it. However, it has been increasing; it was four in the first year, rising to eight in the most recent year.

Mr Blair: Can the Minister outline, either separately to the speculation of today or otherwise, what her Department is doing to prepare for any potential smuggling and fuel laundering challenges arising out of the Northern Ireland protocol and EU exit in general?

Mrs Long: A lot of work has been undertaken in preparing for the end of the withdrawal period at 30 December. Also, it is important that we have in place robust communication measures between police forces on these islands, and indeed beyond. We have also recently seen very effective work done by the PSNI in relation to organised crime emanating from parts of Eastern Europe and, indeed, further afield.

We should never fall into the trap of thinking that Northern Ireland is a backwater when it comes to the opportunity for creating crime and the opportunity for exploiting differences. Brexit will be challenging. That is why I believe that it is so important that we get clarity on the economic agreements that are going to happen as part of Brexit, because you can be absolutely sure that every differential that there is at the border will be exploited by some crime gang or other in order to try and make an illegal profit, which will potentially undermine valid legal businesses in the way that they can do their work. So it is important that we get that clarity on the economic arrangements and agreements, but it is also important that we put in the requisite alternative means of being able to ensure good cooperation and communication between police forces, not just in these islands but further afield.

Child Sexual Exploitation: Strategic Response

6. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Justice, in relation to strategic recommendation 1 of the Criminal Justice Inspection report on 'Child Sexual Exploitation in Northern Ireland', to outline her plans to take forward a cross-departmental strategic response to address child sexual abuse and exploitation. (AQO 569/17-22)

Mrs Long: I remain committed to working with criminal justice and health partners to further improve how cases

of child sexual exploitation are handled. That includes working collaboratively to address the strategic and operational recommendations from the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) reports on child sexual exploitation. The most recent CJINI report contains two strategic and seven operational recommendations to improve the practice and approach of criminal justice agencies in handling child sexual exploitation cases. The majority of the recommendations are operational and will fall to statutory partners to deliver, but the report recognises the importance of ensuring a coordinated and strategic multi-agency approach to this important issue.

It is important to note that my Department does not have the strategic lead for issues related to child protection, as the Member will, clearly, know. However, I recognise that more can always be done to enhance our strategic response and ensure that by working closely with partners we get the best possible outcomes for victims.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, Minister, for your answer. I declare an interest in that I previously worked in this area in my social work job.

In our response to the child sexual exploitation consultation, Sinn Féin proposed to extend the abuse of trust laws to include any adult who holds a position of trust, power or authority over 16- or 17-year-olds. Does the Minister intend to legislate for that change?

Mrs Long: As the Member will be aware, I set out my legislative programme a number of months ago and it is quite a heavy one. We have five to six Bills that will need to pass by the time that we end this mandate. That will require a marathon effort by me and, if I may say, by the Justice Committee, which has been incredibly cooperative in that regard. It is not, at this point, on the list of things that we are taking forward here, but it would not be for the Department of Justice to take it forward because we are not the lead agency. It is for the Department of Health to bring forward those changes and it may have some capacity in its legislative programme to do so. If it chooses to do so, we will work closely with that Department when it comes to things like penalties and so forth as it develops its plans.

Sentencing Guidelines

7. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the current sentencing guidelines for convictions of attempted murder of a police officer. (AQO 570/17-22)

Mrs Long: In 2019, the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal confirmed that the normal level of sentence for the attempted murder of a member of the security forces is in the region of 25 years' imprisonment and, in some cases, a sentence in excess of 25 years may well be proper. That aligns with the sentencing guideline case for the murder of a police officer, where a life sentence with a tariff of 25 to 30 years may be appropriate.

The tariff set by the court, after considering sentencing guidance and any aggravating and mitigating factors in the case, will be the minimum period that the convicted person must spend in prison before being considered for release. No remission is available on the tariff. After release, the person remains on licence for the rest of their life and may be recalled to prison if they breach the

terms of that licence. My Department's recent consultation on sentencing included an examination of the current sentencing guidance mechanism for Northern Ireland and the setting of tariffs in murder cases. A report on the responses to that consultation is due to be published shortly.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for her answer. I am conscious that a debate is ongoing in the House but my question was submitted prior to the motion being put on the Order Paper. In recent years, it seems that there has been a never-ending series of reviews and consultations on sentencing tariffs, particularly for crimes including murder. Five years ago, a former MLA asked a former Justice Minister about the issue of lenient sentences that were handed down in the case of the murder of Constable Stephen Carroll but nothing seems to have changed in that five years. Is it the position of the Executive that sentencing tariff guidelines for the murder or attempted murder of public servants, including police officers, need to be toughened up and brought in line with the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. I would correct his assertion that nothing has been done in the intervening five years. He will, of course, appreciate that we did not have an Executive for at least three of those years but, in the last seven months, we have been able to take forward the review of sentencing, which was instigated by the Justice Minister following the one that he mentioned — Claire Sugden, to be clear. The sentencing that we have has been reviewed and the structures that are in place have been looked at. That went to public consultation and has come back and will be with me very shortly. Then, it will be shared with the Justice Committee and others so that we can have that discussion.

I have not taken the views of the Executive at this point because we do not have a policy proposal to take to them for discussion.

3.15 pm

Ms Kimmins: Will the Minister give an update on the sentencing review carried out by her Department?

Mrs Long: I just did so in a very indirect way. The sentencing review was completed earlier this year in February. My officials then undertook to go through the responses that were received to consider the issues raised and produce a report with respect to what may or may not be required in terms of changes to the current sentencing arrangements. That includes looking at not just the consultation but the wider work of the sentencing review in terms of the impact on the justice system in other places. Obviously, we all appreciate that changing sentencing is merely the tip of the iceberg; the ramifications throughout the wider justice system are quite significant. We have to weigh up all those decisions very carefully. That report will, hopefully, come to me in the next few weeks, and I look forward to being able to take the time to reflect on that and, indeed, the debate that will recommence after Question Time and the views expressed by Members therein.

It is important that people have confidence in sentencing. This is the largest review undertaken for 15 years. We need to get it right, not just get it done.

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

Stormont House Agreement: Legacy Issues

T1. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Justice whether she shares his concern that the NIO's 18 March statement on legacy represents a major departure by the British Government to implementing the Stormont House Agreement. (AQT 311/17-22)

Mrs Long: I do share those concerns. It was an unhelpful way forward. We have struggled in this place to find any agreement on the issues around legacy and how to take them forward. The Stormont House Agreement was imperfect, as will be any solution at this remove from the events for which we are trying to seek justice. However, despite its imperfections, it was the best, and, perhaps, the last, opportunity that we will have to bring justice to many of those who were made victims during the Troubles. It is regrettable that the rather delicate ecology of agreement, which, often, equates simply to a lack of active opposition in this place, has been disturbed so dramatically by the intervention of the current Secretary of State. However, it is important that we continue to work diligently with him to ensure that we have article-2-compliant investigation; the legal requirement for the Department of Justice to deliver that element is not removed simply because of the wishes of a Secretary of State.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that, given that it is six years since the Stormont House Agreement, it is unacceptable that the British Government are still in default of their obligations?

Mrs Long: A number of parties have been in default of their obligations over recent weeks, months and years. The important thing is how we take that forward. All parties need to engage with the Secretary of State to find a way forward because, with the greatest of respect, this is not about differences between us, as parties, or between the perspective of us and the UK Government; it is about innocent victims. It is about people who were shot, injured, killed or lost loved ones and still do not have the answers that they have been seeking for many years. It is about upholding justice in the new dispensation in which we find ourselves, in a way that will build confidence that justice can be reached and available to everyone concerned.

We need to be honest: not everyone will be able to access justice given the remove from the events of the time. However, where justice is possible, it should not be denied. We need to work together now to find a way forward through this morass, not for ourselves or political expediency but because victims deserve it.

Prisons: COVID-19

T2. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Justice what work is being done with the South Eastern Trust to manage and minimise the risk of COVID to prisoners and staff in our prisons, following the weekend's news that a prisoner at Maghaberry has become the first inmate here to test positive for the virus. (AQT 312/17-22)

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his question. I put on record my huge appreciation of the work being done not just by the South Eastern Trust but, day in and day out, by the Prison Service of Northern Ireland to keep safe the people in their care and ensure that those who visit our prisons out of necessity are kept safe and that we have a humane regime in place during a time when lockdown

and other things could become very stressful for not just prisoners but their families. I think that all those people have worked together very responsibly, and what I take away, and what I hope Members will take away, from the fact that that was discovered is that the system worked. Ensuring that anyone who is remanded into the prison system immediately goes into isolation for 14 days so that, if they develop symptoms, they do not transfer COVID into the main prison population has proved to be effective. We were able to identify that someone who was remanded into custody had COVID-19, and they will be taken care of, as you will expect, with the highest possible dignity for their case and respect for their privacy.

It is hugely important that we do not drop our guard when it comes to COVID-19, and I think that prisoners have played a hugely positive role in cooperating with a very different prison environment over the past number of months in order to ensure that we have maintained not just stability in the prisons but a good, healthy prison population.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for that answer. Perhaps she would expand on what arrangements are in place to manage visits and ensure that prisoners' families are able to see their loved ones, particularly at this extremely difficult and stressful time, and whether there are any plans to review those arrangements.

Mrs Long: It is, and has been, a very stressful time. I am pleased that we have been in a position to restart in-person visits in the prison, although the mechanism for those is quite different to the way in which they were conducted previously, both in the volume of requests that we have received and the need to follow protocol in terms of the normal things that we accept in the Chamber, such as washing hands, wearing masks, social distancing and so on. However, we will retain the capacity for virtual visiting that we put in place as an alternative. We want to retain that for a number of reasons. First, it is not always easy for prisoners' families to come to the prisons to partake of visits, particularly if they, themselves, are vulnerable or if they have disabilities that make mobility around the prison site difficult, or, indeed, sometimes children find it quite frightening to come into the prison environment, despite our best efforts to make it a relaxed environment.

Being able to see their families at home is something that prisoners rarely get the opportunity to do, and it has been very much welcomed by some of them. In fact, when I was in Magilligan last week, I talked to some of our officers about one gentleman who said that the highlight of COVID for him had been that he had seen his dog at home and was able to be content that his dog was healthy and well looked after and to know that things at home were normal, that home was still there and the people around him were healthy and well looked after. Therefore, we will continue to keep both of those tracks in place.

Justice Delivery

T3. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Justice to outline what impact any attempt by the UK Government to undermine the Northern Ireland protocol, as alleged in the 'Financial Times', could have on justice delivery on these islands. (AQT 313/17-22)

Mrs Long: First of all, like others, I have not seen the detail of the internal market Bill, which will be laid in Westminster

on Wednesday. I think that it is important that we consider its provisions, once it is properly available to us. That having been said, any action that seeks to undermine the withdrawal agreement or the Northern Ireland protocol could destabilise progress towards a future security partnership with the EU, which aims to support cross-border law enforcement and cooperation across Europe.

My Department has been working closely with law enforcement partners to prepare for the end of the transition period and ensure that the UK Government understand that the key issues for Northern Ireland, such as organised crime, data adequacy, cross-border cooperation and the fight against terrorism, must be prioritised in order to avoid a loss of operational capability.

It is also the case that, when one signs up to agreements in good faith and then one does not follow through with them in good faith, people may be much more reticent to sign up to future agreements. That has an impact not only in the justice arena but on the wider economic future that we hold together on this issue.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for her answer. In addition to the negative impact outlined, is such a distraction at this time not likely to have a very negative impact on programmes already under way, for example, policing budgets and work being done with partners to deliver for the public good, and a whole raft of effects across the Department's remit and beyond?

Mrs Long: I agree that it is a distraction. Some, in the Chamber, will not want me to say that, of course, Brexit was always going to be a distraction. Setting that point aside, of course it is a distraction to the main thrust of the work that we have to do because we are replacing complex arrangements, particularly in the justice sphere, which have allowed us to have the successes, to which other Members have referred, against organised crime — both at home and abroad. We have had successes recently, for example, on issues around counterterrorism. All those things are hugely important. Any distraction from taking that forward, rather than spending our time trying to replace what we already have with what are, inevitably, going to be suboptimal solutions is a distraction. For example, data sharing is one of the key issues for our Department. Whilst it has an impact on health, education and the economy, it has an enormous impact on the delivery of justice. Unless we have data adequacy agreements with other EU countries, we will not be able to do the real-time sharing of data that goes on a daily and almost hourly basis between police and justice agencies across these islands and beyond. It would be shameful if we find that the biggest loophole, through which criminal enterprises could escape, is not being able to have these issues addressed.

Executive Action Plan on Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime

T4. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her phase 2 plans to implement the Executive action plan on tackling paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime. (AQT 314/17-22)

Mrs Long: The political panel will have its first meeting this week to discuss how we will take forward the second phase of the paramilitary action plan. As you know, a

programme board has developed the second phase. What will set this phase out from the previous phase is that, hopefully, we will have a fully functioning Executive and the political impetus this time to put the weight behind it that is required to deliver results. The tackling paramilitarism plan is hugely important. It is a priority for the Executive and one in which all Ministers will be engaged at some level. Whilst Justice may lead on the issue, not all of the implementation will fall to the Department of Justice. Therefore, it is hugely important that that political coordination panel fulfils its role and is able to drive this forward with some enthusiasm and energy.

Mr Sheehan: Does the Minister agree that full buy-in and participation from local communities is essential in tackling all these issues?

Mrs Long: I, of course, agree that it is important that we have the buy-in of local communities. There will be those within the community who are opposed to tackling paramilitarism because they are the beneficiaries of it. For that reason, we also need to be sure that, when talking to local communities, we do it through a range of mechanisms that allows us to determine what the actual views of communities are as opposed to simply passing through gatekeepers in those communities. That is hugely important in getting buy-in for local communities. Doing that will also help to reinforce buy-in on the wider criminal justice sphere from local communities because many of them feel frustrated by the continued existence of paramilitary godfathers in their local communities. A visible undermining of that current situation would make a huge difference to confidence in policing and justice more generally.

Drugs: Belfast

T5. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Justice, with him having met, in July, the then commander of the police in Belfast, the commanders for north and west Belfast and the officer leading the initiative to tackle drugs in Belfast, and given that she will know that drugs and their sale is a particular problem across Belfast, including in the city centre, whether she is convinced that enough is being done and enough resource is being allocated to tackle the issue, albeit that he knows that she will be reluctant to get involved in questions about operational matters. (AQT 315/17-22)

Mrs Long: Again, as you rightly say, I am reluctant to opine on operational matters for the PSNI. However, I argue that this is not simply an operational matter for the PSNI. There is a whole range of agencies, including the work through the policing and community safety partnerships and a number of other agencies with whom we work with people at risk of offending, to tackle this issue. There is a role for the Department of Health to tackle this issue because, for many who are engaged in taking illicit drugs, it is often illegal prescription drugs as opposed to other drugs, and it is often in an attempt to self-medicate for harm caused by mental health and other stressors in the community.

I think that work can be done through the Department for Communities to support people who are at risk and in need. A multi-agency approach is required on the issue, but I agree that it is with growing concern that we see the degree of dependence on drugs and the harm and

destruction that they cause, not solely to the person who takes the drugs but to their family and the wider community around them. Those who sell those drugs have to be the main target for the police, because cutting off the supply as well as trying to address the demand will bring an end to this issue.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Members, time is up. I ask Members to take their ease, please, while the Minister and Members come to the Chamber for the question for urgent oral answer.

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Mr Speaker: John O'Dowd has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Health. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health whether the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) has inspected or been asked to inspect Craigavon Area Hospital following recent COVID-19 outbreaks.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): First, I express my deepest sympathies to the loved ones of those who passed away recently at Craigavon Area Hospital with COVID-19. My thoughts are with them, and their grief sadly highlights the ever-present threat that the pandemic poses.

At all times, citizens should expect the highest standards of infection control to be in place across our healthcare facilities. In light of the recent clusters, the Southern Trust's immediate priorities are to care for affected patients and staff and prevent further spread of the virus. This morning, I chaired a discussion with the senior management of the Southern Trust and the Public Health Agency (PHA) to make my expectations clear on this very serious matter. I have been assured that everything that needs to be done in relation to infection prevention and control is being done and that support is available for families, patients and staff. As I said last week, a thorough investigation is required to provide patients and bereaved families with the answers that they are entitled to. I can confirm that that investigation will be in the form of a level 3 serious adverse incident, which I have asked the trust to initiate immediately. It will be independently chaired, and its findings will be made public. It is important to be very clear at this stage that, whilst we want a thorough investigation, we simply cannot put a timeline on this until we have the greater clarity around the underlying causes that the investigation will provide.

During this morning's meeting, I raised the role of the RQIA. As Members will know, it undertakes inspections of acute hospitals under its hospital inspection programme and conduct rolling programmes of hygiene inspections and inspections of augmented care services. Whilst the immediate focus is now on the investigation, I have asked that the RQIA play an important part in that.

In conclusion, there are undoubtedly questions that will have to be answered by the trust in relation to the outbreaks once the immediate threat has been brought under control. The necessary steps are under way, and any lessons are being shared across all health and social care trusts as they emerge. COVID-19 remains a lethal and highly infectious virus.

Mr O'Dowd: Minister, I thank you for your answer to my question. We have three outbreaks, and, just before I came into the Chamber, a fourth death was confirmed in relation to the COVID-19 outbreaks in Craigavon Area Hospital. We have 17 members of staff in the haematology ward who have tested positive. We have a total of 56 staff who are self-isolating as a result of being in close contact with a COVID-19-infected person. Minister, when is it the

time to call in the RQIA? Surely, it should have been in the hospital before this, giving an independent inspection of the measures put in place to prevent the spread of the infection across the hospital. I use my term differently, because we are told that these three outbreaks are not connected, but I am not aware of any other acute hospital in this region that has had an COVID-19 outbreak. That raises serious concerns for me about Craigavon Area Hospital and how infection control is being managed. The only way in which we can be reassured is if a body such as the RQIA, which is legislated to do so, inspects hospitals. I welcome the Minister's announcement this morning that there will be an independent investigation, but we need answers now to prevent further outbreaks.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his supplementary. I share his concern. The number of outbreaks that we have seen across our health and social care service have not seen anyone lose their life. What we have heard today about another life lost is a death too many. I stand here as Minister saying that. That is why I chaired this morning's meeting on the work that the trust is doing to ensure that every safeguard is in place. That is why they have the additional protocols to ensure that the inspections of personal protective equipment (PPE) and the support for staff, patients and all the families are in place.

As for the role of the RQIA, it has a responsibility to undertake inspections of acute hospitals under its hospital inspection programme, which is a rolling programme. This is a specific, targeted piece of work, and that is why I have asked the trust to implement the serious adverse incident inspection and to get that work going now. Having spoken with the trust's chief executive and the chair this morning, I know that they are fully aware of the seriousness of the outbreak in Craigavon Area Hospital and are taking all the steps that they can to support the staff, the families and the patients who need that support at this minute in time.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for attending for the question for urgent oral answer. Obviously, our thoughts are with the families who have been plunged into grief at this time. It is disheartening to hear that a fourth patient from the haematology ward at Craigavon Area Hospital has lost their life.

Minister, what role have the Test, Trace and Protect initiative and the StopCOVID NI app played in relation, in particular, to the Craigavon Area Hospital outbreaks? Do you have a percentage for the positive tests that are showing to be asymptomatic cases? If that is the case, how do you plan to combat the complacency that is out there and the conspiracy theories about the pandemic?

Mr Swann: I thank the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee for her questions. As these specific outbreaks are hospital-based, we can do a lot of intensive work through the support of the trust. The PHA has an integral part in managing and overseeing the outbreak management as well. It is there and is already part of the incident management team that is meeting daily to make sure that it does all that it can to support the trust and its officials at this minute in time.

The Member asked about the test system showing asymptomatic patients. One of the things that our test system is identifying is people who are asymptomatic. They may not show symptoms, but they still have the potential to spread COVID-19. We are indicating that. It is concerning

that, over the last number of days, we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of people who are testing positive for COVID-19. The Member referred to the complacency that has set in. There is a narrative that we are testing more people and, therefore, we are finding more positives: that is true, but the percentage of people who are positive is also increasing. In July and August, fewer than 0.2% of people who were tested tested positive; in the past three days, 3% of those tested have tested positive. The percentage of positive tests across the increased number of people whom we are testing is increasing, and that is a concern. We are also seeing a change in the demographic: younger people are testing positive. With the asymptomatic carriers, it is even more important today than it was in the early days of the outbreak that people support us in our public health message on social distancing, good hand hygiene and face coverings.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber to address this serious situation. It is particularly concerning that we have an outbreak in a haematology ward, a place where layers of protection should be of the utmost importance at any time, never mind during COVID. What precautions has the Minister taken to ensure that the virus is contained within the affected areas?

Mr Swann: I thank the Chair for his question. According to the update that we received this morning from the joint meeting that I chaired between the trust and the PHA, infection-control nurses and specialists and haematology consultants — the entire team across the Southern Trust — are involved in making sure that every precaution is put in place to support the families and to support the staff, who are finding this a difficult time as they go about their daily business. They think, “Could or should I have done more?”. There are on-site inspections in the hospital to make sure that all protocols are being kept up, as they should be, and strengthened. That reinforcement piece is also being done.

The Member asked about managing the infection in the unit. The PHA is genotyping all the people who have tested positive so that it can see the specific chain of infection for each case and determine where each case came from. That enhanced investigation will allow us to see where the chain came from and where else it could be in the hospital, if there is a risk of that. That is why so many staff are self-isolating at this minute in time, as Mr O’Dowd said, and why we are advising patients to self-isolate, if they have been in contact. We want to make sure that we break the chains of infection and get the outbreak under control as quickly as possible.

Mr McNulty: I welcome the designation of a serious adverse incident and your commitment to an immediate and thorough investigation. Six months into the pandemic, I recognise the stress that our medical staff are experiencing. The increased strain that the outbreaks will put on the staff in Craigavon is enormous. That said, four families are grieving. Alice McShane’s family is grieving; they are grief-stricken and angry. John Fleming’s family is grief-stricken and angry. Over the weekend, I spoke at length with Yvonne Stewart. She is beside herself with anger and grief. She does not want her father’s life to have been lost in vain. His final wish was that she would take this up and do something about it. The two families who are still nameless will also be grief-stricken and beside themselves with hurt. Minister, will you commit to meeting

Yvonne Stewart to assure her that her father’s death has not been in vain and to assure her that you will ensure that this does not happen again and that lessons will be learned to prevent any other family going through the pain that her family is experiencing? We remember that those four patients went to the haematology ward free from COVID. They went to a ward where there should have been a ring of steel around those patients to protect them.

Mr Swann: I will meet Yvonne. The private office has set that train in motion.

3.45 pm

If anybody heard Yvonne speak on Friday afternoon in regard to her father, the support she expected him to receive from a health point of view, and his final request, I do not think there is anyone in the House, in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust or across the health and social care system who could not be moved when you hear a daughter’s commitment to her father and his last wish.

As the Member asked, I will meet the families, and my private office has set that in train. That is why when I had that meeting this morning with the independent chair that I moved to serious adverse incident status to make sure that we get to the bottom of this and answers to those questions. However, those answers will not bring back the people who have lost their lives. What they can and should do is ensure that that incident is not repeated across any other trusts or at Craigavon or any hospital. I will give the House that commitment.

The dedication of staff has been unquestioned during the past six months of this pandemic. Today, those members of staff feel this hurt and loss as much, I think, as I do standing here as Minister.

Mr Chambers: I am sure that the thoughts of the entire House are with those grieving families. Our thoughts are also with the families of patients currently in that hospital. It must be a really stressful time for them and their family members. It must also be a particularly stressful time for the staff of the hospital. Our thoughts are certainly with them as they try to bring this outbreak under control.

The message here is that this virus is no respecter of location or person. If it can overcome all the infection controls in a hospital environment, would the Minister agree that it is more important than ever that the general public continue to follow the advice and regulations to the absolute limit to avoid any more grieving families?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his sentiment for the message that we at the Department of Health, the Executive and every Member has been putting across.

Where this virus goes and how it spreads is in our hands. This virus does not follow any plan or protocol, but the actions of the general public have a direct effect as to where and how quickly it spreads across the Province.

The Member makes a valid point when he says that the virus is no respecter of person, profession or workplace. That is why I reinforce the message and ask members of the public to help us to combat COVID-19 by reinforcing and re-practising the steps that got us to where we were in July and August, when we were seeing a very low number of positive cases and deaths. Any life lost to COVID-19, especially in this instance, is a life too many.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Minister. Notwithstanding the serious nature of the discussion, quite a number of Members wish to ask a question, so I urge them to move quickly to their questions.

Mr Muir: I echo the words of other Members in terms of our thoughts for the families of those bereaved as a result of this horror that we are enduring, which is COVID-19, and for the work of the staff who Alan Chambers spoke about. The first focus has to be on ensuring that we stop the spread of the virus, but what impact is it also having on the services being delivered, particularly as a result of the number of staff having to self-isolate?

Mr Swann: Again, I share the Member's concern. With regard to service provision in Craigavon, the focus of that hospital at this time must be to bring that outbreak under control. Other services will be affected and reduced while we ensure that staff are supported and that enough staff are in place across existing services so that they can continue. The number of staff self-isolating will have a knock-on effect, but we must implement that procedure and take those steps, and we must do that now to make sure that we get this outbreak under control and break the chain of infection.

The adverse effect of some services being lost in Craigavon is such that the management of the Southern Trust is dealing with it under a managed risk procedure. If there is additional risk to any other provision or services, those services will be stepped back because that is what we need to do to get this outbreak under control.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Minister, for responding. In my experience, the remit of the RQIA is quite limited, especially in respect of direct patient complaints and enforcement. Will the Minister give his view on its responsibilities? Does he plan to strengthen its remit so that we could feed into this bigger issue?

Mr Swann: The Member, rightly, highlights the role of the RQIA within the hospital setting. The RQIA will be involved in the serious adverse incident as that investigation goes forward and it takes a proactive role in inspections. Could it be doing more? I think that the RQIA itself would like to be doing more. We have seen that across a number of recent incidents, where the RQIA has been involved and has been cited. The current legislation hampers the RQIA in some of what it would like to do and in some of what its inspectors would like to do. However, that legislation is in place. In recent months, I have committed, in regard to the outbreaks in care homes, to strengthening and expanding the regulation and quality improvement functions of the RQIA.

Mr Carroll: Thanks, Minister, for your answers so far. I want to pass on my sympathy to everybody in Craigavon who has contracted the virus and to the families of those who have passed away.

Given the cases in Craigavon and the fact that we heard yesterday or this morning that our figure per head of population is twice that in England, is the Minister confident that the Executive are on the right path to eliminate this virus?

Mr Swann: The steps taken by the Executive were, I think, proportionate to where we were seeing the spread of COVID at any point in time. Will we have to look at the possibility of localised lockdowns should we not get this

expansion in the number of cases under control? I think that the Executive will have to seriously consider that.

Issues have been raised about a council area being too large. I have asked the PHA and our statistics team to look at postcode areas as well in the event that we have to bring in more localised enforcement measures as a way to manage the outbreaks. We cannot remain on this trajectory. We are seeing, as the Member will see when the dashboard is published, an increasing number in Belfast and an increased number of cases in the Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council area, where Craigavon Area Hospital is situated. However, that increase is connected to the contact tracing that kicks in when there is an outbreak. More testing means more positives, so that is to be expected. It is always about taking a managed approach. If we see that a localised outbreak is continuing and not being brought under control, I will recommend to the Executive that there is a need to look at more localised enforcement, guidance or protocols to make sure that we can support people in that area in breaking the chains of infection that we have seen in the past.

Mr Buckley: I would like to be associated with the remarks made thus far in sympathy with the grieving families. This is a day that we all prayed would not come again. We are looking at deaths within Craigavon Area Hospital, and there is concern for staff and patients there. However, I, too, have concerns, and the bereaved families are, first and foremost, entitled to answers through the investigation that the Minister has announced. I welcome that opportunity to find the root causes of what happened. I am firmly of the belief that the investigation should be independently led, not just independently chaired, and I ask the Minister to elaborate on the type of investigation that he has outlined. Does independently chaired mean independently led, to ensure the complete confidence of the families and to allow our health service to benefit from outside expert advice in its analysis of what happened and what went wrong at Craigavon Area Hospital?

Mr Swann: Again, I recognise no difference between an independently chaired or independently led inquiry. An independently chaired level 3 serious adverse incident inquiry can do exactly that. When the terms of reference are created and the chair is appointed, they will do their work to whatever level they need, with full and open access and the full support of my office, to allow them to get to the root cause of the outbreak and why those lives were lost in Craigavon. As the Member said, that will make sure that that is not repeated anywhere else across our health and social care system.

Ms Dillon: A domiciliary care worker in the community contacted me today. She asked why patients who leave hospitals and go into care home settings are being tested before they go into those settings, but patients who go back into the community, where care workers, district nurses and so on have to go in to treat them, are not being tested. She asked why that is not happening to protect those staff in the same way as staff in the care homes are being protected. I would also like to be associated with the comments about giving sympathy to the families concerned and in support of the staff in Craigavon Area Hospital.

Mr Swann: Our testing programme in hospitals is constantly under review. One concern that was raised very early on was about the transfer of patients between hospitals and care homes and an automatic testing

programme or protocol was put in place there. There is no testing protocol in place for those who return to their homes because of the time that they would have to wait for results to come back. As I said to the Member, it is kept under constant review and I will ask that it is looked at for the Craigavon hospital to support the members of staff and families who are associated with the outbreak.

Mr Catney: Minister, thank you very much for your answers so far. I would also like to pass on my sympathies to those families who find themselves in the situation of having lost a loved one.

Minister, I cannot confirm if it is right, but I was told that the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Constable of the PSNI were in Belfast on Saturday night and were going around public houses. What do you have to say about that? I do not want to make it political. I know that you would do everything in your power and I want to do everything to support you, but I do not think that that is the best use of our Chief Medical Officer when we were having an outbreak in Craigavon hospital. His time could have been better spent.

Mr Swann: Our challenging and combating of the virus is multi-faceted. The Chief Medical Officer took time out of his Saturday night to accompany the Chief Constable of the PSNI around a number of areas in Belfast and to highlight those public houses and drinking establishments that were in breach of COVID-19 regulations. Those are some of the locations where the younger population is gathering. If there are people there and facilities and locations are breaching COVID-19 regulations, those places need to take on their full responsibilities.

As to whether that was the best use of the Chief Medical Officer's time, he is a man who has committed hours, days, weeks and months to combating the virus over the last six months. I have seen that and that goes far beyond what many others with similar roles across those islands have done. I do not agree with the Member's assertion that his time could have been better spent. The fact that he spent his Saturday night going around Belfast and challenging some of those who were breaching COVID-19 protocols shows his dedication and is a testimony to the man. He spent time doing that that he could have spent with his family.

Ms S Bradley: I too would like to add my name to the condolences to those families of loved ones who have died at Craigavon. Through communications with my office, I am all too aware of the anxiety and ongoing distress that exists among staff, patients and their families.

Minister, I welcome your reference to an investigation. In light of the circumstances, do you agree with me that now would be a good time to lift additional burdens from Craigavon Area Hospital? In that, I refer to the fact that Daisy Hill ED was closed at the outset of COVID and those who would have attended Daisy Hill are now extra traffic who are making their way to Craigavon.

It is anticipated that Daisy Hill ED will open at the end of this month. Given these circumstances, would it be prudent to step forward and make that happen immediately and safely?

4.00 pm

Mr Swann: I do not want to tie the two issues together in regards to opening provision and opening facilities, given

the serious adverse incident that I have declared today and the fact that we have seen people lose their life.

The commitment from the trust is to open that facility safely. It will be managed safely to make sure that the provision and the facilities are in a safe working area and condition to allow us to support staff and patients as they use them. I do not think that this is a reason or a rationale to expedite the process and decision that have been made by the trust. I will support the trust to make sure that the facility is opened as quickly as possible, but, at this time, it has been decided to do so only when it is safe.

Mr Speaker: We are really out of time now. I call Mr Paul Givan.

Mr Givan: Can I too associate my name with the sentiments that are being expressed in sympathy with the families?

The Minister said that services in Craigavon Area Hospital will be adversely affected as a result of measures that have been taken to limit the spread of COVID-19. We have deaths directly attributed to COVID-19, but we also have deaths directly attributable to the consequences. We have an impact on patients as a consequence of the measures taken to contain COVID-19. When will we have a system in place whereby all patients are having their needs met, which, because of COVID-19, is not currently the case? Is it sustainable for significant members of staff to be in self-isolation for the required period should that be replicated in other hospitals and considering the impact that it is going to have?

The health service is facing a difficult task in managing and taking proportionate measures. How is all that being dealt with through the managed risk assessment that the Minister mentioned regarding the services at Craigavon Area Hospital?

Mr Swann: The period of self-isolation for staff is crucial. It is crucial that staff follow that period of self-isolation to make sure that anyone who is carrying, or who has been infected by, the virus does not spread it to other patients. That is the last thing that any of us wants to see in a hospital setting. It is not just a matter of rushing staff back into a provision where they could be causing greater risk than they are trying to solve.

We have made the rebuilding programme very clear across the Department of Health and the trusts, and we have done that on a three-monthly programme. That has been published, and the next step — for October, November and December — is due to be published towards the end of this month. It is a gradual increase in provision. That is why we announced the regionalised approach to orthopaedics and elective-care surgeries to reinvigorate and get the health service back onto a footing where we are supporting all our patients equally.

The Member has to be aware of the risk that is associated with COVID. We have now seen the danger and, unfortunately, the high risk that it does present should it become embedded in a hospital facility. That is why we have always taken a cautious approach to make sure that every step in everything that we do keeps COVID out and away from those patients who need the full support and rigour of the hospital service. Unfortunately, what we have seen in Craigavon and the loss of life that we have seen

there is something that I, the trust and the staff deeply regret.

Mr Speaker: Members, that concludes this item of business.

Members should take their ease for a couple of minutes while we change the personnel at the Table.

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

Private Members' Business

Custodial Sentences for Attacks Against Emergency Workers

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly supports tougher custodial sentences for those convicted of attacks against emergency workers in Northern Ireland, including police officers, prison officers, firefighters, search and rescue workers and front-line healthcare staff; welcomes the campaign led by the courageous widow of PC Andrew Harper in favour of whole-life sentences, which reflects widespread public frustration with the current outcomes in such cases; acknowledges the recent UK Government commitment to increase penalties applicable under the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018; notes that, in the Republic of Ireland, there exists a set tariff of 40 years for the murder of a police officer, whilst, in Northern Ireland, the starting tariff in equivalent circumstances is between 15 and 16 years; and calls on the Minister of Justice to bring forward, as a matter of urgency, a revised sentencing framework that better reflects the seriousness of these crimes. — [Mr Givan.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after "Assembly" and insert:

"recognises the seriousness of attacks against emergency workers in Northern Ireland, including police officers, prison officers, firefighters, search and rescue workers and front-line healthcare staff; further recognises the important contributions by victims, campaigners and respondents to the sentencing review consultation that closed in February of this year; and calls on the Minister of Justice to bring forward proposals for a revised sentencing framework after consideration both of the outcome of that important consultation and sentences available for equivalent offences in other jurisdictions in these islands." — [Mr Blair.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call the Minister to respond to the debate. She will have 15 minutes.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I put on record my appreciation for, and our shared indebtedness to, all those front line and emergency workers who daily put themselves in harm's way to serve the common good. We all know the terrible price that some of those valiant public servants pay as they selflessly discharge their duties. I am sure that I speak for all in the Chamber when I say that our thoughts and prayers go to all those families who have suffered loss due to criminal and reckless behaviour in our community.

As lawmakers, we have a duty to adequately protect those whose role it is to protect the weak and the vulnerable. I also appreciate that recent trials in London and Dublin have thrown into sharp relief the adequacy of our laws in addressing attacks on emergency workers. However, behind the rhetoric and the bold headlines, it is important that we bring calm heads to consider the differences in law between the different jurisdictions across these islands.

In truth, they are not as great as has been reported. For example, all our respective jurisdictions provide a mandatory life sentence for murder.

Sentencing decisions are incredibly complex. Rightly, they are, in the main, left to our independent judiciary to determine. They not only have the experience and the expertise but the benefit of having access to all the pertinent information that is required when reaching a sentencing decision. It is easy, in many ways, for us to sit in this Chamber and express opinions about the robustness or leniency of any particular sentence, and we have all done that at different times. However, I am very conscious that sentencing on individual cases is a matter for the judiciary and that we ought not to, as legislators, second guess the factors that led to those sentences. Rather, we should focus on the framework within which those decisions are taken.

It is also unfortunate that sentencing is, because of its complexity, often poorly understood. Recent reports on life sentences have, for example, conflated the starting points provided for a judge commencing consideration of the appropriate tariff for murder with the actual tariff finally imposed and, more worryingly, conflated the tariff imposed with the sentence handed down. Further, few recognise that any tariff set is merely the first point at which someone can apply for parole. For example, with extended custodial sentencing, a full risk assessment is undertaken of the prisoner before a decision is reached.

Judges apply the law and guidance handed down by the courts or a relevant sentencing body in arriving at those decisions. In Northern Ireland, there are very specific guideline cases for the murder of police officers and other members of the security services. Current sentencing guidance for the murder of police or prison officers was highlighted in the consultation document that my Department issued as part of the major sentencing review last year. For those of you who did not have an opportunity to engage in the exercise or read the document, the guideline cases relate to sentences of 25 to 30 years and may be higher in certain circumstances. When compared to the actual custodial sentencing for similar offences in other jurisdictions, they are not dissimilar. The sentence for murder in all cases is a mandatory life sentence, regardless of the jurisdiction.

I will return to the consultation on sentencing shortly in my remarks as that is the appropriate mechanism through which to assess the issues that we are discussing today. However, I share the revulsion of other Members at the recent loss suffered by the Harper family, and I join with the expressions of sincere and deep sympathy by colleagues to the family on a loss that was the result of a terrible and wholly unnecessary act and a wanton disregard for life. I understand that an appeal has been lodged as well as a reference to the Court of Appeal for undue leniency and therefore Members will appreciate that I cannot make specific comments on that case or the sentencing decision.

Whilst the murder of public servants such as policemen, in the course of their duties is thankfully rare, that does not diminish the grief of the families or the impact on communities when such things happen. I also appreciate the fact that too many public-facing public servants continue to be assaulted in the course of their work, a matter highlighted by Paul Frew, Robbie Butler and others

in the debate. Our current sentencing provision and guidance, whether in the Magistrates' Court or the Crown Court, specifically addresses the aggravating effect of attacks on public servants, where the victim is engaged in providing a service to the public, and sentences are expected to reflect that. Doug Beattie and, indeed, others mentioned other people who are also vulnerable, others who work in front-line services and others who may be vulnerable victims themselves. Again, the vulnerability of the victim is an aggravating factor, which judges can take into account as they set sentences.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for taking an intervention. Earlier in the debate, it was outlined that, in the Domestic Abuse Bill, an aggravating factor is a child being in the vicinity of an attack. Does the Minister agree that, while it is OK to have what she just outlined of somebody's role being an aggravating factor, that is very different to what the motion asks for?

Mrs Long: I think that it is in one sense, in that the aggravating factor is one of many factors that is taken into account when sentencing. The danger comes when a blanket approach is taken to particular circumstances. It removes judicial discretion, which is hugely important, in setting the correct sentence.

The approach of our judiciary to such mindless attacks is best reflected by the Recorder of Belfast warning earlier this year that those who engage in attacks on medics or other healthcare professionals in the line of duty can expect to be sent to prison.

Recognising the complexity of sentencing in this jurisdiction, I was grateful to my predecessor, Claire Sugden, for commissioning a major sentencing review, which I inherited with this ministerial post. I thank her for her contribution today. However, I take issue with her view that the Department has been in any way tardy over recent years in advancing that review. The review was much more wide-ranging than a simple public consultation. A number of factors, including COVID-19, recovery of the justice system and, indeed, development of policy ahead of the miscellaneous provisions Bill next year, have impacted on the small team that develops these measures. However, I am convinced, and my staff are convinced, that this is important work, and we will expedite it as soon as possible.

As part of the review, an important consultation document issued last autumn, and responses to that document will be published in the coming weeks. Some Members and political parties contributed to that process, and the conclusions and recommendations of the sentencing review will be helpful to me in considering what, if any, changes should be made to our current sentencing arrangements.

As Minister, however, I was disappointed to note, when preparing for today, that the party that tabled this motion, and whose members have spoken passionately in favour of reviewing sentencing, did not, in fact, make representations to the Department on the wide range of matters included in the sentencing review consultation, including a specific chapter on the consultation document reviewing current sentencing here and elsewhere for assaults on emergency workers.

Regardless, in responding to today's motion, I appreciate Members' genuine desire to protect our public servants and to deter attacks on them. I share those concerns

and will be looking carefully not only at the outcome of the sentencing review but at the evidence from other jurisdictions on their approach to addressing this issue of public concern.

As Members will appreciate, we already have legislative provision specifically for offences against the police, fire and rescue personnel and ambulance workers. I notice that the motion wishes to extend the range of public servants covered by protective legislation. I intend to give full and careful consideration to the findings of the sentencing review, which also considered the range of public service occupations that may require specific legislative provision.

In considering tougher sentences, I will give careful consideration to what has been said during the debate and in the evidence on the effectiveness of sentencing. I thank Jim Allister for his contribution to the debate on the issue of 50% remission and whether that is appropriate or whether, as is the case with extended custodial sentences, a review of public risk at the halfway point of a sentence may be a better approach.

I have been concerned, however, about suggestions over the past few days and today in the Chamber regarding fixing minimum sentences for some offences. We should approach with caution any move away from respecting judicial discretion by imposing fixed minimum tariffs or sentences. When we decide to do so, we must also consider the introduction of some judicial discretion to depart, in the interests of justice, from any such legislative provision made.

These are complex issues and are not amenable to off-the-cuff answers in the heat of debate. I have always had reservations regarding mandatory minimum sentences. I consider it important that we respect the faith and trust placed in our independent judiciary to determine sentences on the basis of the evidence provided in court.

4.15 pm

I am equally aware, however, of the public demand that some paraphrase as “demanding tougher sentences” but, in truth, means longer custodial sentences. I, like other Members, recognise the need to be responsive to people's concerns, but we must also ask ourselves, “What is the purpose of sentencing?” and how we balance the need to deliver rehabilitation, which is a fundamental part of that purpose, with ensuring that the punitive and public protection elements are adequately addressed. I am also clear that there will be exceptional cases from time to time where the near-equivalent of a whole-life sentence may be absolutely appropriate, and our current structures allow for that eventuality. However, thankfully, such cases remain rare. We must, however, guard against a populist approach, however superficially attractive, to sentencing that would lead to the situation prevalent in places such as the United States and Russia, where draconian sentencing has done little in practice to improve public safety. I acknowledge the comments that Gerry Carroll made in that regard. As elected representatives and legislators, we are, therefore, to be thoughtful and considered as we work to provide a balanced framework that results in sentences that are compliant with law, including international obligations, and proportionate to the crime committed and the culpability of the offender and, yes, that engender

public confidence but are also — I would argue that this is more important — effective in delivering public safety.

Our Programme for Government includes, as an important goal, the creation of the safer community for all. In the criminal justice system, that has focused attention on measures that will reduce reoffending and promote the rehabilitation of offenders. It is right that we discuss these issues and consider together the role that sentencing plays in making our community a better and safer place. However, it is worth noting that a 2018 survey found that fewer than one in 10 people said that having more people in prison was the most effective way with to deal with crime. Early intervention, promotion of better parenting, discipline in schools and better rehabilitation were all rated as more effective responses.

The sentencing review currently under way is the most substantial review of sentencing in Northern Ireland in the last 15 years. I want to reflect not only on the views expressed in today's debate but on the views of those who took the time and made the effort to respond to the consultation phase. I wish to have time to reflect on the responses from the public. In particular, I need to consider the impact on other victims, if we were to create a differential between victims based on their perceived value or contribution to society. It is right that we acknowledge that some public servants, however, due to their occupation, place themselves at risk of harm in serving the wider community and require specific protection under law, as Paul Givan has stated.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for giving way, and I welcome the distinction that she makes about some specific public servants. Maybe the Minister is coming to this: other Members have indicated support for your party's amendment on the basis of that being the vehicle in which the issues can be teased out and the quickest way to do that. Can the Minister give me some assurance that that will be brought to the Justice Committee and on what will be the legislative vehicle, where legislation will be changed? That would allow us to get on board, to try to get consensus as a way that we will be able to address the issues in the future.

Mrs Long: As the Member knows, possibly better than most other people in the Chamber, we have a heavy legislative programme over the next while. The deadline for new things to be added to the Miscellaneous Provisions Bill has now passed. It would be difficult, given that I will not see the report and we will not be in a position to make recommendations, for us to legislate in this mandate. However, we can certainly prepare legislation in this mandate that would be oven-ready for someone who wished to take it forward at the beginning of the next. There are changes short of legislation in sentencing that could also be considered through the rest of this mandate. The important part of this is that we allow the Committee and the Assembly to have full scrutiny of what we intend to do. Once I have received the report on the consultation, I will bring recommendations to the Committee in order that we can have that informed discussion.

This is a sensitive issue, and we all recognise it. In my time as Minister, I have met families who have suffered the loss of a loved one through the violent act of another. Those families speak of the contribution made by their family member to their lives and the lives of those who knew them, not solely in terms of their employment. They may

have been a teacher, solicitor, student, carer or volunteer. They may have worked in the public or private sector, been a homemaker, retired or unemployed. Such meetings are difficult for all concerned, but they drive home to me the fact that there is no hierarchy of loss. To the families, their loss is a terrible thing to bear and is no less so because of the occupation of their loved one. I am clear that, to provide good law, we have to approach sentencing holistically, rather than with a piecemeal or cherry-picking approach, and we need to look at a coherent sentencing framework in order to do that. The sentencing review has done that so far, and there is merit in maintaining that holistic approach as we come forward in introducing a coherent sentencing Bill, as soon as Assembly legislative commitments permit. I want to bring proposals for legislative change to the Justice Committee for its consideration as part of the ministerial and Assembly decision-making process.

Finally, turning to the amendment, I welcome it as a measured and balanced approach. It reflects my own views —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I advise the Minister to bring her remarks to a close, please.

Mrs Long: It reflects my own views and rightly recognises the balance between protecting our emergency workers and the need to have a holistic approach when it comes to sentencing, and I thank Members for their support in this matter.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you, Minister. I call Mr Stewart Dickson to make a winding-up speech on the amendment. Mr Dickson, you have up to five minutes.

Mr Dickson: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, and thank you to everyone who has participated in the debate.

I start by thanking the front-line workers who protect and provide vital services to our community. As we all know, they face considerable risks daily, and we, as legislators, must work to make their jobs as safe as possible. I also express my deep sympathy to PC Andrew Harper's widow and family. His death was an appalling act, and the lack of remorse was particularly upsetting for them, and I do understand the calls for a serious look at sentencing. Front-line staff across our society daily face threatening behaviour, and that is clearly unacceptable.

I thank those who have supported our amendment. It offers a sensible way forward, while recognising the crimes that have been committed. We are completely at one when it comes to the victims of attacks on front-line workers and, indeed, attacks on anyone. I welcome those who have contributed to the debate. There is a problem, however, with lists, because you risk leaving somebody off that list. I acknowledge those who supported the original motion, and I encourage them to support the amendment. People across a wide range of jobs have put their lives at risk in the public sector, and I do not believe that it is possible to enumerate all of them in legislation. It is important that we recognise what emergency workers do on a daily basis. I acknowledge the comments of Jim Allister and, indeed, of many Members around the Chamber who have spoken and, in particular, what the Minister added to our discussion in her preceding comments. I welcome her clear setting out of the guidelines and the consultation that is under way. I also welcome Mr Givan's acknowledgment,

as the proposer of the motion, of our amendment, and I hope that, with the Minister's assurances, he can now support the amendment before the Assembly today.

It would be extremely difficult to tell one grieving family that their loved one's death was considered to be lesser than another's, according to law. We must allow our judges to set the appropriate tariff in every circumstance. As the Minister acknowledged, in Northern Ireland we have mandatory life sentences for murder, and it is clearly for the judiciary, following victim impact statements and others, to set out the appropriate tariff in every circumstance and sentence.

I ask Members to support the amendment to call the Justice Minister to bring forward a revised sentencing framework, which is a balanced approach to the issue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you, Stewart. It is great to see you back, and I wish you all the very best for the future.

I call Mervyn Storey to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion. Mr Storey, you have up to 10 minutes.

Mr Storey: We would all do well to pause in the Chamber today and reflect on the many families across a long time, over many years, who have lost loved ones at the hands of those who perpetrated evil against them. Our thoughts are with those families today, and we assure them that we will make every effort to ensure that their loved one's memory is not forgotten or somehow tarnished by our actions. We think in particular and in recent times, of course, of the family of Adrian Donohoe and of Andrew Harper.

As mentioned in the debate, we are never surprised by the actions and words of the party opposite. Never do they come into the Chamber but they take the opportunity to visit and revisit their view of those who have protected us through the years. I refer to the comments made by Linda Dillon in yet again seeking to sully the memory of members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the Police Service of Northern Ireland. That is a reflection of that party's view of law and order, and, of course, we have seen many examples over the last few weeks of their partial approach to even being able to stay within the confines of the COVID regulations: "It is good enough for others, but it is not good enough for us". Yet again, not surprisingly, the party opposite displays duplicity, hypocrisy and double standards.

I welcome the fact that I have to follow the Minister. There is some glimmer of hope that the Minister is prepared to bring the information to the Committee that would see a possible change in the sentencing framework. We welcome that that is a fact. While the amendment is not what we would have sought and, obviously, we would prefer to get our motion through the House, we welcome what others have said in the spirit and consideration of it, and we are happy for the Minister to bring that information to the Committee. However, it is disappointing that the Minister has not been able to give a definitive or conclusive time frame for this. I accept what she said about the legislative pressure on her Department and accept that that is the case, but she, as the Minister, has the power to prioritise. In correspondence with me recently, she was able to tell me that additional police officers were not a priority for her, even though that is in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The Minister said that it is not a priority for her.

Clearly, she has some degree of flexibility. I ask her to revisit that point as well.

This afternoon we have had various comments. Normally, when you come to this part of the debate, you find that it is a rehearsal of all that everybody else has said. I will not go down that laborious route, because everyone has had the opportunity to say what they had to say. However, I will comment on a few points that were made this afternoon.

I welcome the comments of the former Minister of Justice, Claire Sugden. While what she said was batted out of court by the Minister, the Member was on the money. Here is where we, as politicians, sometimes run the risk of somehow being seen as ungrateful for the service of our public servants. That is not the case. However, it is not good enough that, with all the seriousness of the issue that we are debating, in 2020, having had a consultation launched in 2016, we have not seen progress.

Mrs Long: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes, I will give way to the Minister.

4.30 pm

Mrs Long: I have to correct the Member. The consultation was not launched, as he suggested. The actual review was launched in 2016. The consultation was only launched in 2018. It is a much more complex piece of work than simply putting it out to public consultation.

Mr Storey: Again, the Minister is defensive of the system, and, probably, to a lesser or greater degree, when I was a Minister, I was defensive of my civil servants in the two Departments that I was in. However, at least I was prepared to come to this Chamber and tell it, when it was not good enough, whatever it was that had been done.

You would also think from listening to the Minister that there was not a problem, that somehow there was a bit of politicking going on and a few noises being raised. There is a problem. There is a problem in society today where it seems as though you can break the law, you can riot, you can protest and you can attack front-line workers, police officers and members of the Ambulance Service. I came from a meeting today with the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, and we have seen the disgraceful attacks on members of the Ambulance Service. You can go down through the list of public servants.

Somehow, we have to get to the root cause. We have to understand why someone has decided to inflict their form of justice on public servants. It is not good enough as a society, and we have a society today that seems to have more emphasis on human rights than human wrongs. That is an industry that needs to be radically changed, but, of course, when we say that, we are accused of being extremists. We are away out, far right. That is an awful place to be. Tell the victims, who are those who have to suffer as a result of these actions, and I think that they are more prepared to accept that, when you stand before the court, you will get a sentence that is fit for purpose and reflects the crime that was committed.

Let us look at another recent case, that of Christine Connor. It took seven years to bring that person to justice, and, thankfully, she is now behind bars. The Minister has to take responsibility for ensuring that the processes are in place to quickly and appropriately deal with those who would inflict awful pain and suffering in our community.

The Minister made reference to being populist. Dear me, that would be an awful thing. Has the Alliance Party never been populist? There has been a debate, and I welcome many of the comments that have been made. However, the seriousness of this cannot be underestimated, if we believe that victims need to be listened to. Of course, we know the attitude of the party opposite to victims. The IRA were victim makers for far too long in Northern Ireland. We saw how the party opposite had to be trailed to address the issue of victims in the courts just a few weeks ago. We welcome that.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member give way?

Mr Storey: Yes, I will give way.

Ms Dillon: I think that you will acknowledge that your own First Minister was taken to court to deal with the victims issue as well over what happened in Loughgall and the fact that she would not allow that to come to the Executive table.

Mr Storey: I think that the Member is seeking, as always, to create a diversion: "It wasn't us". I am glad to be able to stand in this House today and say that I have never been supportive of a private army that has been responsible for the murder of innocent victims in Northern Ireland and then tried to justify it as though it was some campaign for human rights or some ills that had been heaped on society.

In conclusion, Mr Deputy Speaker —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I advise the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Storey: Although the motion and the amendment are not the perfect place that we would want to be in, if the guarantees that have been given in this House today are delivered on, I think that we can begin to try address this issue. I urge the Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member's time is up.

Mr Storey: — to hasten and prioritise the issue. That would be very welcome.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the seriousness of attacks against emergency workers in Northern Ireland, including police officers, prison officers, firefighters, search and rescue workers and frontline health care staff; further recognises the important contributions by victims, campaigners and respondents to the Sentencing Review Consultation which closed in February of this year; and calls on the Minister of Justice to bring forward proposals for a revised sentencing framework after consideration both of the outcome of that important consultation and sentences available for equivalent offences in other jurisdictions in these islands.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Members may take their ease for a few minutes until we move to the next item of business.

COVID-19: Future Support for Businesses and Workers

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask Members to resume their seats. I thank you for your forbearance.

Ms Mallon: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the significant impact that the COVID-19 crisis has had on the public; notes that Department for the Economy projections show more than 100,000 people could be unemployed by the end of 2020; acknowledges that COVID-19 has continued to spread and may result in further restrictions on workers and businesses; expresses deep concern at the political decision to end the furlough scheme in October; and calls on the British Government to extend the furlough scheme to provide future support to businesses and workers during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic as a critical lever to economic recovery.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List. Go raibh maith agat, Nichola; tá fáilte romhat.

Ms Mallon: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is hard to think of a more fitting message for the Assembly to unite behind on our first day back after recess than that outlined in the motion. It is right that the Executive have agreed to write to the UK Chancellor stating our belief that the furlough scheme should be extended beyond October. I believe that the more loudly we make our voices heard on this issue, the more political weight our message will have.

I speak today as the SDLP Assembly group leader and as an MLA for North Belfast, a community where COVID-19 is compounding disadvantage and deprivation. Families in my part of the world, and, indeed, across Northern Ireland, face a severe cliff edge. The facts are clear and stark: more than 330,000 people in Northern Ireland are receiving support from the Government through the furlough scheme and the self-employed support scheme. That is 330,000 families reliant on those schemes for the most basic of life's necessities.

Last week, the most senior civil servant in the Department for the Economy was candid enough to say that, by the end of this year, the unemployed claimant count here could reach 100,000 people, and that is a conservative estimate. Take the employees whose jobs are in the sectors that have not yet been allowed to reopen under the current guidelines. So-called wet pubs have caught the headlines in recent weeks, but look beyond that. For example, the arts and culture sector is nowhere near its pre-COVID-19 level. Our theatres, large and small, remain closed, and festivals that, in normal times, run all year round in our cities, towns and rural locations are on hold. Airlines and airports are practically dormant. That means that tens of thousands of people have no work to go to. Are they to be punished financially for adhering to the prevailing Government health advice? How can a pilot go to work if the planes are grounded? Where can an actor, a lighting technician or a sound engineer earn their living if the Government have closed the theatres?

If the number of COVID-19 cases was falling week on week, and more sectors of the economy were opening, we would be in a much different place. However, we must be honest with one another: the level of infection is rising, with 118 new cases reported in the last 24-hour period. We are not yet emerging from the coronavirus crisis, and that means that we cannot simply shake off the measures that the Government have put in place to deal with this emergency.

Social distancing, a necessary measure that we all should follow at all times, will prevent any form of a smooth path back to full economic activity. That is not the fault of business, and it is certainly not the responsibility of people who could face redundancy in a few short weeks. We must intervene to protect jobs and promote financial stability. That means all of us in the Assembly, in the Executive, and, yes, Boris Johnson, you too.

If the Government deliver on their intention to end the furlough scheme by October, the UK will stand alone in Europe again. However, should we be surprised if they do? Over the past 24 hours, reports claim that the British Government are planning to end the legal force that would avoid a hard border on the island of Ireland. Let me be clear: Brexit is an act of economic self-harm. It will plunge our economy from the COVID-19 crisis into further crisis.

The Ireland Protocol was designed and agreed to protect our island and our economy. Any attempt to rip it up is a further act by Boris Johnson and his Tory Government to undermine the wishes of citizens here who voted to remain in the European Union.

4.45 pm

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Ms Mallon: Of course.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member acknowledge that Northern Ireland's biggest market is actually the GB domestic market? Putting anything in the path of businesses trading freely east-west would actually be more devastating to local businesses than anything that could happen North/South.

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware that, of course, everyone is supportive of unfettered access, yet we have still to see that materialise in anything coming forward from the British Government. However, we have a protocol, which is an international agreement, and the British Government must implement the protocol.

The reason I am saying this is because we need to be aware of the context in which we are operating. Our economy and communities are living through a crisis and facing into the further crisis of Brexit: the British Government need to understand that. We need to act now to protect our economy, our workers and our businesses from COVID and to prepare for the challenges of Brexit. Furlough is an absolutely necessary part of that plan. It is a safety net for the short term that cannot be removed. That has been recognised and acted on across Europe. In France, a version of the scheme, flexible and targeted, will run for a full two years initially. In Germany, their short-time working scheme has been extended to 21 months due to the impact of COVID impact. The Spanish Government has committed to delivering its support scheme until the

end of this year and, if necessary, into 2021. The Italian Government is actively considering a similar extension.

A lot has happened since March this year. We will never forget this year, and we all fervently hope that we never have to experience anything similar in the future. This was the year when everyone made enormous sacrifices to help each other out. I know that none of that was easy.

Our business community in the North is resilient. It does have underlying strength, and I am confident that, in time, our economy will recover. There is a time ahead of us when our streets will be busy, our pubs open and full, our entrepreneurs will be exporting goods and services and our theatres and cinemas will operate normally. That time will come, but we are not there yet. We need to plan to deal with the situation we face in the immediate future.

Let our Assembly add its voice to that of Nicola Sturgeon and Scotland. Let us join those businesses and political leaders in Wales who have made the same call. Extend the furlough. Do not abandon entire sectors and the hundreds of thousands who work in them. In announcing the scheme back in March, Boris Johnson was explicit, he said:

“we in government say: We will stand by you ... we are going to help workers of all kinds to get through this crisis ... Supporting you directly in a way that Government has never been done before”.

The Chancellor told the House of Commons:

“I want every person in this House and in the country to know that I will never accept unemployment as an unavoidable outcome.”

So what has changed, Chancellor? Will you stand by those words? Right now, in the absence of a Government support scheme, unemployment is not unavoidable, it is inevitable. You do have the power and the resources to make it avoidable, but not by sitting back and doing nothing.

We know that Boris Johnson has already ruled out an extension of the furlough scheme. However, this is a Prime Minister who is well used to U-turns. So I am not resigned to the end of the furlough scheme becoming a reality in October. In fact, as an Assembly, we should be determined to avoid this disaster by making our position very clear. Let us speak with one united voice and send a message, loud and clear: extend the furlough scheme.

Dr Archibald: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after the second “workers” and insert:

“, and to amend the scheme deadlines to allow for new entries to the scheme, including where businesses are forced to close as a result of clusters or further lockdowns.”

There is likely to be consensus across the Chamber and, more broadly, across society that the coronavirus job retention scheme, or the furlough scheme as it is better known, has been a lifeline for many businesses and prevented hundreds and thousands of redundancies. However, the job retention scheme introduced by the British Chancellor has, to an extent, been rigid since its inception with cut-off dates for employees to be on the payroll, the ruling out of newly-recruited employees and a

further cut-off date for businesses being able to enter the scheme.

The most recent figures, published on 21 August, stated that 249,600 employments had been furloughed over the course of the scheme in the North. The crisis caused by the pandemic has undoubtedly impacted on some sectors and workers more than others, with greater numbers of workers furloughed in certain sectors. The accommodation and food sector has seen business down over 93% in quarter 2 this year, while manufacturing is down 20% and construction is down 36.5%; 71% of all eligible employments in construction here have been furloughed. Young people are the most likely to be furloughed, with over 60% of 17-year-olds and 45% of 20-year-olds furloughed. Some businesses, like those in hospitality and tourism, have not yet been able to reopen. In a number of sectors — manufacturing, for example — while operations have restarted, orders have slowed and there is little sign that business activity will pick up any time soon; certainly not before the end of October, when the scheme is due to end.

The changes that have been made to the scheme already have placed a burden on employers in terms of their paying national insurance and pension contributions from the beginning of August and at least 10% of employee wages since the beginning of September. As a result, we have seen a number of redundancies over recent weeks and there are likely to be more in coming weeks. To try to avoid mass redundancies and to take account of the much slower return to business than was perhaps originally anticipated, we have been advocating for the scheme to be extended and for flexibility to be built in to support those sectors most impacted. I welcome that the Finance Minister is writing to the British Chancellor on behalf of the Executive to call for the scheme to be extended.

When we are talking about the impact on businesses and workers, it would be remiss of us not to also mention those who have missed out on any support. The British Chancellor needs to look at reforming other supports, including the self-employed income support scheme, to ensure that those who have been unfairly excluded due to whatever bureaucratic process — in some cases, they have not even been able to access universal credit — and who may still not be able to go back to work can also access support.

As I said at the beginning, the scheme has been broadly welcomed. However, that does not mean that there is not room for improvement or learning from other countries that have put in place similar schemes. Across the EU, including in Germany, France and the South, job-retention scheme equivalents have been more flexible since the get-go and allowed for part-time working, for example. Here in the North and across Britain, part-time working through reduction in hours has only been allowed since August. Some of the schemes also allow for claims for loss of business to be made retrospectively. This means that businesses that have recently faced losses or where business has been up and down, which is likely to be a trend for some time, can enter the schemes. That is not possible with the British version. For instance, in the event of any future lockdown including localised lockdowns, currently, even if there was an extension to the overall scheme, any business that is not already in the scheme would be unable to receive help. It is important that a

degree of flexibility is added and that deadlines around entry are reformed to allow employers that may need support in future to be able to get it.

The coronavirus job-retention scheme has been an important response but it also needs to form part of the recovery. In some other countries, the scheme has been extended until as far as December 2021. That is a smart move because any economic recovery strategy has to be about helping businesses to respond to changing circumstances. That will not happen overnight or in the short term, so businesses will require flexible supports over the next number of months. This is vital to avoid mass redundancies, which would be devastating for workers and their families.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Member for giving way. While I acknowledge, as I am sure you do, the intervention from the British Government and how important it is that they play that role in continuing this furlough scheme and supporting workers, do you agree with me that it is essential that the Executive in this place does so much more to support businesses that have already missed out? We know that £56 million was returned from grant funding that has not been reallocated, and that there are thousands of businesses in Northern Ireland that still have not been able to avail themselves of any support. Do you think that it is important that, as part of that joint strategy, we play our role, via the Executive, to support our local businesses?

Dr Archibald: Thank you for the intervention. I do agree. I hope to see the Economy Minister bringing forward, in the next number of weeks, further interventions to support those who have been excluded. Without the support of the furlough scheme, businesses which have been able to hit pause will be forced to hit stop, as bills pile up and business remains either impossible or much reduced.

My final point is particularly topical. It is impossible to talk about the short- and medium-term outlook for businesses without also looking at the impact of Brexit. Given the speculation since last night, which seems to be firming up, the likelihood of a decent free-trade agreement seems to be slim. Therefore, businesses are likely to face worsening trade circumstances. For those businesses in the North that trade North/South and east-west, the lack of clarity about how they will be doing business come January is a worry that they do not need whilst trying to recover from the worst economic crisis in living memory. The British Government need to live up to their commitments to implement the protocol and, through the joint committee, put in place the best possible trading conditions. The EU needs to ensure that the protocol's safeguards are fully implemented.

Mr Dunne: It is good to see you back in your place at the top Table, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on this very important issue. We all recognise the significant challenges that COVID-19 has brought upon us, not least the severe impact that it has had and continues to have on our local economy. It is a global pandemic, and the challenges that we face are not exclusive to Northern Ireland.

There has been a very significant amount of support delivered by the Executive to date, particularly through the Department for the Economy over the past six months, when we began to face COVID-19 head-on and deliver

direct financial support where needed. We must put on record our thanks to the Economy Minister, Diane Dodds, for her efforts in supporting our local economy as we look to rebuild, regenerate and, most importantly, give confidence for the future.

The Finance Minister recently confirmed that £2.2 billion of additional funding has been provided to Northern Ireland to respond to COVID-19. That figure alone certainly reinforces the value of being part of our great United Kingdom, through which we have benefited from one of the best economic rescue packages in the world during these unprecedented days. The furlough scheme, the self-employment income support scheme, the various local support schemes, including the £10,000 and £25,000 grants, the microbusiness hardship fund, as well as schemes such as the bounce back loan scheme from the banks and various relief measures have all been introduced for businesses.

As a local MLA, I have been pleased to assist many local business owners who have benefited from those measures, which they recognise were a real lifeline for them and their families in these difficult times. I fully recognise that there is need for additional support to sustain jobs in our existing businesses, and there is a real need for Invest NI to look at alternative support for businesses and to support upskilling, training, innovation and research and development. Invest NI needs to be more proactive, rather than reacting to each job crisis when it arises. Encouraging people back into the workplace, including the public sector, and back into our town and city centres must continue to be a priority. The public sector must be encouraged back to work in a safe, COVID-19-compliant manner.

The Eat Out to Help Out scheme saw 2.7 million meals being served. I am not sure how positive that has been for the health service, but it was a real success as a confidence-boosting measure. The scheme was a great example of the hospitality sector having the general public eat out in a safe and controlled way whilst protecting valuable jobs and encouraging people to enjoy the very best of Northern Ireland.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dunne: I will do.

Mr Dickson: Although I acknowledge that the Eat Out to Help Out scheme was inevitably of value to businesses and to those who are able to afford to eat out to help out, I also acknowledge and ask the Member to acknowledge that there are many of my constituents, as, I am quite sure, there are many of his, who simply could not afford to eat out to help out and that the Chancellor might have done more for food banks and others.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you for that. The Minister — sorry, the Member — has an extra minute. Wishful thinking for you, Gordon. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Dunne: Go easy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute if he so wishes.

Mr Dunne: As elected representatives, we all recognise that there is great need out there. We are all aware of the need for food banks. We are also very much aware of and recognise the success of the Eat Out scheme. There are

variations, and, again, we must all do what we can to help those right across the various sectors.

The business revitalisation scheme was rolled out recently, supported by DAERA and the Department for Communities, in conjunction with our local councils, to support our town centres, city centres and villages and to help them adjust to the new challenges facing their businesses.

The apprenticeship recovery scheme, which was announced last week by the Minister, will see employers receive up to £3,700 for every apprentice that is brought into the workplace and retained, and £3,000 for new apprentices. That is exactly the sort of positive financial support scheme that we need as we focus on our recovery, growth and the skills for our future.

5.00 pm

Challenges will undoubtedly remain with us for some time. Every sector has been impacted by COVID-19, but certain sectors, including tourism, hospitality and aerospace, will require tailored support going forward, and we must all continue to work together. The continued support of business through the continuation of the furlough scheme, even in a phased way, is vital as we seek to build further confidence in our economy and to continue to make Northern Ireland a great place in which to live, work and invest.

Mr Dickson: I support the motion and the proposed amendment, and more particularly the workers and businesses of Northern Ireland who have faced extremely challenging circumstances over the past few months as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unemployment has historically been a serious and persistent problem in Northern Ireland, but, in recent times, it seemed that we were improving on this. It is therefore extremely concerning and disappointing that we could see more than 100,000 people out of work by the end of this year. The coronavirus job retention scheme has been a lifeline to businesses and workers alike. While not perfect — many have been excluded, and I use that term carefully because there is a group that is called “excluded”, and there are those who genuinely feel that they have been excluded from all the schemes. Nevertheless, given the exceptional circumstances and the speed at which the scheme was implemented, it has provided support and stability for millions of workers across the United Kingdom, and continued that connection between employers and workers that would otherwise have been broken and seen a massive spike in unemployment this spring. To end it completely by the end of October would be a major, expensive and unnecessary self-inflicted wound. It is perhaps penny wise and pound foolish: this will cost us more in the future. Many businesses and workers face an uncertain and difficult winter. These otherwise viable businesses in the absence of a pandemic would be employing people, paying taxes and contributing to our economy. These range from travel agents, hotels, soft-play facilities, after-school time and the aircraft industry. These are employers that we need. We need to support these businesses and we need to be able to say that we will support you, your employees and your businesses until we can return safely to relative normality.

In a similar vein, I welcome the proposed amendment, which calls for businesses to be able to furlough staff again if restrictions or closures are required again. I really hope that that will not be the case, but we must continue to support workers and employers as we try to control the virus and be fully aware of the difficulties that these restrictions place on society.

The UK-wide furlough scheme, even with its inadequacies and even with those who have been excluded, has been helpful and it should perhaps continue in a more targeted form. However, there is much more that can be done to support people. In fact, money is still waiting to be spent, and it needs to be decided quickly how to be spent. There will be extreme anger should any Minister in the Assembly and the Executive in Northern Ireland end up returning money to the Treasury. I think that most would be aghast at the underspend on the micro-business hardship fund, not least because so many small businesses and sole traders have been excluded again and again. I look forward to meeting the Minister later this week, with such a group of people, to discuss this.

It is also crystal clear that we need an economic recovery strategy to focus on creating jobs and on our future economic development, with clear actions and measures, led by the Department for the Economy. Thus far we have yet to see anything concrete. Perhaps the Minister for the Economy can — indeed, sadly, she is not here — advise us on what progress is being made. The challenge to the Minister is to produce that plan. We must not allow people to fall back into long-term unemployment, so, when jobs cannot be saved, people must be offered the opportunity for supported options to help them back into work. Skills and retraining are vitally important for our economic recovery. We need to seize those opportunities now.

I welcome the announcements on funding for recruitment and retention of apprenticeships, but, again, with many in furlough, I have concerns that there quite simply will be a cliff edge for apprentices. We must also note the particular socio-economic harm that the recession is doing to our young people. It affects their earnings, their careers and their futures. Therefore, I call on the Communities Minister to get moving with schemes such as Kickstart and equivalent schemes for young people who are unemployed.

It is clear that the UK-wide job retention scheme should continue.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I advise the Member to bring his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Dickson: Indeed, it should be widened, even in the case of further restrictions. I encourage the Assembly to support the amendment and the motion.

Mr Middleton: There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on our population. First and foremost, we must continue to recognise the health impact, the hundreds of families who have lost loved ones due to the virus and the many who continue to suffer with the effects after contracting COVID.

We, of course, recognise the serious economic impact that COVID-19 has had, and continues to have, on the livelihoods of so many of our constituents. We do not have to travel too far in our constituencies to see the devastating impact of COVID on many businesses and workplaces.

Without the significant financial packages and measures put in place by the UK Government, our own Economy Minister and, indeed, the wider Executive, the impact would no doubt have been greater in a shorter space of time. The UK Government have provided more than £2 billion in funding to respond to the pandemic, and that does not include the value of the furlough scheme.

There is no doubt that the job retention scheme has prevented many businesses from closing their doors and has kept many people in employment. The figures show that roughly 240,000 people were furloughed by mid-July. That is a significant number given the size of our population. In addition, the self-employed income scheme has had over 76,000 claims made in Northern Ireland, so, based on those figures, that means that around 316,000 jobs and self-employed received support through retention schemes. That is 36% of those in employment. It has been estimated that, in the medium term, many of those who are furloughed are at risk of redundancy, particularly in our SMEs. That presents a significant problem as the job retention scheme comes to an end.

As efforts have been made to kick-start our economy, it is evident that, for some industries, it will take much longer than hoped for to recover. This is through no fault of those involved in those sectors but is simply dictated by the nature of their business and by the restrictions that continue to be in place for the safety of the public. In a few short weeks, many thousands will face the prospect of unemployment and their livelihoods being thrown into chaos. It is vital that the UK Government address the furlough issue and the scheme. That could be done in a targeted way, encouraging businesses back to work whilst providing a lifeline for some of the industries that are facing particular challenges, such as our aviation industry, our travel industry, our entertainment venues and our tourism and hospitality sectors.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. Will he agree with me that it has been crucial that our businesses and communities have been able to access one of the most unprecedented financial packages from the British Government in our lifetime, certainly in this pandemic? Equally, will he agree that as innovative an approach as possible will be required going forward to ensure that industry can continue to cohabit with situations such as the already alarming outbreak of COVID in Craigavon Area Hospital, for example?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Middleton: Absolutely. I completely concur. We need to be innovative and we need to look at a targeted approach. The Executive have written to the Chancellor and it is important that he takes on board those views, particularly views from industry leaders as well.

Our town and city centres are far from what they were seven months ago. There are many more shutters down and empty units. Once busy streets are now empty. When I speak to businesses in my constituency directly, particularly those in the city centre, they stress the importance of getting public-sector staff back into their offices. That must only be done in a safe and practical way. Coffee shops, restaurants and sandwich bars may have reopened, but they are struggling due to the lack of footfall as many office workers are working from home.

We need to bring life back into our town and city centres. There is an opportunity for Departments to take a lead on this.

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way on this point. Does he agree that, whilst the £2 billion from Treasury that he referred to represents a significant subvention from Westminster to help our economy, ultimately that money is going to have to be paid back, and that the best way to safeguard and progress economic recovery is to start moving, in as safe a way as possible, to get much of our economy functioning again?

Mr Middleton: Absolutely. I agree with that point, and it leads me to my next point, in that we need to get life back into our city centres and we need to get businesses opened up in as safe a way as possible. To that end, it is important that we recognise the work of the Economy Minister to try to rebuild our economy in this unprecedented environment. We must also grasp the opportunities in the emerging sectors — fintech, for example — to drive job creation. We must continue to explore how Departments can help firms to improve their supply chains or apply dynamic new ideas or technologies. There is a small window of opportunity to ensure that jobs are protected and the economic impact is not worsened.

The Executive have provided effective short-term measures to support businesses. However, long-term strategic plans must now be put into effect. We need to get on with the investment in our city deals. This will give a strong positive signal to businesses that there is a long-term plan to support and rebuild the affected sectors in the coming months. We must get on, too, with delivering on infrastructure investment to stimulate connectivity in Northern Ireland through digital, education and transport projects. We need to get on with promoting Northern Ireland as a great place to live and work in and to travel to.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Middleton: This investment is now more important than ever. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr McHugh: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on this motion. Since the inception of COVID and its like, we have all become familiar with a new vocabulary in many respects, and we are starting to come to terms with the meaning as well. When we talked about suppressing the curve and furloughing and so on, many people did not really understand what the concepts were. This is not to say for one minute that it is completely and absolutely new. Furloughing is an instrument that has been tried and tested for over 100 years. Just as we talked about suppressing the curve in order for the health system to be in a position to cope with what we knew was coming down the line in the amount of people who would require hospitalisation, it is also the case with furloughing. In fact, if anything, it is there initially to help the system to cope with unemployment. We have, in a sense, suppressed that to date. Now, with the suggestion that, in October, it is going to be removed, we can expect that same surge in unemployment within this economy.

In itself, our economy has much fewer businesses per head of the population than Scotland, Wales or England. All the more reason why we should be there ensuring that we protect those jobs in every respect — and not just the jobs per se, but the skills. The skills that have

been acquired over a long period of time in the whole area of manufacturing and the like. Mid Ulster, an area very near to my own constituency, is now, if anything, the manufacturing base here in the North of Ireland. We do not want to see those skills lost, and that is what furloughing provides for. It ensures that you still hold onto and secure those skills.

As I said, this is a system that was tested and tried a long time ago, initially in Germany in the 1920s, a time of hyperinflation, and more lately, in 2008, at the time of the world recession. Once again, the Germans were the people who came to the fore and provided the world with a system that ensured that they could at least absorb gently, if anything, the more negative aspects of that recession at that time. It is not by accident that they are the same people who now wish to extend their scheme by another two years, because they know exactly the impact that that sudden rise in unemployment will have on their economy.

5.15 pm

Let us not forget one other element of this when we talk about workers who have not been laid off but have been furloughed and are receiving the greater part of their income. They are the same people who, if anything, sustain and maintain our domestic economy. It is in that other area of the demand for goods and services domestically that they still have the resources in order to be able to sustain and maintain that.

When we look at the furlough scheme as an instrument that can influence many elements of our economy and our industries, that is all the more reason to ensure that we give total and absolute support to the Executive, the Economy Minister and the Finance Minister in making their appeals to the British authorities to continue to support the furlough scheme and extend it well beyond the month of October and, if anything, for the next two years.

Another critical and essential point, which has been mentioned by a number of Members, is that there are people who are only now coming to the point where they will require the same type of support but have been excluded by a time frame. That, in itself, is despicable but it is all the more reason why the situation has to be looked at very carefully in order to ensure that we get the best possible results for all of our people and for all elements of industry.

Mr Stalford: Thank you and welcome back, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is good to see you back in your place, not least because it eases the burden on Roy Beggs and me and we now get to participate in some of these debates.

I am happy to support the motion and the amendment. I do not wish to be cruel to the Member who spoke previously, but I am not entirely certain that late 1920s Germany is really an economic model that we want to be following. The Member will know that that model was funded through a series of complicated loans which were, then, called in and — well, read the history books and see how that ended up.

I want to make just a few comments about a couple of key sectors of the economy, the first of which is in relation to aerospace. My colleague from Foyle, Mr Middleton, mentioned the aerospace sector, which employs 10,000 people in Northern Ireland. The contribution that the aerospace industry makes to our economy runs into the hundreds of millions, if not billions, of pounds. Yet, it is one of the sectors that, because of the unique circumstances

that we have been facing, has been absolutely devastated by COVID-19. There are lots of people in my constituency, in East Belfast, East Antrim and North Down who are employed in the aerospace industry, so it is really important that measures and steps are taken in order to protect them.

Anyone who has engaged in — rightly so, I hope, we all have — trying to support the local tourism and hospitality sectors around Northern Ireland will have seen so many of our towns — places where we would traditionally go, certainly if you are from Belfast, during the summer, such as Portrush or Newcastle — completely deserted. We can all see the impact that COVID has had, particularly since there was an outbreak in Newcastle and County Down. That is why initiatives such as the Eat Out to Help Out scheme — taking on board what the Member for East Antrim Mr Dickson said — were positive and welcome.

The massive scale of the impact that COVID has had is measurable. Two billion pounds of additional expenditure has come from the Treasury to this part of the UK to try to shore up our economy and to ensure that once those vast swathes of the economy that have been put into deep storage are brought out of it again, there will be something left. It is testimony to the benefits of being a part of the United Kingdom that our Government were in a position to provide that subvention. However — and we need to be realistic about this — it is money that our children will be paying back. Future generations, perhaps even their children as well, will be paying it back. Although I sing the praise of the Eat Out to Help Out scheme, I am mindful of the fact that there is no such thing as a free lunch; the borrowing that has taken place in order —

Mr Catney: Thanks very much to the Member for giving way. I hope that you agree that the Eat Out to Help Out scheme at least got people used to going back to public houses and restaurants again and gave hope for the future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Stalford: Thank you.

I absolutely agree. I underscore and underline that I do not want us to do anything outwith the best scientific medical advice, but, in a sense, we have almost been victims of our own success in terms of putting the frighteners on people and encouraging them to stay in a form of lockdown. If we can encourage people, in a safe and managed way, out of self-imposed lockdown and into businesses such as those that you mentioned, we should do so. That is absolutely right.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: Yes — very briefly.

Mr Buckley: Does the Member draw a slight contradiction from the Eat Out to Help Out scheme? Although it was a good scheme, some people from the public sector perhaps availed themselves of it but argued that they could not go out in public and return to their workplace.

Mr Stalford: It is important that we try to take as broad a view as possible. I am certainly not going to criticise people if they have legitimate fears and concerns. Our job, as a Government, is to demonstrate the progress that has been made in addressing those concerns and make people feel that it is safe to go out, spend money and help to generate economic recovery.

Unfortunately, the person who proposed the motion, Ms Mallon, is not here. She said in her introductory remarks that we should follow the lead and example given by Nicola Sturgeon, the First Minister of Scotland, who proved her economic prowess in 2014 by telling us all that a barrel of oil would be \$110 today. When I checked on 'Business Insider', it was \$41.98. I do not think that we will take be taking our economic predictions or hypotheses from the SNP-led Administration in Scotland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I advise the Member to bring his remarks to a close.

Mr Stalford: I have made the point that I wanted to make. Thank you.

Mr Catney: This is an incredibly important motion. Although more and more of our businesses are able to come back in some way or form, there are still many out there that are not allowed to open. Obviously, I declare an interest as a former publican. Pubs are an integral part of our hospitality trade and sector. Across the world, the Ulster/Irish pub is famous. They are part of our history. Relationships have sparked, revolutions have been plotted and all the world's ills have been put right in our pubs. They closed in line with Government guidance, and they remain closed.

Some have been with us for hundreds of years. My friend Brian has a bar in Holywood called the Maypole. It has been a licensed business since 1857. I know the owner, Brian, well. He is a hard-working and hands-on publican whose family have provided a centre point for the community for decades. I also speak of another little bar called Laverys on Chapel Hill. One hundred years ago two weeks ago, it was burned in the infamous burnings in Lisburn over the shooting of Swanzy, who murdered the Lord Mayor, who was then one of three lord mayors in Ireland, in County Cork, Tomás MacCurtain. There is a history attached to those businesses. That is my reason for talking about them here today. Places like that could be gone forever without support.

All of those businesses are happy to comply with public-health guidance, but you cannot escape from the hypocrisy of some of the guidance, with pubs being blamed for outbreaks when a third of them cannot even open. Even pubs that can open and are doing everything that they can to stick to the guidelines have had to live in fear of visits from the large number of PSNI officers with the power to shut them down for the smallest infractions. Instead of making pubs seem as though they are the troublemakers, with visits from the Chief Constable and teams of officers, we need to stop ignoring them, listen to them and work with them.

Pubs that have remained closed have lost business to the pub down the street. I know of pubs that are traditional wet bars, which, by selling a bowl of soup, have been able to open. That is very unfair to public houses that are following the law, because, once that business goes, believe me, we are creatures of habit, and it is very difficult to get that revenue back into your public house.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that social and sports clubs that cannot open under the regulations also require additional support, otherwise they might never reopen, and we would lose vital community hubs in our towns and villages?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Catney: Absolutely. The Member is 100% right on that. Sporting clubs, whether rugby, GAA, handball, soccer or whatever, are the backbone of local communities, and the clubhouse is a source of revenue, so I agree with you on that.

Pubs that remain closed have lost their business, as I said, and that will not come back, so it is a double hit. Closed bars make no money but it still costs a lot to try to maintain them. We need to find a safe way for small, family businesses to open and give them the financial support that they have lacked throughout the pandemic. Many owners still live above those pubs, and although this might sound strange to you, the public house is, in a way, an extension of their living room. They are very responsible people, settled strongly in the community and often the pubs have been passed down from generation to generation.

It cannot be just my office that has been overwhelmed by the number of calls and emails coming in from people who could, potentially, lose their job. They come from across our society. They are our shopkeepers, our tradespeople and members of all our families. To just end the support for the furlough scheme in October is just not acceptable. I do not deny that it took a big step to propose the furlough scheme. Surely the steps that are needed to continue it are much smaller and not beyond the possibility of political thought and ability.

Of course, I must also mention all those who have not been able to avail themselves of any of the support mechanisms that have been put in place because of COVID. For months now, I have been asking questions of Ministers, who have assured me that there will be more support coming, but we still have 10,000 small businesses and sole traders who have received nothing. The support mechanisms were blunt tools. They had to be set up quickly to help people as quickly as possible, but, now that we have had time to reflect, to look at the impact of the schemes and to figure out what has been missed, we need to look at the underspend in the schemes and budgets. We cannot go through another Budget process without putting something in place for those who were left behind. We must use all the pressures that we can to support those working to get through this terrible time. I urge everyone to support the motion and the amendment. On top of that —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I advise the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Catney: Thank you. I was just going to say that. OK, thank you.

Mr Stewart: Mr Deputy Speaker, it is good to see you back in the Chair and also my party colleague — sorry, that was presumptuous — my colleague from East Antrim Mr Dixon. It is good to see him back. This is the first time that we have both sat in this Chamber since I was elected, so it is good to see you back, Stewart.

On behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I support the motion and the amendment, although I would probably have liked the motion to go further. As has been discussed today, we recognise the importance of the job retention scheme, but it is only one pillar of several that are integral to supporting our local economy. We talked about the grant assistance

and an economic recovery strategy, as well as schemes that have not, to date, helped those who have been excluded from support measures. I think it would be so much more important had we been discussing that as well. It is critical that we all agree that the Executive find the money to support businesses here but also are directed to create schemes whereby that money can be spent effectively and efficiently, especially to help those who have missed out to date.

The introduction of the coronavirus furlough scheme by the Chancellor was big and bold and was a huge move at the time.

There is no doubting the unprecedented nature of that, with 80% of wages up to £2,500 a month being paid to employees. It was something more akin to what we would see from a social democratic Scandinavian country than to what we would be used to from a Conservative Government. It has also been an undoubted success. It has kept unemployment down to a very low level. It has directly protected 9.5 million jobs across the UK and up to 300,000 here and been a lifeline to employees who, otherwise, would not have had an income and would be continuing to worry about their future. It has not been cheap — upwards of £40 billion, which, as the Member for South Belfast said, will have to be paid back — and that amount of government intervention continues to grow by the day, especially with the other schemes. It has been essential to prop up the economy thus far, which makes it so frustrating that the Chancellor plans to end it in October, long before people who are affected by the pandemic are able to get back to work effectively.

5.30 pm

Some businesses are returning — we know that — and many who have been furloughed are starting to drift back to work, and that is also vital for the economy, especially, as Mr Middleton said, in getting people back into our town centres and city centres. Getting people back into workplaces safely is so vital for the local economy. Other sectors cannot get back. We have mentioned today the wet pubs, the creative industry, the events sector and so many others who, through no fault of their own, are either banned from reopening or simply cannot. It is essential that a scheme continues to be present to give them the support that they need.

Rishi Sunak, the Chancellor, said that the furlough scheme, when he launched it back in March, would be a bridge through the pandemic. I believe that, by withdrawing the furlough scheme prematurely, he risks building a bridge that does not reach the other side. It is integral that he finishes the job. Even to next June, the spend — potentially £10 billion — would be significantly less than what has been spent so far. The cost of not doing it could be even more. The impact on our economy — in Northern Ireland, potentially, upwards of 100,000 jobs could be lost and maybe upwards of 1 million across the UK — would be disastrous. We have heard today that Germany, Belgium, Australia, France and significant other countries have already pledged to extend their schemes, albeit in different guises. That would, probably, be what is integral. We know that businesses want flexibility, and those of us who speak to them want to know if they can get people back into work for a period of time or part-time or that, if they get people

back and things get difficult again, they will be able to slot back in. That is integral as well.

Hopefully, we can all send a joint and strong message to the Chancellor and to Boris Johnson. He is getting that from all sides and his own Back-Benchers. Over the weekend, Julian Knight, the Conservative chair of the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee said that there was growing momentum for that from all industries, especially those that simply cannot get back or seek to exist under social distancing. He said that the British Government would look ridiculous and set the economy back a generation if our world-leading creative sectors went belly-up for the sake of a few billion. I know that we are talking about billions here and billions there, but, given the gravity of the scheme and the fact that the British Government are spending money at a rate not seen since wartime efforts, for the sake of a few more billion, it would be almost ridiculous if we did not support those. The protection of key skills should be a strategic priority and will be the building block of getting the economy back up and running post COVID. It is integral that that scheme is there to support those who are unable to get back. Those key skills need to keep existing.

It is important that we recognise how important the scheme is but also that it is only one pillar of so much more and the Executive need to play their role. It is imperative that we see more of the money that was released or returned from the grants and budgets made available for those who have been excluded.

Mr Muir: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is good to see you in your place, alongside my colleague, Stewart Dickson. We have had many Zoom calls over the months but never actually met in person until today.

The launch of the furlough scheme in March was an unprecedented but much-needed decision by the UK Government. Few would dispute that, had it not been brought in, the situation today would have been infinitely worse. I will for ever remember the moment that furlough was announced on 20 March, after standing in a local business on St Patrick's Day with the staff, owners and me in tears facing the prospect of closure and redundancies. Furlough saved that business and the jobs of the employees, but many others still need furlough to survive. A failure by the UK Government to reverse the decision to end the scheme next month would have catastrophic consequences for working people and their families across Northern Ireland. The Alliance Party supports an extension because the furlough scheme is necessary, given the restrictions on our lives imposed as a result of COVID-19. Most importantly, we must acknowledge that the vast majority of people who are furloughed desperately want to get back to work and are really worried about the grim alternative if the scheme is ended, namely prolonged unemployment without the means to sufficiently support themselves and their families. I know these people. They are friends. They are worried about what will happen in October, and they are desperately keen to ensure that furlough is extended.

We have a furlough scheme because necessary COVID-19 restrictions have made thousands of jobs temporarily unviable. People did not see this coming. Thankfully, some of those restrictions have been eased, and large numbers have gone back to work, yet important restrictions remain, derailing previously viable jobs. We

must continue to support those jobs or risk losing them for ever. While the Executive have been able to loosen restrictions, we are well aware that some of those may need to be reimposed, as, indeed, some already have been. Local lockdowns, as we have heard today, are also a real possibility. For businesses that have run out of any reserves following six of the toughest months on record the furlough scheme remains vital to ensuring that they can afford to keep hold of their staff. The requirement for an individual establishment such as a restaurant to close for weeks at a time because of a case or cluster of COVID-19 could be fatal to the business if the furlough scheme is not there to support staff costs. I was speaking to a local businessman a fortnight ago whose business had emerged from the lockdown with his reserves eliminated and £26,000 of debt, but he is determined to make a go of it. Forcing his and other businesses to close once again without any assistance, such as the ability to furlough and freeze, would, I fear, be the last straw and result in closure of that business.

If we are to end the furlough scheme, we will be asking furloughed workers to either find new jobs or rely on support from existing and very limited safety nets. We cannot expect those furloughed in Northern Ireland to find new jobs that simply do not exist. The furlough scheme is expensive — estimated at over £35 billion at the end of August — but we have seen other similarly placed countries such as Germany, Ireland and others mentioned here today recently extend their furlough schemes well into 2021. If those countries can stand by their workers for the duration of the pandemic, there is no reason why the UK Government cannot do the same. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that ending the furloughing scheme in October would cost more money in the long term than keeping it open. Analysis from the National Institute of Economic and Social Research has shown how, through curtailing unemployment benefit claims this year and several years into the future, continuing the furlough scheme into the middle of 2021 is the least expensive option.

As other Members have outlined, Northern Ireland has its own economic powers. A lot of money that has been allocated through the Barnett consequentials still sits unallocated. It is essential that it is allocated, and, frankly, it would be unforgivable if Departments were surrendering money at the end of the financial year without rolling out support packages as soon as possible.

We still need the furlough scheme, and closing it in October, as planned, would be a big mistake. Furlough is not a luxury but an unprecedented scheme for unprecedented times. It is absolutely necessary to support a large number of workers in Northern Ireland. I support the motion and the amendment.

Miss Woods: I would like to say, "Hello" to Mr Dickson, whom I have not yet met.

I welcome the motion and the amendment. Extending the furlough scheme would, of course, go some way to provide a safety net for many workers who have been affected by the pandemic. It is inconceivable to expect businesses that have been unable to reopen or those who are not able to open fully to survive without any further support when they have had little, if any, income since March. Grants only cover so much, and loans just kick the financial problems down the line. Many trade unions have rightly been calling

for the extension of the furlough scheme for months to protect jobs, livelihoods and families across Northern Ireland. It is a no-brainer. We know that the magic money tree can be shaken when it suits, but it is not a long-term solution; what we need is imagination. We need to think differently, and we need a bespoke economic plan for the people whom we represent.

The motion's call to action is clear and something that I support, but what difference will it really make in light of the British Government already refusing to extend the scheme? The key question for the Assembly is this: what are the Executive's plans to create new employment opportunities for the estimated 100,000 people who will be unemployed by the end of the year? What about those not included in that figure who are already struggling, those who have had their hours cut and are in precarious and unstable working conditions, those relying already on our social security system, those who are having to give up work or are unable to return because of childcare decisions, those who are self-employed and those who did not qualify for the grants and assistance offered by Westminster or by the Executive here? They have been left behind and excluded, and extending the furlough scheme does nothing to help them.

Let us take, for example, a constituent of mine who has been left behind. I am glad that she has given permission for me to mention her today. Mrs Judith Cree set up her own business in Holywood in April 2018 but did not meet the criteria for the schemes set up by Westminster or any implemented by the Executive here. Alongside others, including Excluded NI, she has lobbied for assistance in line with Scotland from the Department for the Economy and the Executive, and they have been turned down repeatedly. She has also lobbied for the scope of the criteria to be changed but has been turned down on that too. She was informed that she was not able to avail herself of as much support as others and that it was impossible to provide funding for every scenario that has presented itself during the pandemic by the Minister.

Why are the Executive not listening and acting to help those who need it? What are the plans to protect jobs under threat? Where are the plans to create new jobs? How are the Executive using available funds and investment to drive forward economic recovery? Where is the imagination? What about the underspend? There are new ideas and new ways of dealing with economic recession and increased unemployment here. We do not need to look too far for opportunities presenting themselves. Issues that, we know, we need to deal with will necessitate job creation: for example, dealing with fuel poverty and the poor condition of housing here. The mass retrofitting of houses that is required is a perfect example of what the Executive should be doing and investing their energy in, not focusing on business as usual. We need green jobs and a green stimulus package from the Executive. We need a just transition to protect workers and create jobs, and that will require investment in people, education and apprenticeships. We need widespread and far-reaching structural change, including cooperatives and community-based models of business, to implement a fair and just transition to a low-carbon economy backed by green investment.

The Assembly has already backed a green new deal, and it was agreed with New Decade, New Approach. Where

are the green jobs? Where is our economic plan and a just transition within it? Whilst we welcome the call to extend the furlough scheme, it is time for the Executive to pull the finger out, present the Assembly with a comprehensive economic plan and deliver green jobs for the future.

Mr Allister: It would be hard to dispute some of the recitals in the motion — recognising the significant impact that the COVID-19 crisis has had on the public and noting the projections that more than 100,000 people could be unemployed by the end of the year — but there is something churlish about it. There is no acknowledgement of the very substantial assistance that has kept our economy afloat. Of course, as taxpayers, we are entitled to benefit from our membership of the UK — that, of course, is the big advantage of being in the UK — but I do not think that it would have really done those who tabled the motion any harm to acknowledge the sheer scale of assistance that has been provided. I have always thought that one of the self-inflicted dangers for devolution — not just here but elsewhere — is the risk of it simply becoming a grievance machine. You cannot blame Westminster for everything. My goodness, in respect of expenditure here, the Executive have not been able to spend, to date, all the money that they have received in respect of COVID from Westminster. Mr Dickson rightly told us — I am sure that each one of us could add to it — about the small traders who have fallen through the net with no help. We have a haulage sector with next to no help, yet money in the coffers not provided.

Before we take the mote out of the eye of Westminster, maybe we should have a look at the Executive.

5.45 pm

There are some, of course, whose *raison d'être* is to blame the Brits.

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: In a moment. We had Mr O'Dowd's infamous shire of bs comment; we had the illiteracy of our Finance Minister saying that the lockdown could be blamed on austerity. There comes a time when the Assembly has to grow up and recognise its responsibilities in the here and now — responsibilities that are here, not elsewhere.

Mr Catney: I thank the Member for giving way. I do not deny that huge effort and a huge amount of money went towards the furlough scheme, but this would be a smaller step to try to retain it, and not be beyond our political thought and wishes to try to maintain our economy, battered and bruised as it is.

Mr Allister: I am not saying that the furlough scheme should not be extended, but it cannot be extended forever. Sadly, there are businesses that will never reopen. At some point, realities have to be faced. You cannot keep putting your hand into the pocket of the Treasury if there is no realistic prospect of that spend turning good. As hard as it is for politicians in a devolved arrangement to face such realities, there comes a point when those realities will have to be faced, because, as Mr Stalford said, some day, someone — possibly down to our grandchildren — is going to have to pay for this. Do we want to create such a mountain of debt on future generations for the ease of being able to say, "We found money off the money tree in 2020"? There comes a point when reality has to settle in. Yes, without the furlough scheme, we would be in a very

dire situation, but you cannot realistically expect that things will go on indefinitely. It comes to personal and collective community responsibility, and I am sure that, as we go forward, there will be other needs to be met in different ways, perhaps.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for giving way. Although I appreciate what the Member is saying, does he agree that, given that we bailed out the banks in 2008, we can do a wee bit more and bail out our people?

Mr Allister: I am not going to defend the bailout of the banks. They were treated with considerable generosity.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Allister: So, too, has the community been, in general. Two wrongs do not ever make a right. I am making the point that, at some point, people have to get real about the economic future.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Agus anois iarraimse ar Gerry Carroll ach, sula mbogaimse chuig an phointe sin, caithfidh mé rud éigin a dhéanamh anseo. Before I move to Gerry Carroll, I inform the House that as the Order Paper is not expected to be disposed of by 6.00 pm, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the business is completed.

Mr Carroll: The COVID crisis has vividly illustrated across the world that workers not only make society function, they — not the billionaires, stockbrokers, bankers or venture capitalists — create the wealth in society. It is worth observing that fundamental reality because, for too long, political representatives in the Chamber and in the Westminster Parliament across the water have propagated policies that attack working-class people. For too long, our economic system has existed based on exploiting the labour power of workers, and concentrating wealth in the hands of the few.

Our hospitality and retail workers, cleaners, porters, office and construction workers, public-sector and health workers and everyone else create the wealth and prosperity in our society. To paraphrase the radical thinker Karl Marx, even a child knows that a society that stops working is a society that struggles to survive.

The cost of this crisis is now being unfairly forced onto working people. Whilst people in the hospitality sector lost their jobs, the wealthy continued to do well during this crisis. People such as Richard Branson, a billionaire, who sits on his private island championing his own bailout, whilst aviation workers are unsure about how long their jobs may exist. Then there are the Debenhams workers who were laid off, undermined and disrespected whilst the company remains profitable and wealthy.

Not to mention, of course, the completely disproportionate experience between those who have worked extremely hard, putting themselves at risk at meat plants and other food production outlets, and the likes of Larry Goodman and others, the beef barons, who have been left untouched by this crisis. Bosses who have private wealth of hundreds of millions of pounds and assets totalling hundreds of billions sit on fortunes while food production workers have been placed at risk throughout this whole crisis, underpaid and disrespected, and too many, tragically, have paid with their life.

COVID-19 remains a dangerous reality in our communities — we heard about that today — in workplaces and schools. We have witnessed a rapid increase in cases in the past few weeks, and, tragically, deaths. Any idea that we have bypassed the pandemic or come through it is not only inaccurate but dangerous thinking. The Executive should bear that in mind, especially as they move to lift more restrictions.

The furlough scheme should absolutely be extended. As we heard, if the German Government can extend a furlough until the end of 2021, and the French Government until 2022, why can workers here not have similar protection? It is likely that there will be no vaccine until next year at the earliest. Workers firmly need security and protection, and must not be forced to choose between risking their health or risking their jobs — and, by extension, their futures.

The furlough scheme was not implemented out of the goodness of the Tories' hearts. I believe that the Tories do not have good hearts. They implemented the scheme because they knew that they needed the state to step in, in order for the system to survive, otherwise they risked great instability. Short-term protection for some workers for the long-term protection of profits was the real reason for their actions.

In any debate about the economy in this Chamber, we always have pleas against whipping the begging bowl to London. We have to reject that caricature of reality. It is not London's money; it is taxpayers' money created by the labour of workers here, and we need more of it, not less. The reality, as Oxfam said in 2014, is that £4 billion worth of cuts have been delivered in the North, and that figure is likely to be higher now. That is the highest since World War II. There is a fundamental, historical problem of underinvestment by British Governments in public spend and public services here but also in working-class communities in Wales, England and Scotland.

Always when there is a discussion about lack of funding, the need for investment and the need to protect people, I am struck by how we often refer to what I would call unfair and outdated proposals, normally water charges, prescription charges and higher fees. We need to have a different focus, which is the need to maintain public services and make those who have more wealth pay for them and not put extra burdens on the working-class and poor communities. We need to see a corporate wealth tax to ensure that those with the most —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I advise the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Carroll: — are forced to pay. There is plenty of money in Britain and Ireland to make that happen.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Agus anois iarraimse ar John O'Dowd críoch a chur ar an leasú. Tá cúig nóiméad agat. I call John O'Dowd to wind on the amendment. You have five minutes.

Mr O'Dowd: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, agus tá fáilte romhat ar ais. Also to Mr Dickson, who is back among us.

It has been an interesting debate. I think that we have managed to unite the House in its call for the furlough scheme to be continued. We have socialists, Tories, liberals, right-wingers and left-wingers all coming together

to support this economic proposal, and it comes about because we are facing — this is an overused phrase, but it is true — unprecedented times. At the start of the pandemic, during an Economy Committee debate, I said to officials that we needed to rip up the economic rule book, and, largely, that is what has happened over the last six months.

The reasons why the Tories introduced a furlough scheme were to secure jobs and to try to stabilise the economy. However, it was also to allow that fundamental market principle — consumption — to continue. It was so that consumers would go out and spend. I suspect that none of the money given to those who benefited from the scheme has been hoarded away in savings accounts or under the mattress. It has been used to consume, which keeps the market ticking over.

Who benefits most from that is arguable. Certainly, the families saved by the furlough scheme very much welcomed it. I think that they will be concerned by Mr Allister's comment that two wrongs do not make a right, when comparing the furlough scheme with bailing out the banks. They are not comparable. They are not comparable at all. One was right; the other was wrong. I am sure that the families saved by the scheme have been very welcoming of it and will want it to continue.

I am concerned when I hear people say that it will not continue, and I have seen in the media that Boris Johnson has made that decision. Boris Johnson never made a decision in his life. Boris Johnson takes a decision on the basis of whatever suits at a particular moment in time. Surely, we have all learnt that from experience. It is only right and proper that the Assembly debate this — the Welsh Parliament and the Scottish Parliament have also debated it — and that we call on the British Government to continue the furlough scheme. It is not because I blame the Brits for everything — I blame them for a lot of things, but I do not blame them for everything. The COVID pandemic is not the fault of any one nation. Certainly, I have concerns about how certain Governments managed the healthcare etc, and Mr Allister referred to them.

There had to be an imaginative response to the pandemic, and there has been an imaginative response. It would be foolhardy, even from a Tory point of view, to end the furlough scheme now, because the support that it gives to the economy would be lost. Some Members referred to what the cost of unemployment benefit and the cost of lost opportunities, lost skill sets and lost industries would be. That cost to the economy would be totally detrimental and have a major impact for generations to come. Mr Stalford referred to our children paying for this in the future, as did other Members. Yes, they may well do, if an economic strategy is put in place that workers pay for this, but why should workers pay for it? It has been a cost to the economy, to the Treasury, but the money that ended up in the Treasury came about as a result of workers. They created the wealth. They paid the taxes that went to the Treasury. They now have some of that payment back. We should not accept the idea that our children's children will pay for this. The way in which the economy operates is that the books have to balance. Somebody will pay for it, but let us introduce a fair and equitable taxation system. I do not wish to pick on Mr Allister, although he and I have a habit of doing that to each other, but he referred to politics here having to mature. Here is a challenge for

us all. Let us establish a commission on fiscal powers for the Assembly. Let the Assembly start talking about and making decisions on tax-varying powers and raising taxation. It is not necessarily about raising a set piece of taxation, but tax has to be paid. Tax has to be paid to pay for public services. The question that we have to debate and answer is this: who pays the tax? That would be a sign of the maturity of this establishment and of the Executive.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I advise the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr O'Dowd: In conclusion, I call on Members to support the amendment and the motion. The maturity of the Assembly will be based on what we do next on fiscal powers.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Go raibh maith agat, agus anois iarraimse ar Matthew O'Toole conclúid a chur leis an díospóireacht ar an mholadh. I call Matthew O'Toole to conclude the debate and wind on the motion.

Mr O'Toole: Mr Deputy Speaker, it is good to see you back in the Chair. I think that it is the first time since we have reassembled that you have been in the Chair when I have spoken.

6.00 pm

I am pleased to make the winding-up speech on the SDLP motion and support the amendment that was tabled by Sinn Féin. The debate has been very useful. We are often divided in the Assembly, but there is broad support for the principle of extending the furlough scheme to protect Northern Ireland workers, businesses and families. I will make some general remarks, but I will also try to reflect on the debate more broadly, which, as I said, has been useful and broad. There were a few interesting comments that I will pick up on, some of which I do not agree with and possibly some of the same ones that Mr O'Dowd picked up on, but possibly not for the same reasons.

To start, I welcome Mr O'Dowd's commitment to and interest in new fiscal powers for this place and in establishing a fiscal council and/or commission. I look forward to working with him and his colleague the Finance Minister on that. It will be good if we can get credible proposals.

This has been the most challenging and frightening summer in memory for many workers, in a public health sense and economically. Mr Deputy Speaker, in just over an hour, some of my and your staff will be participating in online training on the provision of universal credit. The reason that that is essential is that we know that, in the months to come, whatever happens with the furlough scheme, we will see a significant increase in people coming to our constituency offices who will have to be supplied with universal credit. That is a very difficult reality that we will have to face, but it does not have to be as bad in the short term as it might be. That is what the motion and debate are about.

As we heard, over 330,000 people in Northern Ireland are either receiving support through the furlough scheme or the self-employed support scheme. About a quarter of a million of those have been on furlough. Just under one in eight UK workers are still on furlough, with the majority having their wages topped up by an employer. The total withdrawal of the furlough scheme in October — the

taper has already begun — will be a drastic cliff edge for workers, their families and, indeed, their employers.

As mentioned by several contributors to the debate, it is highly possible that a large volume of microbusinesses in Northern Ireland will not reopen their doors. Once the furlough scheme ends, they will have no revenue to pay their staff's wages. Those staff may have been with them for a long time, but there will be no plausible way for them to continue to pay them. My colleague Pat Catney raised the particular cause of small pubs in Northern Ireland in a very heartfelt and passionate way. Several others, including, I think, Andrew Muir and Christopher Stalford, talked about the stresses that the hospitality sector faces.

All Assembly colleagues — it is universal across the House — are concerned about the volume of correspondence that we are receiving from constituents who are fearful for their jobs and, frankly, are worried about their families' futures. More than 40% of companies have said that they have already cut jobs and a further third have said that they are likely to make workers redundant in the next six months.

This month, BDO, the auditors and accountants, found that more than half of medium-sized businesses in Northern Ireland were planning to cut jobs once the furlough scheme ends. In the accommodation and food services sector, more than four fifths of workers in Northern Ireland have been relying on the furlough to keep their jobs. Northern Ireland's 81% take-up for that sector is the highest in the UK and, again, Pat Catney talked very clearly and resolutely about that sector. Other Members talked about the sector, too.

Caoimhe Archibald specifically talked about the need to increase flexibility. The amendment that was tabled by Sinn Féin refers to greater flexibility around entry requirements in addition to an extension of the furlough scheme, and we welcome and support that.

In manufacturing, a higher proportion of workers in Northern Ireland are benefiting from the furlough scheme than those in England, Scotland or Wales. Several Members referred to aviation manufacturing and Christopher Stalford drew particular attention to the impact on that sector, particularly in constituencies such as East Belfast and, indeed, East Antrim, which is John Stewart and Stewart Dickson's constituency.

Last week, Mike Brennan, the Permanent Secretary at the Department for the Economy, warned that the full impact of the crisis has not yet begun. A conservative estimate is for 100,000 unemployment claimants in Northern Ireland before the end of the year. That is an extraordinary number. We are a small, tiny jurisdiction of less than 2 million people. We are also a small community. The impact of 100,000 job losses will be extreme for families and communities across Northern Ireland. For those who say that this is not mature politics for the Assembly to use its voice — and let us not forget that for three years we did not have a voice — with respect, Mr Allister, for those to say that it is not mature for us to call for an extension to the furlough scheme —. Yes, I am happy to give way.

Mr Allister: In fact I said no such thing. I said that I supported the extension of the scheme but that we had to recognise, and this is where the maturity comes in, that you cannot go on forever pouring money into the scheme. There have to be other ways to create and to keep

employment, because if there are companies which are never coming back you cannot keep pouring money into them. It is pretty simple.

Mr O'Toole: With respect to the honourable Member and to take the point more broadly, he said that we have to face reality sooner or later. He made a broader point that we needed to be slightly more supplicant in our gratitude to HM Treasury. I used to work in HM Treasury and I am under no illusions about the nature of that Department and the work that its officials have done and the necessity of this scheme. Nor do I "blame the Brits for everything", to use a phrase that people have used. I used to work in that Department. It is not the case that we are in a situation where we are in normal social or economic times. The whole point is that our economy cannot operate at full capacity for the foreseeable future. We all hope that it will be sooner rather than later. It would be great that if by the end of this year, our pubs, hospitality and retail sector were able to have a normal Christmas, but I am afraid that that is unlikely. The point is that the extenuating circumstances that prompted the Treasury to make this intervention in March have not yet ended.

Therefore, it is completely correct to extend the furlough scheme. As John Stewart was saying, it is not just people in the devolved Assemblies and it is not just left-wingers calling for an extension to the furlough scheme. He mentioned Julian Knight, a Conservative Back-Bencher, who is calling for an extension of the furlough scheme. With respect, Mr Allister, we are not just talking about who you might see as the usual suspects.

We could face a claimant count of 100,000 by the end of this year. The gravity of that number is enormous. I have spoken about communities in Northern Ireland, but that number is nearly double what we faced in 2012-13. As we have heard, governments across Europe are working to implement variants and extensions to their own support schemes. Germany, France and Spain have already indicated that they are going to extend those schemes. My colleague, Nichola Mallon, spoke about that and I think others have too. I know that there are some in this Chamber who are not particularly keen in looking to Europe as an example, but I am afraid in this instance that it is important that we do.

It is important that we echo the appeals of political leaders in Scotland and Wales to the British Government to not leave UK workers. Christopher Stalford, my constituency colleague, has left the Chamber. He was keen to have a little pop at Nicola Sturgeon and that is entirely his right. I would say to my South Belfast colleague, as someone who was an enthusiastic supporter of the Vote Leave campaign, that if we are talking about political leaders who have made false and disproven promises, then I am afraid that the Vote Leave campaign will beat every political campaign in history, not just on these islands but probably anywhere in the world.

If we abandon entire sectors and hundreds and thousands of workers in a few weeks' time, we will regret it. It will not just be us that will regret it — our economy and our communities will suffer. The instinct of the British Government might be to move to austerity to counterbalance the wage subsidy schemes that have kept people in work. We know from the last decade that that does not work.

I am running out of time, so I will not talk in great detail about why it is wrong to think of a state's public debt liability as the same as a household balance sheet, but I will leave it as this: it just is not; they are completely different things.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr O'Toole: It is clear from Boris Johnson's recent actions on Brexit that he is entirely reckless about the future of people in Northern Ireland. But, it is important that we, in the Assembly, send a clear message today that we want to support workers, families and businesses and that we want to extend the furlough scheme. I am grateful for the support and commend the motion to the House.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the significant impact that the COVID-19 crisis has had on the public; notes that Department for the Economy projections show more than 100,000 people could be unemployed by the end of 2020; acknowledges that COVID-19 has continued to spread and may result in further restrictions on workers and businesses; expresses deep concern at the political decision to end the furlough scheme in October; and calls on the British Government to extend the furlough scheme to provide future support to businesses and workers, and to amend the scheme deadlines to allow for new entries to the scheme, including where businesses are forced to close as a result of clusters or further lockdowns.

Adjourned at 6.10 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 8 September 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Private Members' Business

Local Economy and Post-Brexit Preparedness

Dr Archibald: I beg to move

That this Assembly notes with concern recent comments from the Northern Ireland business Brexit working group regarding the lack of technical and operational details available to local businesses concerning the changes that will come into force post-Brexit; recognises the very complex and unique characteristics of the local economy; is concerned by the precariousness of many of our small and medium enterprises at this time; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to establish urgently educational and training opportunities to enhance the capacity of local businesses to prepare for post-transition trading arrangements.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Dr Archibald: Today's motion was submitted in June, following the publication of the NI business Brexit working group paper on implementing the protocol. The sentiments of the motion, however, are as relevant today — indeed, more so — given the revelations of the past two days, because very little has changed.

The motion refers to the “complex and unique characteristics” of our local economy. We have an economy in which the vast majority of businesses are SMEs, that has highly integrated supply chains across the island, with some products crossing the border numerous times in the production life cycle, and where more businesses trade North/South than anywhere else.

It has been well documented over the past four years how damaging a Brexit that does not take into account those unique circumstances would be. That is one of the reasons that the protocol in the withdrawal agreement was painstakingly negotiated. Let us not forget that it was negotiated and was a compromise on behalf of the EU 27 as well as the British Government. The protocol is the legal basis for how trade will occur post-transition, and businesses need to be supported in preparing for the post-transition trading arrangements under all scenarios of the future economic partnership. There are 16 weeks until

the end of the transition period, and the calls for technical details and solutions that reflect the needs of businesses are still as relevant today as they were three months ago.

We have heard from numerous representative bodies about the challenges facing businesses in the time frames to prepare, and that it will not be possible to have systems in place for checks and other procedures. The British Government had the opportunity to request an extension, which, given the unprecedented circumstances created by the coronavirus pandemic, would have been the responsible thing to do, but instead they sailed through that deadline with little consideration of the impact on businesses here that are already reeling from the impact of COVID-19.

Over the course of the past few months, it seems that some realities have dawned on the British Government, with the acceptance that goods entering the North will require customs declarations, and, at the beginning of August, there seems to have been an acknowledgement that they were unable to deliver on their conflicting promises of no additional burdens, and that the unavoidable avalanche of red tape was going to be costly. Unfortunately, there is no clarity around the permanency of the arrangements or the funding of the Trader Support Service — currently, it is two years — and there are, of course, still questions around how the customs processes, and the verification of those, will work.

Ultimately, however, it is the lack of progress in negotiations on a number of key issues, such as the complexities of dual VAT systems, the certification requirements for agri-food and, critically, what “unfettered access” will mean and the definition of “at-risk” goods. These issues urgently need to be resolved, and, instead of committing to meaningful negotiation, the British Government indulge in brinkmanship, and mooted plans to abandon the withdrawal agreement and the implementation of the protocol. We await the publication of the legislation to see the extent to which their reckless words turn into reckless actions.

Let us also be clear that we are not the only ones who await that. Any country that is considering entering into trade negotiations with Britain will be watching, because it is about trust and whether you can count on those with whom you have made an agreement to deliver. Whether the British Government, the DUP or anyone else likes it, the protocol has been agreed to, it is part of an international treaty and it cannot be wished away. It is a necessary mechanism to protect the Good Friday Agreement, the all-island economy and North/South cooperation.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: Go ahead.

Mr Stalford: The Member mentions the importance of North/South trade and, of course, I acknowledge that the Republic of Ireland is our largest foreign trading partner. Does the Member also acknowledge that, for businesses in Northern Ireland, the biggest element of our trade goes east-west, to GB?

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for his intervention, and, of course, unfettered access is something that we all want to progress. However, if you talk to the 80% of microbusinesses and the 70% of small businesses for which the only export market is the South, you will find that they really want to see that protected. Business groups here have been clear. They want the protections of the protocol. What was agreed to by the British Government needs to be implemented. This is vital to protect our businesses and people's jobs and livelihoods.

That brings us back to today's motion and what we are calling on the Economy Minister to do. We need to hear how she and her Department are supporting businesses to prepare for post-Brexit trading arrangements under all scenarios, particularly in the midst of the ongoing and increasing economic crisis created by COVID-19. What training and educational opportunities are being put in place and what is the time frame on those? Will there be funds available to businesses to help them to enhance their capacity to respond to the challenges that they face? What is she doing to help them identify opportunities on an all-Ireland basis?

We are fast running out of time, and businesses and others are crying out for clarity and the ability to prepare. We need to ensure that they are supported in that as far as possible, so I urge Members to support the motion.

Mr Speaker: Matthew O'Toole will move the amendment. He will have 10 minutes to propose it and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called on to speak will have five minutes.

Mr O'Toole: I beg to move the following amendment:

At end insert:

“and, along with her Executive colleagues, to bring forward urgently details of legislation this Assembly will be required to pass before the end of the transition period, in order to give businesses certainty.”

I am conscious of two things. The first is our duty to represent the best interests of our constituents and those of the people of Northern Ireland as a whole. Secondly, I am aware of the traumatic pandemic that our society is still going through and the profound economic trauma that, we know, is likely to face us in the months ahead, as we debated last night. For these reasons, amongst many others, it is critical that we debate the economic consequences of the breathtakingly irresponsible conduct of the UK Government in refusing, as was reasonably requested by the Assembly in June, to extend the transition period.

It is worth, briefly, before I move on to the —.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member giving way. We discussed this at some length yesterday. The Member will be aware that the principle of dual consent is enshrined in

the Belfast Agreement, which, like the law of the Medes and the Persians, cannot be changed. Does the Member acknowledge that not a single unionist Member of the Assembly voted for the motion that he refers to?

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for his intervention. He will be aware that dual consent did not apply to that specific motion, and that if he or any other Member across the House had decided to invoke the principle of cross-community consent, they could have done so before the motion was debated, and they did not.

It is worth us pausing and reflecting on quite how far the Brexiteer vision has shifted since the EU referendum in 2016. I remember it well. I was working as a civil servant making the case for the UK to remain in the EU. Back then, numerous leading Brexit campaigners said that the UK would remain in the single market after leaving the EU. Absolutely nobody is talking about leaving the single market, said Daniel Hannan, the prominent former Tory MEP. Then, for years after the vote, it was claimed, including by some in this House, that leaving the single market and the customs union would be a doddle, with Boris Johnson going into last year's UK general election promising a fantastic deal: super Canada-plus-plus, as he called it.

Now, as we debate today, the latest round of negotiations are beginning in London between the UK and the EU. Boris Johnson is saying that no deal — meaning the UK crashing out of its current deep economic relationship with the EU and having the same trading relationships with its near neighbours as Mauritania — would still be a very good outcome. We are, Mr Speaker, through the looking glass of economic lunacy, and no one should ever forget where responsibility lies for the disruption of Brexit and the consequences being visited on Northern Ireland.

Our region has always been the front line of the impact of Brexit, not just economically, but societally. Our unique society and the political institutions that have underpinned it since 1998 were placed in jeopardy by the UK's decision to not just leave the European Union but to do so in the most harsh and complete way, removing the UK not just from the political ambit of the EU, but virtually all of the economic linkages, too.

Those who complain about the protections in the Ireland protocol — I understand and respect that there are many people who have issues with it, including in this House — should reflect on why those protections are necessary in the first place and be honest with themselves and others about what would happen if those protections were not in place.

It is essential that the protocol is implemented in full and, yes, implemented in a way that allows businesses maximum access to both the UK and EU markets. We have always maintained that there should be as few barriers to trade as possible across these islands, and indeed across the continent, but I will not listen in detail to complaints about the provisions of the Ireland protocol from some people who made it necessary in the first place.

Moving on to the specifics of the motion, it is essential that these institutions, both the Assembly and the Executive, do everything that they can to cushion the impact of Brexit on an economy that will still be reeling from the impact of COVID-19 and here I hope today that we can find some unanimity of purpose. It is clear, as I have said previously

while debating Brexit in this House, that there are people who take sincerely different views on Brexit and of course on the protocol, but there are many things that we can do together as an Assembly and an Executive to give clarity to the businesses and workers who are crying out for it.

As I said, it is essential that these institutions, both the Executive and the Assembly, do everything that they can to cushion the impact of Brexit, but this is just a private Member's motion, with respect to the Member who has just moved it, and my amendment is just an amendment to a private Member's motion. It is not legislation and it is not direct action from the Executive. Since the institutions restarted, I and my party have been shouting about the lack of detail from the Executive about Brexit preparation. I accept, and I have had much correspondence with the Minister about this, that this, in large part, is as a result of the lack of detail that has come from London, but it is not enough for us collectively to simply defer to London and say that it is for the UK Government or that we are waiting on HMRC or the Cabinet Office or, heaven forbid, Number 10, for more information.

Mr Stalford: You worked for them.

Mr O'Toole: I certainly did, but I do not work there any more, as the Member will recognise.

We had a very non-detailed Command Paper that came out in May. We have not had any further details since then, other than the announcement of a trusted traders scheme, but very little detail about how the border operating model will work. Our businesses and our society know the limitations of our devolved powers, and most of them are all too aware of the ideological obsessions driving the current UK Government, but they do expect our Executive to take a public stand in speaking up for them and the people they employ. This year, however, the silence has been deafening from the Economy Department, with respect, but also from the Executive Office, which has formal oversight of Brexit policy, and I have written to the joint First Ministers on this numerous times.

The Executive could not even speak with one voice to insist on an extension to the Brexit transition period, despite it being in the overwhelming and obvious interests of not just people in Northern Ireland but people across the UK. We now need to see the Executive, including the Economy Department, not only ramp up communications to businesses on preparations for the end of the transition but speak directly and bluntly to the UK Government about their handling of Brexit. Let me say this: speak to other parties too. Speak via the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) to the Irish Government. Speak to the European Commission in Brussels. Those are not illegitimate things for the Executive to do in order to get the best possible outcome for people and businesses here. If Wales and Scotland can do it, why can we not?

10.45 am

Our amendment focuses specifically on legislation, and, as I said, we endorse the meat of the motion. We know that the Chamber will have to pass a significant volume of legislation, primary and secondary, by the end of this year, but, as yet, we have had no formal update from the Executive Office. I have written to it multiple times asking that the Assembly be given information on the work that Members will be expected to undertake this

autumn. We have not had that yet, just as we have not had a clear economic recovery strategy from the Economy Department. Again, I appreciate that there have been —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: Yes, I am happy to give way.

Mr Allister: I have been listening with interest. The Member says that we need legislation to iron out some of the difficulties, but, yesterday, he was the very Member who brought to the House his outrage at the fact that the sovereign Government were prepared to bring in legislation that would ameliorate, for example, the exit declarations. If he is concerned about the difficulties that are being created, why is he so opposed to a Government ameliorating the exit declarations? Does he agree with exit declarations?

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for his intervention. My outrage yesterday was specifically in relation to the "sovereign Government", as he calls them, obviating, walking away from and repudiating an international treaty that they have signed. As someone who clearly very much believes in that sovereign Government and Northern Ireland's membership of their state, he should reflect on what it would mean for that sovereign Government and their international reputation and ability to sign further trade agreements if they were to walk away from a treaty.

As I said, we have not had an update on legislation, which we need, and we have not had a clear economic recovery strategy that factors in not only the effects of Brexit but the opportunities of EU market access that we will continue to have, unlike other parts of the UK.

Mr Speaker, just yesterday, you rightly pointed out that you had communicated to the Executive Office and, I think, to the Executive more broadly that they should not use accelerated passage to pass laws in this place except in extreme circumstances. Let us remember that if Ministers bring forward primary legislation in the coming weeks in relation to Brexit. It should not be rushed through the Chamber or rushed through by accelerated passage given the importance of scrutinising it carefully and of the consequences for the people whom we represent.

I commend the motion and our party's amendment, but, as I said, they are just private Members' motions with little practical or legal effect — in fact, they have no legal effect. We need urgent action from the Executive and, indeed, from the Economy Minister on preparing businesses and giving the public clarity on what is being done to manage the process, which, as I said, is being inflicted on us. We need an urgent update on what legislation the Assembly will be asked to pass before the end of this year. After all, Mr Speaker, why else are we here?

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I call Gary Middleton, and let me say that you have up to five minutes to speak.

Mr Middleton: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. Despite the sequencing of the debate, it is fair to say that we share its general aim, which is to seek greater clarity on the final arrangements that businesses in Northern Ireland will have to grapple with, once the implementation period ends. There is no doubt that there is a greater need for urgent clarity on the nature of new trading arrangements, but the priority should always be getting the right deal for Northern Ireland.

I listened on the radio this morning to people from businesses from the border areas. They were clear about their priorities, which are to ensure that there is no border down the Irish Sea and that the UK internal market is the priority, first and foremost. You can see why that is the case. Whilst it might be lost on some Members, it is important to note, as my colleague Mr Stalford said, that GB accounts for 52.7% of Northern Ireland's external sales. Northern Ireland food and drink sales to GB are valued at over £2.3 billion. Sixty-five per cent of Northern Ireland's purchases from GB were worth £13.3 billion. You can see why protecting the UK internal market should first and foremost be our priority.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: I will indeed.

Mr Stalford: I got there before you.

I appreciate that the Member has given way. In his remarks introducing the amendment, Mr O'Toole referred to ideological obsessions: I would never accuse Mr O'Toole of being an Eurofanatic ideological obsessive. I would never accuse him of that, but will the Member agree that it would be indeed the manifestation of ideological obsessiveness — indeed, it would be cutting off your nose to spite your face — to cut businesses from Northern Ireland off from their biggest market out of an act of fidelity to Brussels?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Middleton: I absolutely agree with that point, and I urge Members, whilst they may claim to be listening to businesses, to actually go out and speak to those businesses. They should speak to the lobby groups, absolutely, but, if you speak to directly to the businesses, as we have been doing, you will see that there is real concern about some of the proposals that are being made.

It is also important to note, with reference to the motion, that the responsibility to provide clarity ultimately rests not with the Department for the Economy but with the UK Government, who are negotiating on behalf of us all in the United Kingdom. Getting the right deal should be the priority, but, if we are to be honest, communication with businesses has been poor, and lessons must be learned, going forward. That said, many of the parties bemoaning the current risk to local businesses from a lack of clarity are the very people who jumped over backwards to promote the benefit of the protocol in the first place. Whilst some have belatedly realised the dangers of trade barriers between Northern Ireland and GB and vice versa, the DUP has been consistent in our opposition to that.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: Go ahead.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much. Of course, many of us will remember the events, I think, of 2 and 3 October 2019, when a certain political party — the DUP — and its leadership were embracing the idea of a regulatory border down the Irish Sea. Can you explain how you have had this change of heart and, indeed, how you have this change of heart apparently in your party at this moment in time?

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for giving me the opportunity to address that very point. The facts are that

the only proposal that we agreed to was a safeguard mechanism for Northern Ireland here in the Northern Ireland Assembly that would have given us the final say on whether Northern Ireland would have any regulatory difference from the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: I want to move on because I have just a few minutes left.

In our opinion, the motion wrongly focuses on education and training opportunities for local businesses as we prepare for the end of the implementation period. Whilst, yes, there is room for that, in reality, there is a plethora of other substantive concerns that need to be addressed holistically by the UK Government, if Northern Ireland's unique and characteristic economic interests are to be protected moving forward. They include the absence of a timetable for legislating for unfettered access between Northern Ireland and GB, as outlined in 'New Decade, New Approach'; the reluctance of some UK Ministers to incorporate safeguards and standards relating to food imports in the Agriculture Bill; the impact of closing existing routes to lower-skilled labour for key industries in Northern Ireland such as agri-food, manufacturing and hospitality; and, of course and importantly, the impact of alignment with EU rather than UK state aid on farm support levels and inward investment and competitiveness in Northern Ireland. Placing all the eggs in one basket and forcing the Economy Minister to simply focus on ploughing money into training for local businesses without knowing the eventual outcome of the talks would be very counterproductive. Instead of reverting to a blame game, we need to look at the challenges in a rounded fashion to protect local interests.

We note the speculation that the Government will pursue fallback measures under the internal market Bill to protect Northern Ireland's interests, should a deal not be agreed that mitigates the threat of the Northern Ireland protocol. We will carefully look at those in the finer details and the clauses relating to this, and we will study them carefully. Because we support the general aim of the motion, we will support it, and we will support the amendment.

Dr Aiken: The Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion and the amendment.

Members of the Assembly will be very aware of the discussions that have been ongoing, particularly about the Northern Ireland protocol and the much-vaunted press release that was out yesterday and the potential impact that that has on Northern Ireland businesses and consumers.

There is an expression that we need to be aware of, and it is the idea of a level playing field. There is much discussion across Europe about whether the United Kingdom will be working on a level playing field with the rest of the EU. It is fundamentally important for the people of Northern Ireland to know that they are on a level playing field with the rest of their country. As has been said many times, our largest trading partner is the rest of our nation. It is not just a matter of us sending goods to GB or GB sending goods to us: it is equally important that we make sure that, when we come to issues relating to state aid, Northern Ireland is not disadvantaged.

We will hear many times over forthcoming weeks, as we hit problems with COVID and the implications of trying to get business and manufacturing back together, about what we need to do for our aerospace sector, which will need state aid, what we need to do for our life sciences sector, which will need state aid, and what we will need to do for agribusiness and even things such as fintech. Those areas need to be sorted out. One of the things — I hope that Lord Frost and Michel Barnier are listening to some of the elements of this debate today — that we need to see is a level playing field across the United Kingdom to make sure that we are able to deal with the problems of COVID and with what happens after 1 January next year.

From looking at some of the other issues that we have, it is clear that we have not seen any information on the trader support system.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member giving way. Members are being very generous. I am up and down like a jack-in-the-box, but there is a point to be made here. Does the Member agree that there is an irony that parties that classify themselves as either social democratic or being on the left are to be found opposing the UK Government having the opportunity to make state interventions into businesses that need help as we come out of the COVID-19 crisis?

Dr Aiken: Indeed. If one looks at the history of the social democratic movement and the labour movement, one will see that there has always been an implication of providing state aid and making state aid available on the occasions when we wish to do that.

Ms Anderson: Will the Member give way?

Dr Aiken: Certainly.

Ms Anderson: It is important that we understand that state aid needs to be reformed in the EU; of that there is no doubt. Does the Member not agree that what will happen with what is being proposed on state aid by the British Government is that global corporations will go to a state such as Britain that will give them tax breaks, grants and public money? That is the problem with what is proposed here. There is no doubt that state aid needs to be reformed, but we cannot have a situation where global corporations go to the likes of Britain so that they can get tax reform, tax breaks, grants and public money. That is where the money will go, not to hospitals, not to doctors, not to nurses and not to schools.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member very much for that.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Member that he has an extra minute.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much.

I must admit that I find it ironic that a Member from the party opposite who talks about wanting an all-island approach points out the fact that one of the main reasons that the likes of Microsoft and Apple go to the Irish Republic is for the tax breaks and their ability to work out the tax system. It would be excellent if they ever paid 12% corporation tax, but most of them only pay about 0-12% corporation tax. That argument is probably not even moot, and I do not think that we should take it much further than that.

There are real issues. I talked about the trader support system. I talked about the issues with trying to find

about what is happening on VAT and the implications of that when we come through this. We have heard many times about the likely implications of this for the Belfast Agreement. The Belfast Agreement is about the principle of consent. I have read the Belfast Agreement more times than many people have, and I cannot see anywhere in it anything about a border down the middle of the Irish Sea. I cannot see anything that says, "We're going to be in a position where the EU or, indeed, a special committee to a Joint Committee sets the laws that we have in Northern Ireland". Indeed, yesterday, the Minister produced a document that has been out for consultation on the energy market and electricity in Northern Ireland. It says that, even though there will be reforms to the United Kingdom's energy market, they will not apply to Northern Ireland and we should not even consider that because we will follow the rules from the EU without any say. I cannot see any Members of the Assembly willingly going for that and for that process of non-democratic accountability. We need to be able to address that.

11.00 am

In winding up, I want to say, "Minister, we need a plan; we knew that this was coming". The Executive need to gather together to do that. One of the few things that all of us who sat through the tortuous New Decade, New Approach discussions could agree on was that we needed a plan for Brexit and what we were going to do after it. We are well beyond that time. Somebody needs to take leadership. Just as our Health Minister has been the only person willing to take leadership for health, you, Economy Minister, now have the opportunity to take some leadership on this process. We ask you, urgently, to take some leadership on the issue.

Mr Dickson: I support the motion and the amendment and welcome the opportunity to speak on this important matter for Northern Ireland. In 2016, it was notable just how little Northern Ireland was mentioned in the EU referendum campaign. In 2017, Liam Fox, the then International Trade Secretary, said:

"The free trade agreement ... with the European Union should be one of the easiest in human history."

However, unsurprisingly to most of us here, the Brexit process became stranded on the rocks of reality, on the border issue, and a necessitated agreement. The protocol is an imperfect response to Brexit; it is a bare-bones means to protect the institutions that maintain our economic, political and social lives. It therefore has merit. Businesses sighed a small sigh of relief after a series of tempestuous negotiations in 2019.

Unfortunately, here we are, less than three months until the end of the transition period. I really am quite exasperated and concerned that we have nothing but confusion and uncertainty at the very centre of our economic future. Indeed, a Minister who is clearly interested only in following what London is doing is not particularly keen on taking any local initiatives herself.

I am truly concerned that the UK Government seem, once again, to want to use Northern Ireland as a bargaining chip, as an excuse to destroy any hopes of a post-Brexit trade deal with the EU.

I recognise that much of this has been press speculation in the last few days. Unfortunately, we have a Government that do not inspire confidence. I, and many others, do not wish to gamble our future or the future of our economy. I am sure that there are many workers and businesses across Northern Ireland that would agree.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: Yes.

Mr O'Toole: The Member may be interested to know that, in the last half an hour, it has been revealed that the head lawyer of the Government Legal Department has resigned, apparently in frustration at the UK Government's approach to the implementation of the laws around Brexit. Presumably, that will add to the Member's concerns about the UK Government's approach.

Mr Dickson: Once more, that leads to the door of Number 10 and the Cummings faction in that building.

The working group — a working group, Minister, that does not have all voices in Northern Ireland in it, which I find disappointing, particularly the failure to have a trade union voice — mirrors what the business community has been saying. It recognises that we have been left in the lurch. We are unsure what to do, knowing that this issue is complex and technical and is yet another burden on business.

The past few months have been turbulent and difficult for local businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises. They have faced the additional challenge of COVID-19 restrictions, safety measures, supply issues and staffing. That requires additional necessary costs and bureaucracy. What is not necessary is another huge disruption, another fog hanging over the future post-Brexit arrangements for business.

Businesses want to prepare; they want to put themselves on the best footing for the future. However, without training opportunities and a clear direction for the future, how are they supposed to commit confidently to investment and to take on new employees? It is time for the Minister to give us some concrete answers.

Today, in discussing post-Brexit preparedness, we need to start clearing that fog, which is where the proposed amendment really adds to the motion. With an estimate of 100,000 people being out of work in Northern Ireland by the end of this year, the Minister's number-one priority must be to defend jobs and livelihoods. A considerable amount of legislation needs to be passed. While the clock is ticking down to January, the Department for the Economy is the lead Department on this matter. We need a cross-Executive approach, a joint approach to give business clarity, to make Northern Ireland's voice heard in London and to protect our local economy from the adverse impacts of Brexit.

We are now told that no deal is a good outcome. I just wonder, what would a bad outcome would look like? The reality is that there no such thing as a good Brexit. The protocol is not perfect, but its function is as a basic framework to protect Northern Ireland from some of the worst effects of Brexit.

Mr Dunne: This is, indeed, a very challenging time for our local economy. There is no doubt that the fresh challenges that COVID-19 has brought have added to the need

for clarity and certainty for our local businesses going forward. The global pandemic that we are still contending with will change how local businesses operate in the future.

Negating the threat of the NI protocol must be a central element of the economic recovery as we seek to rebuild, regenerate and build confidence within our local economy. We do share the general aims of this debate today, in that we all agree on the need to seek clarity on the final arrangements that our local businesses will have to manage once the implementation period ends. The focus should be on getting the right deal. Whilst uncertainty is difficult for everyone, the barriers created by the protocol could be even more damaging long-term, and they have the potential to cripple and restrict many businesses. That is why the Government must urgently address the uncertainty around our future trading relationships.

In Northern Ireland, we are fortunate to have so many entrepreneurs and small to medium-sized enterprises. The fact is that Great Britain is our largest and principal market: it accounts for over 52% of Northern Ireland's external sales and 65% of our purchases. Over 90% of local businesses trading with Great Britain are SMEs, and our food and drink sales to GB alone are valued at over £2.3 billion.

All of that highlights the need for free and unfettered access to Great Britain. That is why the DUP voted against the withdrawal agreement in Parliament. That is why the DUP has consistently opposed — at every opportunity, whether that be in London, Brussels or Belfast — any concept that our economic place within our United Kingdom should be compromised by the protocol.

The recent speculation that the Government are looking at ways, under the internal market Bill, to protect our interests and mitigate the threat of the protocol are to be broadly welcomed. It is ironic that those who are so opposed to potential trade barriers and borders are the first to criticise any attempts to reduce the burden on our businesses by exploring ways to break down potential barriers. Our focus remains on minimising friction for trade in every way possible. Anything else will be harmful to business, cost consumers and reduce choice. We must continue to work with Her Majesty's Government to remove any disadvantages to Northern Ireland brought about by the signing of the protocol.

Our local economy and businesses have faced an incredibly difficult and challenging six months. We must protect local interests. There will be challenges ahead for businesses adapting to the transitional period and the post-Brexit arrangements. I do welcome the range of online tutorials, Brexit preparation grants and information workshops being delivered through Invest NI and, indeed, InterTradeIreland's valuable programmes. It is important that work continues between the Economy Department, business organisations, local councils and our Government. I know the Minister will make that a real priority within her Department and ensure there are interventions to help prepare businesses for the new arrangements.

Mr McAleer: Today's motion is very timely. I want to reflect on the motion in the context of the agriculture sector in the North. We know from many previous discussions and debates here that Brexit has caused huge issues

for our 25,000 front-line farm families and the wider food and drinks trade, which accounted for £4.5 million in turnover in the North last year. The sector here is already under pressure with the COVID crisis and many other challenges, one of which is climate.

Agriculture is a big exporter. We export 87% of the North's agri-food produce and, yes, Britain is one of the areas that we export to most. It also goes to the South and Europe. We need unfettered access east-west, North/South and across the EU.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr McAleer: Yes, absolutely.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much indeed. I think that the Member would also like to acknowledge the fact that one of the biggest agricultural markets for agricultural goods from the Irish Republic is the United Kingdom market. Anything that is put in that creates an Irish Sea border will, in fact, impinge on them significantly and really affect small and medium-sized farms throughout the island of Ireland.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McAleer: The Member is right. Any barriers or friction at all will affect not just the North of Ireland but the island of Ireland, because Britain is a big market for produce right across the island of Ireland.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr McAleer: Yes.

Mr Allister: If the Member is concerned about the fettering of trade, why is he a supporter of the vehicle for fettering that trade, namely the protocol? It is the protocol that fetters the trade each way, yet he and his party are the biggest cheerleaders for that protocol.

Mr McAleer: Our party is one of the most vocal opponents of Brexit; we are completely against it. This is not something that we want. The protocol is a way of grappling with a very bad situation. We, like all the parties here, are trying to do our best to make it as seamless and frictionless as possible for businesses, farmers and communities across the North.

As I said, Brexit has a disproportionate impact here, certainly on our agri-food producers. Our disposable income in the North is lower than that in Britain. We heard from the Brexit group last week that disposable income here in the North is £119 and that, in Britain, it is £215. Any friction that is caused and any extra cost that is passed on will have a disproportionate impact on consumers here compared to those across the water.

We also learned in the Committee a number of months back that 200 lorries a day come across the water to stock our shelves and that shelf life here is 12 to 18 hours shorter than it is across the water. What we are looking at is posing a huge challenge to the entire food ecosystem here in the North.

There are many unanswered questions. Indeed, a figure was put on that when the AERA Committee met the Brexit group last week. The Brexit group posed 67 questions and, so far, 60 have not been answered. The questions are on things like what constitutes a qualifying good, what is unfettered access, two VAT regimes, tariffs, sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks and, of course, labelling. We

will have to create a new label for our produce here in the North. It takes four to five months to create a new label and that deadline has already lapsed.

As I said, yes, of course Britain is a big market, but we must realise that the British market will shift as well. As Britain cuts itself off from its nearest market, the EU, as a result of Brexit, it will be cut off from its biggest market. That will have an impact on Britain as an export market for us. If Britain then enters into trade deals with the USA and imports cheap food, suddenly the floor could drop out of the British market for our agri-food produce. We must realise that Britain will not be the same market post-Brexit that it has been up until now.

The latest shenanigans from London are causing more concern. I know that some people like to emphasise that the British market is so important, but our all-Ireland trade is hugely important in the agri-food sector. North/South and South/North, there is almost £2 billion of exports in live animals and food, which is really important. Dairy is organised on a —

Dr Archibald: Will the Member give way?

Mr McAleer: Yes.

Dr Archibald: The quantum of trade with Britain is often cited, particularly by the party opposite, but does he agree with me that the highly integrated nature of our supply chains in those products, particularly agri-food, needs to be considered?

11.15 am

Mr McAleer: Exactly. Dairy is a good example. Most of the milk produced in the North is collected by dairy producers based in the South.

I am out of time, but, before I conclude, I will say that, yes, there is huge amount of bandwidth being taken up by legislation. In the AERA Committee alone, we have 74 pieces of secondary legislation to scrutinise and pass before December, thanks to Brexit. That is going to put huge pressure on officials in the Department, and indeed on our own Committee, which will have to try to scrutinise and pass that legislation so that DAERA has a functioning rule book come 31 December, thanks to Brexit.

In conclusion, I commend the motion and support the call for more education and training for our businesses in farming communities.

Mr Stalford: The Chair of the Economy Committee, in her intervention to Mr McAleer, referred to our highly integrated supply chains. That is precisely why the protocol was a bad idea: because it interrupts our highly integrated supply chains east-west.

It is important that we put a bit of political context on the record. The DUP voted against the withdrawal agreement in Parliament. At that time, we set out our clear opposition to any concept of Northern Ireland's economic place in the UK internal market being compromised. The protocol compromises it. We therefore oppose the protocol. The DUP, on three occasions —.

Dr Aiken: Will the honourable Member take an intervention?

Mr Stalford: Yes. I am happy to.

Dr Aiken: There seems to be a degree of confusion, because, given the remarks that the First Minister made on Sky News, I think on Friday, she seemed to be of the opinion that we should be following what the protocol says. Can the honourable Member clarify, please?

Mr Stalford: I am happy to.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Stalford: Thank you.

I am happy to. The First Minister acknowledged what the present legal reality is. Acknowledging reality does not mean endorsing the same or approving the same, unless, of course, you happened to be reading the commentary and the political editorial of the 'News Letter', but that is an issue for another day.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: I will give way later to Mr Allister. I am always happy to.

The DUP, on three occasions, helped to stop Theresa May's version of the withdrawal agreement. We spoke against it and we argued against it, and we voted against the current Prime Minister's Brexit proposals. We are still arguing that, in the negotiations, the withdrawal agreement should be scrapped or else changed to take account of the need to protect Northern Ireland's place in the internal market of the United Kingdom. Others were very upset by the speculation that was in the 'Financial Times' yesterday. What I would say is this: one swallow does not a summer make. Although I hope that the Government will move to protect our position through the legislation that is due to be published tomorrow, I will judge the Government in London on the action and the content of that legislation rather than on briefings to the newspapers.

On 20 May, the Government published a policy paper on their approach to the Northern Ireland protocol. It included four principles: one, unfettered access for Northern Ireland's business to the rest of the UK, and particularly that trade should take place as it does at present; two, no tariffs on internal UK trade; three, no new customs infrastructure in Northern Ireland; and, four, Northern Ireland should benefit from UK trade deals and not be excluded from them. We as a party believe that those objectives must be the immovable, foundational position and are extremely concerned about the absence of regular updates to Northern Ireland and to businesses to date.

I give way to Mr James Allister QC.

Mr Allister: Thank you, Mr Stalford. Very formal.

The Member has been telling us that his party is all on the one page on this matter. I refer back to the point that Mr Aiken raised. Last Friday, the First Minister said:

"I mean, there are some who would continue to fight against the protocol. I have to recognise that that is the reality now."

Then, last night, the Member's party, whether as a rebuke or otherwise, said that it continues to maintain that the protocol must be scrapped. Are those some people who will continue to fight it, and which side is he on?

Mr Stalford: I think that I have made it clear where I stand on Brexit throughout the Brexit process. Normally in these

debates, I stand shoulder to shoulder with him. It is a pity that he cannot stand should to shoulder with me.

The First Minister was very clear in what she said. She acknowledged the reality of the situation — as in the law that has been passed — whilst disagreeing with it. We all disagree with it, or certainly we all, on these Benches, disagree with the content of the protocol. The party opposite had, for years, the opportunity to participate in the shaping of any Brexit outcomes but its members chose not to. They refuse to take their seats at Westminster, where these matters are debated and discussed on an almost weekly basis.

Ms Anderson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: OK, go on.

Ms Anderson: I say to the Member that he should reflect on the fact that Sinn Féin secured 641 MEPs in the European Parliament to protect the Good Friday Agreement in all of its parts: no hardening of the border in Ireland and the peace process. We were at the side of the table that mattered.

Mr Stalford: I recall Sinn Féin referring to this — while the lady was a member of the European Parliament — as a "charm offensive". I do not know which it was in her case, whether it was the charm or the offensive. However, the fact of the matter is that although Sinn Féin could have gone to Westminster to take their seats and to participate in the shaping of a Brexit outcome, they did not. Not only that, but they criminally kept these institutions down for three years when we could have been having an input into the Brexit process. Therefore, we will not take lectures on shaping the best possible outcomes. I take this opportunity to express my full confidence in the Economy Minister: she is doing a good job and I am sure that she will continue to.

Ms Kimmins: I will speak in support of the motion and the amendment. There has been a lot of focus, particularly around the trading arrangements, and I want to home in a bit more at a sectoral level with regard to financial services and the lack of attention that that sector has been given in the protocol and subsequent discussions.

It is very important to emphasise the very challenging situation that the financial sector finds itself in, particularly, as my colleague mentioned, 16 weeks out from a deadline. The protocol makes no reference to financial services, despite a recent report from the Department for the Economy that outlined the huge importance of the sector to the economy in the North, employing 24,000 people and making a contribution of £2.4 billion to the economy in the last year. The financial services sector is experiencing huge uncertainty around passporting firms in the North. If this continues, we could see these firms gravitate towards the South as they are likely to no longer view the North as a viable option to do business because of red tape. The loss of passporting, with no clear replacement system, will have a serious impact. We are already seeing businesses put in place contingency steps to trade on both sides of the border in the absence of any clarification on their future.

As a representative of Newry and Armagh, I see that Newry has been seen in recent years as developing into a specialist area for financial services, with indigenous firms, including First Derivatives, which is a massive employer, not only in the constituency but across the North, providing in the region of 2,000 jobs to the local economy. The

lack of clarity being afforded to those firms is causing significant concern.

On the topic of cross-border operations —

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much for giving way and thank you very much for highlighting the importance of local companies in Northern Ireland.

There is a significant issue about digital taxation and digital taxation legislation that is being brought in by the EU. Do you and your party support the digital taxation legislation that is coming from the EU or would you rather that we have a more bespoke, equal and level playing field approach across the rest of the United Kingdom on the issue, bearing in mind the importance to jobs?

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Member for his contribution. In the absence of any clarity going forward, it is difficult to take a position on that at this stage. However, it is something that we need to be looking at very seriously, regardless of the outcome.

Going back to my point about cross-border operations, I come from a border constituency where cross-border working is a huge part of the economy. It is also very important to highlight how cross-border workers have been left behind and forgotten about throughout this. That impacts not only on the lives of individuals who do not know whether they will have a job post-31 January but on employers in the area, particularly local employers, as I said previously. EU citizens are being penalised, and, when we should be encouraging people from other countries to contribute their skills to our economy, we are treating them particularly badly. Similarly, there has been a lack of clarity around the mutual recognition of qualifications. We talk about nurses and doctors all standing on the same qualifications across the EU. Where does that stand? There has been no mention of that.

Going back to the original motion, it is very important that the Economy Minister looks at this, reaches out to all those sectors and provides detail, clarity, training and education to help them move forward in the short period ahead.

Mr Durkan: Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, warnings about the damage that the UK Government's plans, or rather lack thereof, would cause for Northern Ireland beyond the 31 December came loudly and frequently from Members of these Benches and from the business community. Those warnings were met by Cabinet Ministers contradicting one another on what paperwork would be required to send goods to Britain, and, when asked how they might square that circle, they gave vague assurances about the regime that would be implemented. Now we learn that they could well be renegeing on what they agreed.

The impact of the pandemic has made the scale of the task even greater, as our SMEs face the double whammy of that economic hit and the end of the transition period. We are now just over three months away from that ending. Time is of the essence. The struggle to prepare would have been difficult enough without the crisis that many of our businesses are facing today; they are simply trying to survive. The working group's comprehensive document lays bare the unanswered questions, and Mr McAleer highlighted a few. That is why I have joined my colleagues in signing the amendment calling for the Executive to set out details of the legislation that they need to introduce

and that the Assembly needs to pass to ensure that businesses, employees and consumers can go into 2021 with at least the burden of uncertainty lifted on that front. As legislators, we need a time frame for and an outline of the passage of that legislation.

The Minister should also provide multiple information and training opportunities across Northern Ireland at no cost to businesses. I also ask the Minister, in her response, to set out what plans she has for ongoing support once the transition period ends. A few lines on nirect just will not cut the mustard, nor will bombarding businesses with copious amounts of guidance that they have to wade through. Businesses need easy access to detailed, practical and, importantly, tailored advice to help them navigate the post-Brexit trade landscape, and they need to know what financial support will be there to enable them to do so.

Stepping back, all of this, of course, takes place against the backdrop of our local economy. We sometimes hear about the pandemic and Brexit offering an opportunity to rethink the economy and the world of work, but, in fact, they demand it. Over the summer, we published the SDLP's four principles for a long-term economic recovery, and they take into account the distinctiveness of our economy in terms of its sectoral, geographical and governance profile. I fully believe that those are principles that every party in the Assembly could and should support. We need greater powers for the Assembly and Executive so that we can disperse economic activity more equally and sustainably across the North.

We are all well aware of the problems embedded in our economy. We tend to — I certainly do — speak about the east-west divide in Northern Ireland, which is particularly pronounced in my constituency of Foyle. There is, or seems to be, a divide between Belfast and the rest of the North. The concentration of economic activity in Belfast has always been a problem, but it comes under even more strain when faced with the greater demand for flexible working. The old model of expecting workers, young and old, to flood into one city for the bulk of job opportunities already looks antiquated. We need to address regional imbalance urgently, and the most impactful way of doing so would be by expanding university provision in the north-west.

The economic benefits of doing so would filter out well beyond the education sector and, undoubtedly, well beyond the wonderful city of Derry.

11.30 am

The deadline to prepare for the end of the transition period is rapidly closing in, yet the support for businesses to adapt cannot end on 31 December, and nor can it take place without a strategy for wider economic recovery.

Mr Speaker: I remind Mr Muir that he will have three minutes.

Mr Muir: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

The end of the transition period represents the most significant change to trade in Northern Ireland for a generation. With less than four months to go, Northern Ireland businesses remain largely in the dark with regard to what technical and operational details will apply from this date. Instead, all they are getting is political games from the Government at Westminster. The timing could

not be worse. Thousands of local small and medium-sized businesses have been hit hard by the pandemic and do not have the reserves to be able to cover the costs that arise from Brexit. The high-stakes game that the UK Government are currently playing in the Brexit negotiations is not one that Northern Irish businesses can afford to play. We need clarity, consensus and support for businesses, recognising however that the full and worst effects of Brexit can never be fully mitigated. Therefore, my party supports both the motion and the amendment.

Education and training opportunities to enhance the capacity of local businesses to prepare for post-transition trading arrangements would be useful, but getting clarity on what those arrangements actually are must be the first priority, not just to let businesses prepare but also because the legislative time frame between now and December is very short. This Assembly needs as much detail as possible with regard to the legislation to be scrutinised during that period, using accelerated passage as the exception rather than the norm.

There are many areas where technical and operational details are required, but the UK Government's latest strategy, as reported in the 'Daily Telegraph', of saying that the withdrawal agreement never really made sense anyway and threatening to unilaterally walk away from the agreement is not the way to get the clarity required. The UK Government signed up to this less than 12 months ago, and talk in recent days does not exactly help build faith and trust in the current negotiations. So much for that great oven-ready deal that was sold last year. Only detailed technical and operational guidelines, negotiated and agreed with the EU, will provide the small and medium-sized businesses with the information that they need to make plans now.

There has been a lot of discussion here today around the issue of consent. I would add that the Alliance Party, alongside many other parties, campaigned to remain in the European Union, and the ultimate demonstration of consent was in the vote that took place, where the majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the European Union. We are now dealing with the consequences of Brexit, and it is important that we do all we can to assist businesses so that they get the clarity and support that they deserve.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Economy Minister that she will have 15 minutes.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): First of all, I want to thank Members for their participation in this very important debate. There is much in the motion that we can agree on. We can all agree that the local economy has both unique and complex characteristics. We are the only part of the United Kingdom with a land border with another jurisdiction, and we all recognise the complex nature of our supply chains across that border. I hope that we can also all agree that the UK's internal market, the proper functioning of that market and our full participation in it are absolutely vital to our economic well-being. They sustain jobs and family income in Northern Ireland and, as the Member for East Antrim said, are my top priority. Indeed, the benefits of belonging to the United Kingdom have been starkly demonstrated during the COVID-19 crisis, when the support for the local economy from the national Government has been unprecedented. Nevertheless, it is a challenging time for business.

I will take this opportunity to commend the business community, which has shown such resilience over the last number of months. I have been working closely with business organisations since taking up office on the COVID response and through my Department's EU exit stakeholder forum. I have consistently said that my top priority is to seek to ensure that Northern Ireland firms have unfettered access to our own internal market in the United Kingdom and that we do not have any competitive disadvantage within that market.

In recent weeks, our Government have published a White Paper on their vision for the United Kingdom's internal market and have included unfettered access and a trader support service in that vision.

Miss Woods: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: I would like to make some progress and, then, I will give way.

I continue to engage with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) on the matter and, in common with the motion, seek to ensure that it is aware of the need for great urgency and clarity on the issues. I also note the Sinn Féin agriculture spokesperson's statement that he, too, wants unfettered trade. I am, therefore, at a loss to know why he and his party persist in supporting a withdrawal agreement and a protocol that would endanger that trade.

I also want to reassure the Member for South Belfast — who, unfortunately, clearly did not want to hear the response to his own debate or his amendment, since he has left the Chamber — that I am direct and blunt with the Ministers in London and in my frequent quad calls with other devolved Administrations across the United Kingdom. For his information — perhaps he will read Hansard if he is not here to hear the debate.

Mr Catney: Will the Minister give way? I am sorry, but I just want to ask you about one point that you made.

Mrs Dodds: No; in a moment. I also suggest that he should read the short and medium-term plan for economic recovery that was published by my Department in June, setting out our plans for the Northern Ireland economy. I have been consistent since then in my work in the Executive and in the bids that I have made to the Finance Minister in relation to that published paper.

I share the concerns of business and, through my stakeholder engagement forum and regular meetings with all aspects of our economy, I frequently discuss those issues with business. There is no doubt that absolute clarity on how businesses will be trading on 1 January is necessary. The sooner we have that clarity and the sooner businesses can understand the steps that they need to take, the sooner the Executive can see where government need to step in to add support for businesses to adapt.

It is also right that internal UK trade should not be subject to any unnecessary administrative or financial burdens. That is the demand of business and its representative organisations and I support trusted trader schemes and the binning of exit summary declarations on Northern Ireland to GB trade. Of course, there is a negotiation and there is an onus on Michel Barnier on behalf of the EU to, as he would say, be flexible and imaginative. I am almost nostalgic for those meetings in Brussels.

So far, if the information that is coming from the negotiations is correct, there has been a maximalist approach on everything in relation to the protocol, including exit summary declarations and goods at risk. The EU should recognise that that is risking the incomes of families right across Northern Ireland. However, I also note the recent press speculation that the Government will pursue fallback measures under the internal market Bill to protect Northern Ireland's interests should a deal not be agreed that mitigates the threat of the Northern Ireland protocol. I did not vote for the withdrawal agreement and the Northern Ireland protocol. I have been consistent and clear, in my former role as an MEP and in this House, in saying that the protocol is damaging to trade within the United Kingdom. The responsibility for the protocol lies firmly with the Government and those who voted for and continue to advocate for its implementation.

Although I want to see the detail of the proposed clauses, I welcome this approach. The Government must continue to remove any disadvantages to Northern Ireland brought by their signing up to the protocol. Indeed, I will raise those issues directly with the Business Secretary, Alok Sharma, later today. It is about ensuring that the UK Government move to protect not only Northern Ireland's place within the Union but, in so doing, our trade with our largest market. They need to put those trading arrangements on a sustainable footing and cover the full spectrum of our economic interests. Again, for the benefit of the Member for East Antrim, this is not following London; this is challenging London and making sure that it understands the needs of business and families in Northern Ireland.

As the Minister responsible for issues in relation to international trade, I will write to Executive colleagues this week to make them aware that, at this stage, I will not be seeking to bring forward a motion to seek legislative consent in the Northern Ireland Assembly for the Trade Bill, which is currently making its passage through Parliament. It is absolutely essential that Northern Ireland is able to be a full participant in future UK trade deals. So far, the Minister for International Trade has been unable to provide the necessary legislative assurance that that will be the case, and there are still too many uncertainties around the implications for internal UK trade. Although there are important provisions in the Bill for the trade remedies authority and the rollover of existing EU deals, there remains uncertainty in those important areas. Of course, I will continue to engage with the Department for International Trade and the trade forum set up between all constituent parts of the United Kingdom on these vital issues.

Mr O'Toole: I am really grateful to the Minister for giving way. I apologise; I just came back into the Chamber, but I was listening to her remarks. Has she made representations, and, if not, will she, either through London or directly to Brussels, about the possibility of Northern Ireland benefiting from continued access to EU trade deals in the spirit of, as she and her colleagues have talked about, having the best of both worlds in relation to access to EU and UK markets? Is that something that she will take forward?

Mrs Dodds: The Member has advocated that subject for some particular time, but that will be a matter for negotiation. For my part, Northern Ireland's place is within the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland needs to be able to benefit fully from UK trade deals and not just be a named

participant in them. That is vitally important for Northern Ireland businesses, families, jobs and prosperity. However, the greatest help to business will be when the Government provide clarity.

There are an important range of interventions in the meantime, including services to local businesses that are being provided at local council level and by many of the business organisations themselves. Invest NI offers a range of support services to companies, including a Brexit preparation grant, information workshops, an online assessment tool and online tutorials that provide access to specialist advisers in customs, tariff, taxation, strategic sourcing, people movement and immigration.

Mr Catney: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: If you just let me finish this point, I absolutely will.

I welcome the various online webinars scheduled for September and October on key aspects of the post-transition environment, including the EU settlement scheme and preparing for the post-immigration system, VAT implications and data-transfer issues. We should not underestimate the scale of that work, nor the issues still to be resolved, to enable businesses to understand their areas of biggest exposure and what to do next.

11.45 am

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister for giving way. As, I am sure, you realise, my colleague and friend, as he stated, was sitting outside in the Lobby. We are moving in and out of the Chamber, as we are allowed only four Members in at a time because of the COVID restrictions. There is no doubt that he would have been glad, like the rest of us, to sit here and listen to all that you have had to say. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Minister, when you were a Member of the European Parliament, you had your office in Lisburn, in my constituency, and not far from where your office was there is one of the biggest employers in Lagan Valley: Coca Cola. Coca Cola makes its syrup in Ballina in County Mayo, in the west of Ireland. It brings it up to the North of Ireland for packaging and distribution round the whole of Ireland. Also, whiskey is a growing industry here now, and all the malt whiskey is made in County Antrim. Can you tell me how those businesses, not to mention many more examples, will operate and how they will find crossing the border numerous times? To me, it is impossible.

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his intervention. I understand, of course, the COVID regulations, but I am also insistent that those who challenge the Minister should be here to actually listen to the Minister's response on those issues.

I had a wonderful experience in my office in Lisburn. I visited Coca Cola many times during that period. Of course, the protocol facilitates cross-border trade. I acknowledged, at the start, the complex supply and manufacturing chains in the Northern Ireland economy.

If I may continue on the initiatives to help business, I am also supportive of InterTradeIreland helping businesses to continue to trade across the border and to encourage businesses to take their first steps into export trade across that border. InterTradeIreland's Brexit advisory service provides financial support and professional

support on customs, supply chains and rules of origin, with online learning supplemented by specialist webinars targeted at the cross-border market. InterTradelreland is also exploring the development of a cross-border trade information centre and a new supply-chain programme. Both initiatives will help firms across the island to benefit from the growth that cross-border trade brings.

As we have seen during the debate and from my earlier comments, full clarity on the trading arrangements for 1 January is not here. However, businesses can take action to understand how the issues play and how they could impact on their trading model. I encourage them to go to the Invest NI and InterTradelreland web pages, utilise the online Brexit tool, enrol for the webinars and, if appropriate, apply for the support vouchers.

We have, today, talked about important interventions for businesses, but I believe that success for business will also depend on a holistic approach to a wide-ranging set of issues that the economy faces in Northern Ireland. We need to see the timetable for legislating for unfettered access to trade between Northern Ireland and GB. I hope that the internal market Bill will provide that. I hope —

Miss Woods: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: I will, and I apologise: I forgot.

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is almost up.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does she agree that, given the UK Government's aims, it is simply impossible to satisfy both the internal market Bill proposals and the NI protocol, unless the UK remains aligned with the EU internal market regulations for goods?

Mr Speaker: The Minister's time is almost up. It actually is up.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for your indulgence, Mr Speaker. I apologise: I had forgotten about the intervention.

I acknowledge that there are difficulties. What we need and what I am absolutely insistent on is that the Government give us the clarity that, they say, they will give us around unfettered access for Northern Ireland goods in the UK market.

Mr Speaker: Minister, time is up. Sorry about that.

I remind Members that the courtesy of a Member in taking an intervention should not be abused by people to make lengthy interventions, which have caused a difficulty.

Mr McGrath: The remarks that we have heard today about the east and the west being better or the north and the south indicates one thing for business: Brexit is bad for business. Remain was the only way for us to be truly supportive of businesses and enable them to carry out all of the trade that they were doing.

I thank Members for their contribution today to the debate. Brexit has been a slow-moving car crash with Northern Ireland's economy and society at greatest risk. People across my constituency, South Down, voted strongly to remain and have backed pro-Remain parties at each election since. They are deeply concerned about the impact of leaving the EU on their businesses, their community and society. Despite the efforts of the SDLP, others in the Chamber and at the Executive table, the British Government dogmatically refused to extend the

transition period and are forcing the North to crash out of the EU in just a few short months. People across the House and our community had some hope that, when the Assembly returned, they would finally get some clarity, but, unfortunately, they have been badly let down. People demanded clarity and have been met with denial, obfuscation and outright silence, and it is not good enough. People deserve better.

Our amendment seeks clarity around reality; it is about real timescales. Timescales that businesses need to know and consider to deliver. Businesses need certainty. My colleague, Matthew O'Toole, in moving the amendment highlighted how the British Government had made many promises about Brexit, many of which businesses had accepted, interpreted and were preparing for, but, in the last 48 hours, they may be railroaded. A British Government who cannot be trusted means that our Executive must step up to the mark. I speak after the Minister, but I would like her to detail for us in other ways how long the Brexit discussions were at the last Executive meeting. It is four months before the cliff-edge deadline, and I wonder if it lasted more than 10 minutes. Matthew highlighted the irony that the extension to the transition period would have helped prepare, especially, for trade north-south but also east-west. It was in everyone's interest, but many in the Chamber voted against that extension. They voted against helping businesses. That means that, right now, we must do all that we can to help.

Mr Aiken discussed many of the very uncertainties about the process with reference, for example, to state aid. He again highlighted the confusion and the uncertainty that we have to face. We do not even have a timetable for the legislation that we need to pass.

Mr Dickson highlighted the confusion over the press speculation about the potential railroading of the protocol and the heavy frustration felt by senior members of the legal team for the British Government if they have resigned: again, confusion, uncertainty and no detail and an agenda from our Executive that may not have even lasted 10 minutes. We need detail, we need timing, and we need to know what the processes will be.

Given the chaos that we have seen this week alone, the continued silence and passivity of the joint leaders of our devolved Government is nothing less than inexcusable. Since January, they have largely remained silent on vital pressing issues from the delivery of the protocol to the protection of citizens' rights and the undermining of the principles of devolution. I appeal to the joint First Ministers not to let Boris Johnson and his cronies recklessly force us out of the EU on 31 December and leave our businesses and communities in chaos. This place is back after three long years of silence. However, there is no point in being back at work if we are not using the Assembly to speak up for people across our society.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr McGrath: I made the mistake the last time. I will get to the end of my remarks.

The joint First Ministers must use the Assembly to explain what actions they are taking to minimise the harm to our economy and our society. In Wales and, particularly, in Scotland, the devolved legislatures have robustly stood against Boris Johnson and his reckless agenda. We must do the same, or do the First Ministers really think that we

should blindly follow the Tories in one act of bad faith after another?

Mr Speaker: I call Martina Anderson to make a winding-up speech on the motion. You have 10 minutes.

Ms Anderson: I recognise the fact that all the parties here support the motion and the amendment. People should bear it in mind that you do not get an extra minute if you let people in, and, like the Minister, I want to get through my speech and all your contributions.

I acknowledge the work that has been done by Sinn Féin's Dr Caoimhe Archibald as Chair of the Economy Committee throughout the entire process. As she clearly stated in the debate, with the scale of Brexit difficulties facing SMEs — she has been saying this for such a long time — there needs to be training and support, with the added confusion caused by the provocative and shameful attempt, as she said, by the British Government once again to play fast and loose with the Good Friday Agreement, the all-Ireland economy and the peace process. She outlined a number of measures that you, Minister, need to bring forward, and I did not really hear much of them, to be honest with you, in your contribution. She has talked to businesses and is clear on what businesses want. Some people listening to you, Minister, today might fear that you and the Department are maybe snuggling up asleep. At this time, we are hearing from businesses that they need not just clarity but support and action. Therefore, I fear that one might be behaving like a Brexiteer as opposed to a Minister. Are SMEs to read from the responses that you and the British Government are using your inaction to undermine a legally binding international treaty? That is crucial.

Sinn Féin's Declan McAleer, who is also Chair of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, spoke at length about the 25,000 farm workers and the 60 questions that, he said, he had put to the Minister and to which he still awaits an answer. That is Minister Poots, by the way, not you. He is still waiting for an answer. I think that it might have the Committee that put those questions.

Regardless of whether there is a deal or no deal, the British Government are obliged to ensure that there are border control posts and checks and controls on goods entering the North of Ireland. They confirmed that they would do that in only a few weeks' time. The protocol is an ugly compromise. No one said it was perfect, but businesses and farmers will pay the price for, unfortunately, what you on the opposite side have cost them.

MLA Liz Kimmins, who lives close to the border partition in Ireland, indicated the disaster of Brexit for the thousands of people who cross the border every day to work and to study. She rightly focused on the impact on financial services for her constituency and others and the danger of businesses relocating to places that will have access to the largest market in the world — the EU market — with 440 million customers. There has been agreement, without doubt, that there should be no diminution of rights, and she pointed out the importance of the recognition of qualifications for workers. She recognised that, despite the statement that there will be no diminution of rights, workers' rights, environmental rights and consumer rights are all potentially under threat.

Mr Gary Middleton, MLA for my constituency, asked Members to speak to business. I respectfully suggest, Mr Middleton, that you listen to business, particularly

businesses in your community. If you listen to the Derry Chamber of Commerce and the report that it gave us all, you included, it will tell you, like me and others, that it is unprepared and uninformed, and it needs help and assistance. We hear them loud and clear.

Mr Gordon Dunne, you do not like the protocol. I understand that. It is a —

Mr Stalford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker, is it in order for a Member to refer directly to other Members as "you" and "your"? Surely, all remarks should be directed through the Chair.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that they should speak through the Chair.

Ms Anderson: I will speak through the Chair. That is not a problem.

12.00 noon

Mr Gordon Dunne does not like the protocol. He said, as we have all said, that it is an ugly compromise. However, the DUP made a statement last night and, when I listen to Mr Stalford reporting, he talks about being very confident in his Minister. Of course, you would say that anyway. Of course, you would be. You have always rejected the protocol. That is what the Member said. The DUP's statement last night boasted that the DUP had stopped Theresa May's version of the withdrawal agreement. Well done the DUP. What they ended up with was, from their point of view, something much worse than what they wanted. The DUP, I believe, and Brexiteers want to keep the North in Britain's internal market, and we all know the importance of unfettered access to markets for business, and many agree with that. However, they will do that if it means a harder border in Ireland. They will do that if it means re-enforcing partition. They will do that if it means discarding the Good Friday Agreement and all its parts, and they will think that that is a job well done.

Boris Johnson once said, "Over my dead body will there be a border in the Irish Sea". Well, he was alive and kicking when he did just that and signed up to a border down the Irish Sea. Those were the changes that the DUP made to Theresa May's protocol.

Only 24 hours before we had the British Government's latest fiasco about Brexit unfolding, we heard from the leader of the DUP, Arlene Foster — some businesses thought that they were getting reassurance — that she had reached the point of realisation that there would be a trade border in the Irish Sea. A regulatory border and a customs border is a long way from Nigel Dodds's insistence that the integrity of the UK was more important than Brexit. I have to say, having listened to what has happened over the last couple of days, that the DUP seems to be all over the place.

I thank the SDLP for its amendment. We acknowledge the amendment and the fact that it adds to the motion. All the pro-Remain parties are on the one page. They have already contacted the British Government and Boris Johnson about the latest fiasco.

Mr Matthew O'Toole is right that we need to cushion the impact for workers and businesses. I do not think that the SDLP should be surprised. I do not think that the pro-Remain parties should be surprised, given that they are the majority in the Executive, when they find out that the

rest of the Executive do not agree with us and we cannot get a shared position. Do the maths: of course, we are the majority in there with that view, but the Brexiteers will not agree with us, and that is not news to you.

Mark Durkan said that the warning signs have been heard. I think that they have been made; I do not know whether they have been heard. He said that people need to listen to them, and he is absolutely right about the devastation that Brexit will cause to his constituency, which is my constituency, in Derry.

Colin McGrath talked about needing more information and about confusion and uncertainty. Some people might think that the SDLP's high horse is not a safe place for them to rest on, because 23 of the Brexit common frameworks to be sorted before the end of this year reside with its Minister, Nichola Mallon. I asked for the kind of clarity that Members such as Colin McGrath talked about from the Minister on transport, rail passengers, rights and EU driving hours, all of which have to be worked through before the end of the year. However, she was not able to enlighten me one iota.

I want to acknowledge what Stewart Dickson said and particularly his exasperation. I share that. He accused the Minister of slavishly following London, and, I think, a lot of people would concur with that.

Andrew Muir reminded us that the majority of people in the North voted to remain in the EU.

When Steve Aiken spoke, I made an intervention about state aid, and he will not be surprised to learn that Sinn Féin has been very clear about Apple and tax and all that happened in the South. We talk about harmonisation across the island. When we get to that point, that will be a different place and a different country for everyone.

The Member also mentioned constitutional status and the Good Friday Agreement's principle of consent. The principle of consent refers to the constitutional question. If we are all so concerned as we are about the various aspects of the constitutional question, let the people decide. What union do we want to be a part of?

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Anderson: Do we want to stay in a union with Britain, or do we want to reunite Ireland? That is the constitutional question —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Anderson: — and that will answer the principle of consent question. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Thanks to all Members.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly notes with concern recent comments from the Northern Ireland business Brexit working group regarding the lack of technical and operational details available to local businesses concerning the changes that will come into force post-Brexit; recognises the very complex and unique characteristics of the local economy; is concerned by

the precariousness of many of our small and medium enterprises at this time; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to establish urgently educational and training opportunities to enhance the capacity of local businesses to prepare for post-transition trading arrangements and, along with her Executive colleagues, to bring forward urgently details of legislation this Assembly will be required to pass before the end of the transition period, in order to give businesses certainty.

Mr Speaker: Members, take your ease for a few moments while we change the personnel at the Table.

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

Public Inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, resume your seats, please. Order. Resume your seats or leave the Chamber.

The next item on the Order Paper is a motion on a public inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital. I call Paula Bradshaw to formally move the motion.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and thank you, Minister, for joining us in the Chamber today. I rise —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I am asking you to formally move the motion.

Ms Bradshaw: Sorry. I beg to move

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health to establish a public inquiry, under the terms of the Inquiries Act 2005, into Muckamore Abbey Hospital in support of the families of residents who have campaigned for justice; and, in the interim, further calls on the Minister of Health to progress urgently the recommendations of the recent review of leadership and governance at Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Thank you. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and a further 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Before we begin, I advise Members of the need to take care in their contributions today. I am sure that you are aware that there have been a number of arrests related to alleged offences at Muckamore Abbey Hospital. I do not want to inhibit discussions on the motion, which clearly relates to a matter of public interest, but, in accordance with my responsibility under Standing Order 73, I caution Members to be particularly careful that they say nothing in their contribution that might prejudice the outcomes of the criminal proceedings. That is a very serious responsibility. Members who deliberately flout the sub judice rule will be asked to resume their seat.

Ms Bradshaw: Again, thank you, Minister, for being here. I propose the motion not on my behalf or on behalf of the Alliance Party but on behalf of the parents and loved ones who have campaigned for many years for a public inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital in their quest for truth and justice. I pay tribute to the families, whose dedication and determination have brought us this far. This is an extraordinarily difficult and sensitive issue, as the Deputy Speaker pointed out. We cannot applaud enough their efforts to get us this far.

In her review of safeguarding at Muckamore, Dr Margaret Flynn stated:

“Our overarching observation is Muckamore Abbey hospital is a ‘high-risk setting’ — there are high risks for patients who are placed at MAH. We think of hospitals as healing environments, we think of hospitals as places where we stay for a limited

period and then we are discharged — this is not the experience of patients at Muckamore Abbey hospital.”

The motion is about an inquiry into what turned Muckamore into a high-risk setting rather than a healing environment but it is more fundamental than that. In supporting the motion, I am asking MLAs to make a commitment to never again place vulnerable people in high-risk settings. Therefore, the motion is not about bricks and mortar or even one location. It is about how we care for vulnerable patients and how we ensure and commit to their loved ones that they are being cared for appropriately.

It is clear from what the families said in various reviews and reports over the years that Muckamore was felt to be a place of out of sight, out of mind. Some cases of the denial of information about the care of family members, particularly about serious incidents, were and are alarming. It could take days for families to be informed about those incidents, and it could, and still can, take years for complaints to be investigated properly. The Assembly must commit to never allowing that situation to develop again.

Let us look at the background. Professor Roy McClelland, chair of the Bamford Review, warned that what we have heard about Muckamore, particularly in the past three years or so, constitutes systemic failings requiring a full inquiry. He also warned that that may be just:

“the tip of the iceberg”.

That re-emphasises the fact that an inquiry is not about just ensuring justice, although that is essential, but about enabling us to take urgent action to ensure that such a situation never occurs again. The most urgent action is that we now implement the conclusions of the review of leadership and governance, and the safeguarding report. The latter, of course, requires the closure of Muckamore Abbey Hospital. On top of that, however, we must ensure that we never again see any place of care within the health and social care system become so peripheral that the highest standards of leadership and governance are not implemented.

Muckamore was once seen as a model for good delivery, but that was many decades ago. Already, by the mid-1990s, focus in public policy and academic research was shifting towards community care from the outdated concept of institutions. From October 2002, we saw the publication of the Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability and the implementation of at least some aspects of the review. Those included the relocation of children’s services and a more general emphasis on moving on from Muckamore as it was at that time.

It was in November 2012 when two staff members were charged with assault for abuse in the Ennis ward. The fact that the subsequent report was not acted upon is one reason why families will, with justification, accept nothing less now than a full and transparent public inquiry. Years after the Ennis report, CCTV was, finally, installed in two wards at Muckamore but no policy was put in place to finalise its use. Nevertheless, we then heard about the CCTV footage, and the subsequent introduction of the police looking at that. We know that that is ongoing, and I respect that process. No policy being in place was evidence of there being too great a distance between the operation of the hospital and the management of it. We

have heard of many arrests and suspensions for alleged abuse over the years, so we will not go into that.

In December 2018, Dr Margaret Flynn's report outlined failings including a lack of safeguarding protocols, the harming of patients and the use of an unmonitored seclusion room. She made public her view that the hospital had to close. The resettlement of those at Muckamore was promised but remains incomplete. The report was leaked rather than published. That lack of transparency is one reason why the Alliance Party and others made clear their view at that time that only a public inquiry would suffice. It was even later than that when the RQIA took action against the trust in regard to standards of care. It is unclear why it took so long.

12.15 pm

This is a deeply alarming litany of adverse incidents, poor governance and, most importantly, alleged harm caused to vulnerable people.

Mr Clarke: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bradshaw: Go ahead.

Mr Clarke: I accept everything that the Member has said in her opening remarks. However, does she accept that politicians also had a responsibility? When Muckamore went to some lengths to rehabilitate people and get them into the community, the very adverse reaction left the trust on the back foot. Some people were kept in Muckamore longer than they should have been because politicians in some communities rejected them.

Ms Bradshaw: It is possible that that was before my time as a full-time politician, but I will note your remarks.

When simply put on the record like that, I am unsure why we have not, to date, had a public inquiry.

As I mentioned, a review of leadership and governance was carried out earlier this year, and it provides recommendations for immediate implementation. The culture of resolving matters on-site rather than enabling challenge at board level regarding the discharge of statutory functions; the lack of clear direction, in any sense, from board management through even to the plans for the future of the site; and the fundamental failure to implement governance arrangements are clearly defined problems that need to be rectified.

On top of this, we see that our regulation system simply does not work. The entire system of oversight, but not the actual regulation, of Muckamore by the RQIA is a nonsense. There needs to be specific regulation of mental health and learning disability services similar to that carried out by the Care Quality Commission in England.

We should already have seen a review of staffing, both numbers and training, if we are to become increasingly reliant on day care for patients, and a comprehensive package of emotional support for the families of those who suffered at Muckamore should be in place.

The Minister has met the families in the past. Indeed, he did so at a recent Health Committee meeting. The families are very clear about what they want. They have demanded a full public inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005. Indeed, when they made this clear around, I think, 2018, the Minister, in his previous role as leader of the

Ulster Unionist Party, signed up in support. There is no harm in the Minister continuing in the role of engaging with the families. However, he must know what is required. Now, it is about getting on with what he signed up to. Endless delays mainly suggest that people are trying to hide something. What we need is absolute transparency. Specifically, a public inquiry is required to meet the families' justifiable demands and address their concerns, and to compel witnesses. We saw in the recent review of leadership and governance that not everybody who should have taken part in that did so. We need to get the answers. We need to get the information from the people who were there and were responsible.

Before I draw my remarks to a close, I want to acknowledge that many fine employees at Muckamore have provided, and still provide, health and well-being support to the patients with professionalism and integrity. A public inquiry would separate those who did wrong from those who did right by their patients. We owe it to them to provide a mechanism for marking out that distinction.

In conclusion, the motion is not just about a public inquiry. It is about meaningful change emerging from such an inquiry. It is about justice for families, past and future. It is about transparency about what went on historically, but it is also a call to action to improve, meaningfully and permanently, the future experience of people with mental health problems, learning disabilities and autism. Those in care, and their families, must always be assured, regardless of what form that care takes, that they are being looked after properly, with appropriate safeguards and leadership in place. I will support the Sinn Féin amendment, and I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Colm Gildernew will move the amendment. He will have 10 minutes to propose it and five minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Gildernew: I beg to move the following amendment:

Insert after "urgently":

"a bespoke plan to stabilise and support the current delivery of services, as well as implementing"

I want to start by thanking the Members who tabled the motion. It is extremely important and probably one of the more important things that we have discussed. I would like to thank the Members — Paula and John — who tabled it. I would also like to thank the press and legal teams who have supported the families throughout, but I call into question why that has been necessary when families are struggling to get answers about the care that has been provided by a healthcare system. In the first instance, healthcare should provide that support on an ongoing basis.

One of the first meetings that I attended after I became an MLA was in Belfast City Hall. I met some of the family members: Glynn Brown and Catherine Fox. I was absolutely rocked at the impact of what had happened on those families. It was horrendous and I was totally taken aback. I was also deeply impressed by their stoicism, dignity and quiet determination to protect their loved ones and to get answers about what had happened.

Along with party colleagues, I then engaged in a series of meetings with different organisations and started to get a flavour of what the families were dealing with in trying

to get information. Members should bear in mind that, throughout, there were times when families had to put in freedom of information requests to get basic information about what had happened. I met representatives of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and the PSNI on numerous occasions. I also met representatives of the PPS, the Human Rights Commission, sectoral groups, the Safeguarding Board, Mencap and Positive Futures. They were all of one mind: that the issues had to be addressed and that the people who were being cared for in Muckamore deserved better and deserved answers and improvements.

I also visited Muckamore and was struck by it. It is a challenging environment; there is no doubt about that. I felt all over again for the families. Having to put your son or daughter into any of those facilities when they are so vulnerable is bad enough, and, despite the efforts of staff, Muckamore is a difficult environment. I was in the seclusion rooms and those really show the starkness of that setting. I also observed what seemed to me to be a lack of facilities to train and prepare people for more independent living. I was struck by that and it is important that we recognise that.

My colleague Pat Sheehan has also met staff, and we recognise that the staff are working in a very challenging environment and have struggled to maintain high levels of care. There has been a huge reliance on agency staff and, while they also do a good job, that reliance stands in the way of developing the relationships that are so needed.

A public inquiry is needed and I think that all parties in the Chamber would agree with that. It is a stated Sinn Féin Ard Fheis policy, and I know that the Minister would also agree that a public inquiry is needed because of the extent and gravity of what has happened in Muckamore. What has compounded that difficulty is the fact that some of the worst abuse was piled on some of our most vulnerable people, some of whom cannot even speak for themselves. That places a duty on every one of us — on the healthcare system, on us and everybody else — to speak on their behalf. Families have been carrying the burden for too long to try to speak out and deal with it.

There have been issues with governance and accountability in the health and social care world. It is not acceptable to place blame at a ward or hospital management level only; we need to look at the structures right up through the piece. There have already been multiple reports on Muckamore. We had the serious adverse incident investigation by Margaret Flynn, who I met in Muckamore, the leadership review and a series of other reports, such as Bamford, that called for a change in services. The recognition of how it needs to be developed is there.

We need, absolutely, to find out why there were failings in providing learning disability workers of our own, whom we could develop as valuable staff and with whom the people in Muckamore could develop meaningful staff relationships.

A significant number of staff have been suspended. There are arrests ongoing and that is appropriate. When I spoke to the other agencies, they all said that it is possible to conduct a public inquiry and to allow any police or criminal investigations to continue.

The complexity of this has highlighted similar issues across the system. We have seen this in neurology, SAI processes and in joint protocols. There is a difficulty here in responding quickly and effectively to situations, and communicating properly and openly with families in a timely way, so that they are not having to constantly dig out information. They sometimes hear of it in the press — that has happened in Muckamore and that is totally unacceptable. That piece should be able to be dealt with.

The findings in 'A Review of Leadership and Governance at Muckamore Abbey Hospital' that the Belfast Trust had appropriate governance structures in place, I find absurd. Governance should be about ironing out human frailty. We all recognise that serious abuse has taken place in Muckamore and that serious mistakes have been made. Therefore, to me, the governance failed. We need to establish what happened and what caused that failure.

As mentioned earlier, the fact that the learning review has not spoken to some of the key people involved is an absolutely major issue that needs to be addressed by way of a public inquiry.

Families have carried this burden and they have fought a lone battle in speaking for their children. I call on and appeal to the Minister: families have waited long enough, please give them the public inquiry that they deserve and the inquiry that the system needs in order to improve learning for the future.

Mrs Cameron: I rise to support the motion and the amendment and to thank the Members for bringing this very important subject to the House.

I am sure, like all Members, my thoughts are, first and foremost, with the families for whom the words "Muckamore Abbey Hospital" bring hurt, pain, and a sense of betrayal and trust. We speak as those who have been informed of only some of what has happened in that place but without that personal connection. My deep sense of anger can count as nothing when I think of the emotions that the families must feel today and every day.

Muckamore represents a failure of the system, personal accountability and leadership, and the duty of care that society has for those who have suffered. I am still absolutely astounded by the sheer scale of what we are dealing with in this hospital. This is the largest adult safeguarding case in the entire United Kingdom.

I am still horrified by the events that happened. The PSNI have identified some 1,500 separate criminal cases for investigation with a timeline of around five years for that process to conclude. Institutional abuse was investigated in 2012, but steps were not taken, which allegedly resulted in further harm to other vulnerable patients. The cases of physical and mental abuse were not isolated. It was not the actions of a lone worker, it was systemic in scale. Here we had the supposed sanctuary for adults with learning difficulties, but where they suffered personal torment by being physically abused and assaulted by nursing staff.

It is a scandal and, as such, I see no other appropriate mechanism by which to investigate it other than by a public enquiry. However, I do welcome the commitment given by the Health Minister last month that he intends to create an inquiry, but it is the shape of such an inquiry and the powers that are available to it that will be fundamental to its credibility and the weight of its investigation.

That is why we are backing today's motion. A public inquiry is essential and nothing less will do. I urge the Minister to press ahead on that basis.

Witnesses and evidence must be compelling with no place to hide in the quest for truth, for justice and to learn from this horrendous case. I recognise the caution on allowing the police investigations to conclude, but five years is too long for families to wait.

I believe that the families should be at the centre of any discussion on the form that an inquiry takes. This is about getting the truth, first and foremost, for those affected. It is also about ensuring that no other family faces anything like what happened in any other place within our health system.

12.30 pm

We have learned much from the review and subsequent report that was commissioned by the Department and published last month. The record of the Belfast Trust and its handling of Muckamore is nothing short of shameful. We have seen nurses having their suspensions overturned without the Belfast Trust having provided evidence and CCTV to the Nursing and Midwifery Council, senior managers have refused to cooperate with the internal governance review and trust officials have admitted delays in the reporting of incidents from staff management and onward referrals. It is unacceptable for senior management in the Belfast Trust to say that they were unaware of the issues at Muckamore.

Why should a family have to rely on freedom of information requests to establish whether risk assessments have been carried out on their loved one's care. Why is candour so hard to find? Why has the trust adopted a closed, defensive, dishonourable stance with families? Such behaviour, coupled with the scale and seriousness of the alleged abuse and failings in governance, makes the case for a full public inquiry irrefutable.

We all want the truth and those responsible to be held to account and brought to justice. We support the motion and the amendment.

Mr McGrath: I support the motion and the amendment. Should the motion and amendment pass, for the SDLP, nothing less than a full and independent public inquiry into the systemic failures of leadership and governance at Muckamore Abbey Hospital will be sufficient.

The findings of the review into the governance and leadership at Muckamore Abbey make for some of the most disturbing and heart-wrenching reading that I have encountered in as long as I can remember. This has been a moment of abject shame and disgrace for us. The review revealed institutional abuse of the most indefensible nature, with basic human dignity discarded for some of the most vulnerable members of our society. It revealed a systemic failure by the Belfast Trust and the Health and Social Care Board. Furthermore, it raised major concerns about how previous Health Ministers did not have Muckamore on their agenda and did not challenge the happenings in the hospital.

It is clear from reading the report that, for too long, Muckamore was regarded as being something that just was not talked about and operated just under the radar. It is also clear that the directors and managers were able

to operate with autonomy in a culture where matters were settled on-site. They had loyalty to each other and not the trust, never mind the patients whom they were caring for.

This is a monumental scandal, as has been referenced, and all the more galling is the fact that the investigations were launched almost eight years ago but were not escalated to the executive team or the trust board. That we may never know the full scale of the abuse that took place at Muckamore — new CCTV recording equipment was installed in 2013 and older recordings were overwritten — will only cause further outrage and justified righteous anger.

We need to get to the root of this disgrace, hence why the Health Minister must begin proceedings to open a fully independent public inquiry into the leadership and governance at Muckamore Abbey Hospital. There were retired members of staff who did not respond to the review team. That is not good enough; witnesses must be compelled to bring forward their evidence. All Health Ministers since 2012, some of whom are still MLAs, must give an account of how marginal Muckamore was on their agenda.

Our health service failed the residents of the hospital for too long; it is time to bring the truth to light. While that may be uncomfortable for many, it is critical that we get to the truth and get the full facts and all the information so that we can determine how to ensure that such events do not happen ever again.

I, and my colleagues in the SDLP, will not rest until their story is told, until their truth is spoken and acknowledged and until they receive the satisfaction that they deserve. I support the motion and the amendment and sincerely hope that all right-thinking and compassionate Members will also do so.

Mr Chambers: No words of condemnation are strong enough for what is alleged to have happened in Muckamore Abbey Hospital. Patients, many of whom were the most vulnerable in Northern Ireland, were failed. They were allegedly abused. Patients were allegedly verbally and physically assaulted. They were treated as if somehow they were not equal citizens, and somehow it was all inflicted on them by fellow human beings, people who were charged with both the privilege and the responsibility of caring for them. It was disgusting. Regrettably, it could unfairly compromise the reputation of all those professionals who provide dedicated and loving daily care for the most vulnerable in our community.

Muckamore Abbey Hospital should have been a place of safety; it should have been a therapeutic place to which patients could have gone for loving support and care. While I suspect that, over the years, some patients received exemplary treatment, unfortunately, the shocking scale of abuse subsequently revealed has understandably overshadowed all that.

As the Deputy Speaker has cautioned, we should remain especially careful as a live police investigation is under way. It is important that we let it take its course. However, there are many other unanswered questions about Muckamore. How did it happen? How could staff who were trained to look after vulnerable patients cruelly inflict such harm and distress on the very same people? How was it allowed to go on for so long? How did the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust seemingly not know what

was going on? Those are four basic questions to which the Muckamore patients and families deserve answers. Just as importantly, we all need assurances that such depravity will never be allowed to happen again.

While the abuse came to light in September 2017 with the game-changing discovery of CCTV recordings, there were earlier warning signs. The Ennis ward safeguarding investigation, a full five years earlier, should have been enough to raise concerns. However, time after time, opportunities were missed, and the abuse was allowed to go on. While the responsibility for any abuse should always rest, foremost, with the individuals inflicting it, there was clearly a systemic failure in the leadership, management and governance of the facility.

I noted the publication of the report into that issue last month. While the findings do not make for a pleasant read, I was glad that the Minister, once again, affirmed his intention to hold an inquiry. I also welcome the sensible approach that he has adopted since coming into office. He has avoided any knee-jerk decisions or statements on an issue that warrants the utmost attention and consideration. He said that he would visit Muckamore; he did. He said that he would engage with the families; he did. It is the families and patients who should remain to the forefront of our minds. This should not be a party issue. All political parties should be equally disgusted at what happened at Muckamore, and all parties, I suspect, have an equally strong appetite to get answers as to how and why it happened in the first place. Those answers will not be easy, and there may be more difficult revelations ahead, but, if we are to ensure that it never happens again, we need total truth and transparency about what took place on the wards of this hospital.

I recall an elderly and frail widow, whom I knew well, who devoted her life to lovingly caring for her severely disabled adult son. He depended on her for every aspect of his day-to-day care. Just before her death, she had to commit her son into the care of Muckamore Abbey Hospital. She died, reassured that her son would receive the same care and attention that she had lavished on him. That poor lady would spin in her grave if she knew the potential for her son to have become a victim and a punchball for some sadistic person who was supposed to supply care. That poor man could not have resisted or articulated the treatment that he may have been receiving.

I wish the harrowing police inquiries well. My party fully supports a timely public inquiry into this dreadful scandal. We owe it to the patients and their families, and to those family carers, such as the widow whom I mentioned, who are no longer with us, to provide answers, to hold those guilty of any criminal offences to account and to ensure that such a shameful episode never happens again.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Members who tabled the motion and the amendment. We will support both, as my party colleague said earlier. The proposer of the motion used words that struck me: out of sight, out of mind. For many of us, that is what this issue seems to be.

We all support the families, and indeed the staff, many of whom are innocent and doing an excellent job. Sometimes, that is lost, because there is this blanket approach to the staff. Many excellent staff will continue to work there, and I know that we will all agree with that. I also feel for the police, who are called to Muckamore Abbey Hospital more

often, because the staff are cautious about what actions they can take with those vulnerable patients. The local police are there more frequently than they would like to be, because they are used, in a sense, to protect the staff and prevent them from getting into any further danger, given some of the historic nature of what has been said.

There are historic cases and, at the Policing Board, I have the opportunity to raise them with the police. I have heard that there are hours of tape. I am confident that the police will get to the bottom of that investigation, and I am not going to touch that, as the Speaker advised. Only yesterday, we heard about another arrest. Of course, that does not necessarily mean that someone is guilty, but it is a part of the investigation.

I listened to the Member who spoke previously, who talked about the woman who placed her son in care and now, he said, she would be spinning in her grave. I will talk about another family. The grandmother, mother and father are still alive and well, and they visit their son on a weekly basis. The amendment touches it better for me, as it includes the words "the current delivery of services". We can focus on the past, and the things that we know, but let us focus on the future and on today.

The family went down to Muckamore Abbey Hospital every week to visit the young fellow, who is in his 20s. Picture that young fellow. He is over 6 foot tall, and he has the best of clothes. The family brought him clothes on a regular basis. However, they came down one Friday afternoon to see him in clothes that were unfit for him to wear, because they were too small. That was not years ago, but only months ago. This is today, and this is what is happening. They would come down and see their son in clothes that were unfit for him. The young fellow goes through periods when he is not lucid, so the family came to me for support, and approached other elected representatives as well.

For me, this goes to contact with the trust and its responsibility and how difficult it made it for elected representatives to support families. First off, you need a consent form. The mother signed the consent form and thought that it was adequate. However, the trust said no: it had to be the patient who signed. The patient signed the form, and the trust said, no: the patient would not have known what he was signing. The trust did everything that it could to obstruct and prevent anyone from supporting that family. Eventually, thankfully, the trust granted a meeting, and we went through various aspects of the care of that young fellow. The trust changed his care, and the young fellow became more lucid and was more able to cooperate with the family.

If we roll on to a few months ago, backward steps had been taken. The family contacted the hospital, but the staff said that he was sleeping, although it was the middle of the day. They arrived down to see him but they were unable to because he was sleeping. They asked to go to his room so that they could see him, but the hospital would not let them do that. The family were unable to go to the room to see their son. This young fellow is in his 20s. There is a mental health issue, and that is why he is there, but prior to his problem, he was fairly lucid with his parents. Indeed, I have met him in Muckamore, and I could hold a conversation with that young fellow.

Suspicion grows within families when they are unable to meet a family member. They asked when would be the

best time to visit their son. They asked to see him during the day, but he was in bed. Should they go at night? Should they telephone? On every occasion, they were unable to see him. Only a few weeks ago, the father arrived on another visit, to see his son being physically restrained and handled in a manner that was disturbing to him and questionable. The father raised a complaint on that occasion, and a member of staff was removed. Roll on another few weeks, and that member of staff was back on the ward, but the family and the father had not been updated.

I support the motion and the amendment. In particular, I support "the current delivery of services". I appreciate that the Minister has said all the right things in the past.

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

Mr Clarke: I appreciate what the Minister has said, and I am confident that he will take whatever action is necessary to bring this to a close.

12.45 pm

Mr McHugh: I am privileged today to speak in support of the motion in every respect. Like other Members, I am totally outraged by what has happened in Muckamore. That outrage is a result not just of all the incidents that have happened in Muckamore but particularly of the experiences of families. When what was happening in Muckamore was revealed and they attempted to raise questions and issues about that, they experienced inherent resistance, not only in the Belfast Trust but in the wider health and social care system, to being open and transparent and answering some of the basic questions of families about the quality of care. The previous speaker also referred to the same issue.

It is also worth noting that Muckamore Abbey Hospital is a regional facility and is part of a regional pathway of care for the assessment, treatment and support of those with learning difficulties. Yet, such abuses occurred. Some of my colleagues have spent considerable time engaging with the relevant bodies and agencies to try to get to the centre of this, and, indeed, my colleague Colm Gildernew has named a few of the organisations. That highlights the need for an inquiry. It is necessary and important and will help to identify not only the individual failings but the wider systemic failings and the culture that existed in that provision.

The motion refers to the leadership and governance review. An article today in 'The Irish News' quoted a comment made as a result of an independent review that found that Muckamore was "a place apart" managed by

"a 'dysfunctional' team who missed opportunities to prevent abuse identified years earlier."

That in itself is a very damning statement in every respect. As a result of that, I come back to a point made by my fellow party member Pat Sheehan in a question to the Health Minister. The Minister stated:

"I have sought detailed advice in relation to an inquiry; further advice is still being received. I also need to ensure that any process that is put in place does not interfere with the current PSNI criminal investigation."

Will the Minister provide some clarity on what further details he is seeking, so that, as has already been stated in the Chamber, that type of public inquiry, which is so necessary — we can all identify with that — does not interfere with a police investigation running concurrently. Who has the Minister asked for those details, and when does he expect some answers?

Finally, I make the point that it is so important, in the event of the inquiry happening, that all the people — the families, the residents and the staff, because we all know that there are many good members of staff at Muckamore — are given their opportunity to be open, transparent and honest about what has happened in that provision.

Mr Easton: I support the motion and the amendment and thank the Members for tabling them.

The PSNI and the health authorities are still investigating allegations that vulnerable patients were physically and mentally abused by staff at Muckamore Abbey Hospital. The hospital, on the outskirts of Antrim, is run by the Belfast Trust and provides facilities for adults with severe learning disabilities and mental health needs. As allegations of abuse began to emerge, a number of people were arrested, and staff have been suspended from their jobs. The PSNI said that it was working with the trust on an investigation of the allegations, and Detective Chief Inspector Duffy said that police were examining a series of traumatic events seen in more than 300,000 hours of CCTV footage. It is clear from some of the evidence that vulnerable patients were assaulted by staff at Muckamore Abbey Hospital between 2014 and 2017. CCTV footage revealed 1,500 crimes on one ward alone, which is extremely serious. CCTV footage from the psychiatric intensive care unit showed a patient being punched in the stomach by a nurse. That is truly shocking. Footage taken over a three-month period also showed patients being pulled, hit, punched, flicked and verbally abused by nursing staff. The Belfast Trust confirmed that, at Muckamore, between 2014 and 2017 there were more than 50 reported assaults on patients by staff. The chair of Northern Ireland's biggest review of mental health services, Professor Roy McClelland, said that the allegations emerging from Muckamore:

"could be the tip of the iceberg".

Professor Roy McClelland, who led the 2007 Bamford review, also said:

"this is not just ... bad apples in a barrel".

The then chief executive of the Belfast Trust, Martin Dillon, said:

"Some of the care failings in Muckamore are a source of shame, but my primary focus is on putting things right."

The Northern Ireland health regulator took action against the Belfast Trust over standards of care at Muckamore. Three enforcement notices were issued by the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority over staffing and nurse provision, adult safeguarding and patient finances. The then Northern Ireland Secretary of State, Julian Smith, apologised for the pain caused to families by the situation at Muckamore Abbey Hospital. Mr Smith then agreed to look into the matter further and to take advice about ordering a public inquiry.

Dr Flynn, the co-author of a damning review of Muckamore, said on 23 January this year that the hospital "needs to close". In her damning 2018 report she identified a series of catastrophic failings and found that patients' lives had been compromised. Dr Flynn said that Muckamore residents had been manhandled and slapped on some occasions and that she was disappointed that the facility was still open.

It was revealed that Belfast Trust had spent £4 million on agency staff in order to cover vacancies at Muckamore because so many members of staff have been suspended during the abuse probe. The Belfast Trust has confirmed that 40 employees have been placed on precautionary suspension while investigations continue. In addition, so far, five people have been arrested and questioned about the ill treatment of patients. That is how serious this is.

Northern Ireland's health regulator announced the results of a three-day unannounced inspection of Muckamore, including an overnight visit. The RQIA inspection found that there had been significant improvements, but it still has concerns about financial governance and safeguarding arrangements. Muckamore patients' families met the Health Minister, Robin Swann, following the restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Also at that meeting was Glynn Brown, a representative of the campaign group Action for Muckamore, who said that he was disappointed that Mr Swann could not give them assurances that a full public inquiry would take place. Minister, in light of the seriousness and the extent of what has been going on at Muckamore, on this occasion, that is not acceptable, and I know that you have talked in the past about supporting a public inquiry. It is my view that there should be no more reviews and no more inquiries. There has to be a full independent public inquiry. Nothing else will do or suffice.

There must be a public inquiry. Nothing more or nothing less will do. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Durkan: It is now three years since the wide-scale abuse that took place at Muckamore Abbey Hospital came to light. The intervening years have not diminished the horror of the events that have been recounted here today; in fact, they have only made the need for accountability and justice more acute. The very people entrusted with the care of vulnerable residents dehumanised them and abused the trust that residents and their families put in them. Any individual who subjects a vulnerable adult or any vulnerable individual who relies on them to attacks and mental abuse is despicable, but they were enabled to do so by the Belfast Trust's oversight failures. The depth of violation and distress that those people have suffered is unimaginable.

I have said in the past that this should prompt a wider review of the safeguarding system across our health and social care sector, so I am extremely alarmed by a more recent report of a safeguarding incident just in July of this year in Muckamore. We should be under no illusion that this is purely an historical issue, a point also made by Mr Clarke.

Apologies for the failures that allowed the institutional abuse and cruelty to take hold have certainly been forthcoming. I very much welcome the Minister's apology in August, when the departmental review was published, and I note his intention to set up an inquiry. I do not doubt

his commitment on this. I commend him for doing his best to get to grips with this in the midst of the pandemic dominating his and officials' time and efforts, but I urge him to take the next step and establish a public inquiry under the 2005 Act, as the families have consistently called for. The SDLP has always taken our lead from the families, and I take the opportunity to pay tribute to them for their dedicated and dignified work, striving to secure truth and accountability and trying to ensure that no other family is subject to what they and their loved ones have been subjected to. Their calls for a public inquiry have our full support.

The terrible abuse at Muckamore has led to the biggest criminal safeguarding investigation that we have seen in Northern Ireland. That this would not be complemented by a public inquiry is, to my mind, bizarre. The departmental review makes for devastating reading:

"a place apart which operated outside the sightlines and under the radar of the Trust."

That is recognition, I am sure, that the families will welcome, but the report also reveals that the since-retired staff member who could shed some light on the CCTV issues did not respond to the review team's request to meet. Only a public inquiry could compel witnesses to attend to gather all of the evidence needed for thorough investigation and recommendations. The scandal has not only uncovered the shameful systemic abuse of some of our most vulnerable citizens but rocked and shattered confidence in our whole care system. What is more, only a public inquiry can provide the independence and authority that are a prerequisite for the residents and their families to trust in its proceedings and findings.

The Minister rightly said last month that the families deserved answers. Today, they are still waiting for those answers. A public inquiry is now the only credible means left to secure the accountability and scrutiny that the scandal demands. I urge the Minister to commit to that full public inquiry and, if he cannot, to explain why he would resist it. I support the motion and the amendment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, the Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm today. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time, and this debate will resume after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Stewart Dickson.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the first Member, I advise Members that question 13 has been withdrawn.

Climate Change Bill

1. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will commit to introducing a climate change Bill to address the climate crisis, as agreed by the Assembly on 21 July 2020. (AQO 578/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): It is imperative that we build the evidence base and ensure government policymaking has climate and the environment at its core and that future policies and strategies can demonstrably deliver the outcomes that people expect. We need to fully understand the unique characteristics of the make-up of Northern Ireland emissions and determine what is our equitable contribution to net zero. That is why I have written to the independent expert UK Committee on Climate Change (CCC) for advice on what would be our equitable contribution to the UK's net zero emissions target, to ensure that our emissions reduction targets are credible and evidence-based. Unfortunately, the CCC is not in a position to respond to my request until after it has provided advice on the UK's sixth carbon budget, which will be published in December 2020. In the interim, my officials have commenced work on scoping the options for the introduction of a Northern Ireland climate change Bill. I will consider those options along with the advice provided from the CCC and will present my findings to the Northern Ireland Executive to agree a way forward.

Ms Ennis: I note the Minister's response, and I thank him for the actions that he has outlined thus far. Minister, given that you have acknowledged that there is a climate crisis and a need to follow the latest scientific advice on climate change and given that we are the only place on these islands without a climate change Act, how can you justify your heel-dragging on the issue and your reluctance to bring forward a climate change Act?

Mr Poots: I can assure you that there is no heel-dragging taking place in my Department. We are working on actions, as opposed to Acts. Actions actually deliver things; Acts put a form of words in place. Action speaks louder than words, always.

Ms S Bradley: Minister, with all respect, you have not really given an answer to the question. I do not think that you have to wait for a CCC report dated December 2020 to gather evidence that a climate change Bill is required today.

Mr Poots: In producing a Bill, one will want to have the best and most credible evidence available. We are doing courses of work in conjunction with gathering that evidence. A Bill will not be what delivers real and significant change; it will be the actions that flow from it or, indeed, the actions that we can take prior to developing a Bill. What is important is our actions, as opposed to legislation. I assure you that my Department is working extensively on what actions it can take to reduce Northern Ireland's carbon footprint and make a significant contribution to ensuring that Northern Ireland's effort in reaching net zero is significant.

Mr Blair: I acknowledge the answers given by the Minister and the work done by the Department and, indeed, others to achieve net zero. To frame this specifically in relation to the original question, can I ask whether there is an exact date or even a general timeline in the Department or the Minister's office for when a climate change Act might become a reality?

Mr Poots: No, there is not an exact date, because we are working towards gathering the appropriate information. We have been in correspondence with the Committee on Climate Change, because it has the most expertise and the best qualitative information to work from. We will continue to work closely with it to identify what the issues are, what contribution will be expected from us and how best we can achieve that most expeditiously at the best value for money.

Import and Export Costs

2. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the support he will provide to meet import and export costs not covered under the Trader Support Service, such as sanitary and phytosanitary checks and export health certificates. (AQO 579/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have already sought assurance from the UK Government that they will meet any associated costs placed on Northern Ireland business as a result of the implementation of the protocol, including as a result of sanitary and phytosanitary checks. I will continue to press them on the matter.

Ms Anderson: Minister, thank you for that answer, brief though it was. As you will know, farmers and rural businesses face the loss of millions of European funding post Brexit. Are you telling me that there is not an estimated cost for the number of businesses that will be made unviable as a consequence of the implementation of this disastrous Brexit? Have businesses been made aware of what they face, particularly with checks?

Mr Poots: The Member assumes that the funding that came from Europe will not be replaced, and that is not something that we have accepted. Her party might have accepted that, but I will fight to make sure that we have that funding available and that we distribute it. Given that the UK was a net contributor to the European Union and that we were getting back only about 50% of what we were paying into it, it is entirely reasonable that my ministerial colleagues and I make the case that that funding should be fully replaced. That is the case that we will make.

Mr Allister: No later than last night, the Minister's political party affirmed opposition to Northern Ireland's economic place in the UK being compromised by the protocol and

proclaimed opposition to any new customs infrastructure in Northern Ireland as an immovable foundational pillar. Why, then, is the Minister continuing to be ready to provide infrastructure at our ports in Northern Ireland to create an Irish Sea border?

Mr Poots: The Member will find that the Minister has always opposed infrastructure at the Irish Sea ports, as have his colleagues at Westminster, who have voted consistently against any such proposals. We have resisted such proposals in Northern Ireland. The protocol is an imposition that has been put upon us. It was not put through the Assembly. We sought to have that be the case, but it was refused.

We will have to wait and see what the Government do next, because legislation is going through this week. At this point, we do not even know what will be required at ports, because nothing has been agreed between the European Union and the UK on those matters. That is the flux that we find ourselves in.

Dr Aiken: Does the Minister have any details of the goods and products that can avail of the free Trader Support Service? Can he publish a regular updated list and information?

Mr Poots: Again, all those things are being continually negotiated; I think that we are in the eighth set of negotiations. Therefore, we do not have the clarity that, I suspect, the Member would like and that all of us would like. Consequently, we will continue to lobby. We will continue to make the case that Northern Ireland have unfettered access from NI to GB and from GB to NI. After all, 53% of our goods go from Northern Ireland to Great Britain, and 65% of goods imported into Northern Ireland come from Great Britain. It is entirely illogical to create barriers or create tariffs or fetters between those internal markets. Let us see what comes out of the internal market Bill. It is fundamental that Northern Ireland's place is appropriately recognised in the United Kingdom and that we are not treated differently from other places.

Climate Change: DAERA Initiatives

3. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of what initiatives similar to the UK Government's nature for climate fund should be implemented to address climate change and the promotion of natural habitats. (AQO 580/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is committed to the continued protection and improvement of the environment as we move into this new decade. I agree that initiatives are required to address climate change and the promotion of natural habitats. I have already initiated a number of measures to address these matters. In March, I announced the Forests for our Future programme, which will involve the planting of 18 million trees over the next 10 years. I also recently outlined in the Assembly my concept to transform and grow the Northern Ireland economy whilst protecting our natural assets and reducing our carbon emissions through use of a green growth approach. I have committed resources in my Department to progress this approach. A delivery framework will be developed that will consist of a range of programmes that together will contribute to the key environmental and climate change targets and commitments in the Programme for Government and 'New Decade, New Approach' by

transforming to a greener, low-carbon economy. Some, like Forests for our Future, are already in motion. We will also seek to continue to deliver measures to conserve and restore our natural habitats such as those delivered through the Department's environment fund. I look forward to obtaining support from Executive colleagues to enable further implementation of these measures.

Mr Catney: We can also use sustainable farming practices to promote the restoration of natural habitats. I know that companies such as Jordans have good initiatives. What is the Minister doing to promote sustainable farming practices to help restore our natural habitats?

Mr Poots: We are working closely with the farming community to identify how we can deliver carbon-neutral farming. Carbon-neutral farming is entirely achievable because a lot of farming practice in Northern Ireland is already very environmentally friendly. In Northern Ireland, there is a considerable amount of carbon sequestration, which does not take place in many parts of the continent. Where there are feedlots et cetera or ground is ploughed continuously and machinery is cutting and drawing that material in, that is not as environmentally friendly a way of farming as would be the case in Northern Ireland, where we have animals outdoors in our green fields.

We need to identify what we are doing in carbon sequestration. We need to identify what we can do to reduce the amount of nutrients that go into our soil and the amount of ammonia and greenhouse gases that go into our atmosphere. There is a lot that we can do. There is low-hanging fruit that we want to identify quickly. There are things that will be a little trickier, but, nonetheless, we can work together and overcome those issues.

Mr Givan: I commend the Minister on the work that he is doing to drive forward this agenda and, in particular, the forestation plans that he has announced. In the schemes and initiatives that his Department is considering, will the Minister undertake to look at what potential there is to capitalise on the many outdoor opportunities that exist with organisations that need capital support to bring those into realisation in light of the past number of months, with increasing numbers of people have enjoyed the outdoors? Capital schemes need to be put in place so that these can be developed and organisations supported.

Mr Poots: As someone who had the privilege of being brought up in the countryside, I am delighted to see people who live in cities and towns have the opportunity to come out and enjoy the countryside. As a body, through our Forest Service, we have been working with councils to develop and enhance a lot of our forest parks. I know that there are a lot of urban-based organisations that bring young people who live in urban areas into rural and forest settings. The young people get a better appreciation of our countryside. They get a better appreciation of habitats and of the good that they do. It is important that we look at that to see how we can encourage and support organisations that bring young people into rural settings.

2.15 pm

Mrs Barton: Minister, thank you very much for answers so far. Do you accept that agricultural development has been restricted significantly in recent years, particularly in County Fermanagh, due to policy implementation of Shared Environmental Services (SES) and the Northern

Ireland Environment Agency? Have these directives been based on Northern Ireland, UK or EU legislation?

Mr Poots: I do accept that that is the case, Mrs Barton. It is EU policy; let us put it out there. EU policy has restricted a lot of farm development over the last number of years. It has restricted growth in the economy. It has restricted job growth. Let us be very frank about it. However, these are laws that we will continue to live with for some time and, consequently, it is important that we seek to mitigate where we can. That is why I am looking at how we can reduce a lot of the emissions that come from farms and manage a lot of the nutrients in a better way so that we can develop a win-win situation where we do not restrict the growth that needs to happen in agriculture — otherwise it will die — whilst not doing environmental damage. That is achievable. It will require investment and it will require commitment; you will get both those things from me. I will take those issues to the Executive at an appropriate point to drive forward.

Ms Bailey: The Minister will be aware from his own departmental figures that, in most areas of special conservation in Northern Ireland, we have unacceptable breaches of ammonia levels; in some of those areas, it is up to 300%. Will the Minister give us some detail of what he will do to address this critical issue?

Mr Poots: In the past, we have had SES, for example, recommending refusal to applications where people wanted to demolish older buildings to replace them with newer buildings. That would have reduced the ammonia but they were still recommending refusals, which is entirely unacceptable and illogical. A lot of the newer developments, particularly for pigs and poultry, can be done in a way that will reduce the ammonia levels that are produced. We need to be rational as to how we do this. In doing so, we can ensure that we protect the environment — it is critically important that we do that — but, at the same time, allow people who want to invest and grow their farm to do so and, consequently, create jobs and produce precious food to be put on people's tables right across this country and beyond. We can allow both to happen simultaneously; that should be the goal of all of us in the House, not just me.

Cranswick Country Foods: Closure

4. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the closure of the Cranswick pork processing plant. (AQO 581/17-22)

Mr Poots: A number of people at Cranswick Country Foods, Ballymena have recently tested positive for coronavirus. During the week of 17 August, a decision was made by the Public Health Agency (PHA) to declare all workers on-site to be close contacts. This required all workers to undergo coronavirus testing and then self-isolate at home for 10 or 14 days, depending on test results. The ultimate decision on the actions required to manage this COVID-19 incident in Cranswick and the wider Ballymena community lies within the remit of the Chief Medical Officer and Minister for Health. DAERA has facilitated, and will continue to facilitate, communication between all parties involved and provide expert advice on our areas of competence as required.

The last day of processing was Thursday 20 August, and the site as a whole closed on Saturday 22 August. On

Friday 28 August, a site visit was carried out by PHA, Health and Safety Executive and DAERA officials, and all bodies were content with the measures in place to protect the health and safety of staff. The factory reopened on Friday 4 September and the food business operator is planning measures to deal with the backlog of pigs which has built up on farms.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response and also for his endeavours in relation to this issue. He mentioned the backlog of pigs. I am fully aware of this and have had constituents contact me in relation to it. Has the Minister had any discussions with processors about trying to clear the backlog?

Mr Poots: We were speaking daily with Cranswick through the Public Health Agency for at least a week about managing the closure and, indeed, the reopening. I welcome the fact that Cranswick has committed to clearing the backlog, and it is working closely with the farming community. We will offer all the support that we can to ensure that Cranswick can carry out its processing. We will also seek to assist it in getting the approval to go back into the Chinese market, which is critical to ensuring that the price rises to where it was at before this happened.

Ms Ennis: On the issue of processing plants, the Minister, I am sure, will be aware of the huge fire that happened in Kilkeel in my constituency last evening, in which up to 2,000 pigs unfortunately were destroyed. Can he confirm whether his Department has been in contact with the farmer in question to see what supports it can offer?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I think that we veered from the question there a bit, but all politics is local, so if the Minister wants to answer it, I am sure that the 'Mid-Ulster Mail' will be interested in his response.

Mr Poots: Absolutely. I have asked Veterinary Service to get in contact with the owner. It is an absolutely awful thing to have happened. I hope that it will be able to ensure that it can give qualitative advice and support to the individual on animal welfare and all of that.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, for the safety and well-being of employees of meat processing plants, can you confirm whether you are going to move towards more regular testing at this plant and others, given the prevalence of the spread of the virus in such facilities?

Mr Poots: I think that we need to be very careful. First, I will say that Cranswick as a company has behaved very responsibly throughout the COVID period. It has put in place mechanisms and measures to avoid the spread of COVID, and it is fairly evident that a lot of the COVID that appeared in the plant came inwards, as opposed to its going outwards. A lot of it came from the community into the plant, just as it came into Antrim and Newtownabbey police stations and just as it came into Craigavon Hospital.

People therefore need to take responsibility for themselves outside of their place of work. When they are in their place of work, personal protective equipment (PPE) and the Perspex separation are there. A lot of work has been done to ensure that separation takes place in the canteens, as people enter work and as people leave work. There has therefore been a massive amount of work done by food companies. Given that the agri-food industry supports around 10% of our employees, it is incredibly important that we support our processing plants, because they are

providing jobs. Many of the people who work in them come from outside of Northern Ireland, and we need to support those people as well. There are major challenges there, however. I commend the work of Cranswick, and I trust that, very soon, it will return to the Chinese market and that the plant will get back to full normality as early as possible.

Mr McGlone: In the interests of protecting customers and staff alike, I ask the Minister to expand on the level of collaboration that exists between his Department and the likes of the HSE and the Public Health Agency around such matters.

Mr Poots: Our veterinary division in particular provided massive support to the Public Health Agency. In giving advice on PPE, Perspex and all the separation that should take place, it played a leading role in all the meat plants across Northern Ireland. Its staff supported the meat plants with expertise beyond their veterinary expertise. If you were to speak to any of the meat companies, I think that they would indicate to you that the support that they have got from DAERA's veterinary division has been massive, and I commend the division for that.

Mr Chambers: Is the Minister in a position to detail the number of pigs that would have been processed through this plant during the time that it was closed? Is there evidence of how many of those pigs remain on the farm, and how many have been processed through other plants?

Mr Poots: There are 12,000 pigs a week that go through Cranswick. It closed two weeks ago and it opened on Friday. Some 2,000 pigs went through on Friday. In the meantime, there are two other key plants in Northern Ireland, one in Cookstown and one in Cranston in Londonderry. They were hoping to be able to pick up around 4,000 per week, which left a backlog of roughly 8,000 each week. That is significant and many farmers contacted me directly to indicate the problems that they faced. Young pigs were being born and would then normally move into an area, the weaners move into another area and the fattening pigs move into yet another area, so that was causing a backlog and considerable problems on those farms.

COVID-19: Support for Farming

5. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has plans for additional support for farming as a result of ongoing COVID-19 circumstances. (AQO 582/17-22)

Mr Poots: In my written statement to the Assembly on 30 June, I outlined the allocation of £21.4 million of the £25 million support package to support farmers and growers in the dairy, beef, sheep, potato and ornamental horticulture sectors, which have been hardest hit financially as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. I also stated that I wanted to be prudent with the funding as we cannot rule out the possibility of further market disturbance as a result of the pandemic with the need for additional support to farmers and growers.

For that reason I have retained a budget of £7.2 million based on the residual funding of £3.6 million — which is from the £25 million agreed by the Executive — and £3.6 million that was reprioritised from within my own Department. This would allow me to address the additional issues and challenges that COVID-19 may present in the weeks ahead. My officials and I are monitoring the

situation and continue to consult with industry stakeholders to assess the impact of COVID-19 across all sectors.

Should any future support schemes be required, their development would require a robust business case and an available budget, and follow the same design principles as the current schemes. These include ensuring good governance; that support is for evidence-based losses caused by market disturbance; that it is targeted at those impacted most financially; and avoids unnecessary bureaucracy and complies with legal requirements, including state aid rules.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for that answer. When I tabled my question I was unaware of the scheme that was coming forward. I congratulate the Minister for the very full package that has been announced. However, in looking at that there is probably one area that has been missed out, namely the broiler breeders. Will you give any consideration to that area going forward given that you have captured most of the other areas in the very generous scheme that you have announced?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. My Department has been meeting with industry stakeholders and we are aware that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on hatching egg producers. Many of those eggs would have been sold to the Middle East and to the Far East, for example. The standard of Northern Ireland chickens is rated right across the world therefore the demand for the hatching eggs is something which is sought by many people. However, those markets have dried up as a consequence of COVID-19. State aid rules previously prevented me from supporting the sector because we were not looking at losses that had happened, but at projected losses. My officials are continuing to monitor the impact on the sector and losses are becoming more evident. Therefore, I think that in the future — certainly in this financial year — we will be able to give significant consideration to this.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We have about 30 seconds left so a quick question and a yes or no answer.

Mr McAleer: The Minister has no doubt been lobbied by the wool industry. Will he be minded to look at supporting those farmers who have been affected by the collapse of the wool industry in the next round, or with some of the money that he has retained?

Mr Poots: I have certainly had the conversation. It is very complex with regard to providing support to that sector. The wool actually accounts for a very small proportion of the profitability in the sheep sector and the lamb prices have been remarkably good. I reserved the £7 million expecting a double-dip for lamb and beef, but they have been remarkably good over the summer.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We move on to topical questions.

Lough Neagh Fishing Industry: Support

T1. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether support will be forthcoming for the fishing industry on Lough Neagh, given that he will acknowledge that Mr McGlone has written to him several times and has had a number of conversations with him about that issue. (AQT 321/17-22)

Mr Poots: We recognise that the Lough Neagh eel fishery has been affected, and we will be looking to provide some support for that sector. We are looking at around £250,000 to implement a support scheme for inland fishermen who fish on Lough Neagh for the eel and scale fisheries. That course of work is not complete, but that is certainly the figure that we are looking at to provide support for Lough Neagh fishermen.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for that. He has provided part of the answer to my follow-up question, which is whether he will give full consideration to providing support for the eel fisheries and the scale fishing industry on Lough Neagh.

Mr Poots: Yes, and I recognise that a lot of these people have a real love for going out onto that lough and fishing. It is not the most profitable thing in the world, and they have been significantly affected as a consequence of COVID. So, I trust that we will be able to offer them some support and help to enable them to keep their nets and boats in reasonable shape for future years.

EU Designated Points of Entry

T2. **Ms Ennis** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after stating that she found his response to Mr Allister's question to be quite worrying, given the significant implications for Warrenpoint port in her constituency, to provide an update on the preparations for our ports and airports to become EU designated points of entry. (AQT 322/17-22)

Mr Poots: A submission was made to the European Union by the UK Government on that issue. It is not something that I did; it is something that the UK Government did. They have agreed a protocol that I do not agree with, quite frankly. That protocol has the potential to cost every home in Northern Ireland additional money as a consequence of adding checks, which will have a cost to business that will be passed to consumers. It is incredibly important that consumers are not impacted. The consequence of lorries that are bringing food from Britain to Northern Ireland, which we will consume, having to go through checks, has the potential to cost the people who you represent more money. You might be happy to sell that to them. You might be happy to tell people that it is a good idea that supermarkets and corner shops in Northern Ireland charge more for their goods because we have created barriers that are unnecessary. I am not in that position.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Member for her supplementary question, I apologise most sincerely to her. I suggested that she send her press statements to the 'Mid Ulster Mail'. I of course meant to say the 'Down Recorder'.

Ms Ennis: Emma Sheerin is very annoyed that you got that mixed up.

I thank the Minister. Given that he is not prepared to give an answer to the question that I asked and that, in his previous responses today, he said that he is opposed to infrastructure at our sea ports, is he signalling his intention to put a temporary stop to the SPS point of entry controls? The Minister has to agree with me that any temporary stop to the work of his Department on SPS point of entry controls, which are, let us remind ourselves, an obligation

to fulfil the protocol, would be detrimental and in conflict with the Executive's position on the matter.

Mr Poots: The decision that went to the European Union was made by DEFRA. We will just have to wait and see how things are taken forward. I can assure the Member that I am not one who wants to create any barriers, and I am not looking for barriers to be created between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic either, for that matter. I am not looking for barriers to be put around Northern Ireland. I am looking for access to our markets to be as free as possible and for people who are bringing necessary goods to us to have access that is as free as possible.

Tree Planting: Progress

T3. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on his pledge that 18 million trees will be planted across Northern Ireland over the next 10 years. (AQT 323/17-22)

Mr Poots: Considerable work has already been done on that issue, and I welcome the work in my Department by the staff who have been focusing on that issue. There is absolute commitment to ensuring that we take this forward. We have also been in contact with the Queen's Commonwealth Canopy as we look to develop through that programme and receive support from it. We will be looking to draw down funding from as many places as possible, and we will be looking to ensure that we use as much of the public estate as possible and get as much buy-in from people who own private land as well in terms of planting more trees and encouraging that development.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Will the Minister consider broadening out the scheme to include forests that have been culled due to the ash dieback disease?

Mr Poots: In some senses, that is merely a replacement for what has been lost, but we are looking for new trees to be planted. I recognise the difficulty of ash dieback, but that is a slightly separate issue, if we were to identify support for it. I recognise that ash dieback has the potential to ruin a population of trees that has existed for centuries, not just in Northern Ireland or Ireland but right across the United Kingdom. Therefore, it causes me a lot of concern, but we need to move forward and plant as many appropriate trees as possible in the appropriate places, and we need to continue to identify a means of counteracting ash dieback, which is having terrible consequences.

Salmon: Increasing Numbers

T4. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has any evidence that the number of salmon coming into our rivers has increased, which is something that he became aware of during his travels and his time spent at home when we could not go out, when he spoke to a lot of fishermen, who are known for spinning big yarns, who told him that the numbers are like they were 40 years ago, which they are putting down to the lack of commercial fishing out in the Atlantic. (AQT 324/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department has been seeking to stop net fishing for many years, and most of that is now done away with. The people who put the nets at the mouths of

our rivers no longer do that, and that is positive because it allows more salmon to get back into our rivers. It is a hugely complex issue. Changes in water temperatures, climate change and all of that have been blamed for a lot of the issues around the lack of salmon. Our waterways in general are a lot cleaner than they were 20 years ago, and we need to continue to work on that to ensure that we have clean water systems, the appropriate spawning grounds and no netting and that we do the appropriate things to ensure that we reduce carbon emissions across Northern Ireland.

Mr Catney: Minister, this is slightly off the point that I made, but I heard about the 2,000 pigs that were killed on a farm. I want to thank, as I am sure you do, the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service and the animal welfare rescue teams for dealing with what they came across.

Mr Poots: Absolutely. It is horrific, first of all, for the animals, and it will be horrific for the owner of the property. Representatives from that area have been in touch with me, and, as I indicated, our veterinary service will work appropriately to provide the support that it can for that place.

Farm Business Improvement Scheme: Update

T5. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the farm business improvement scheme. (AQT 325/17-22)

Mr Poots: The farm business improvement scheme is something that we wish to take forward. It has been held back as a consequence of some of the decisions that have been coming from Shared Environmental Services (SES). I have given some instruction to SES that it should stay with the 1% while we do a course of work that will ensure that ammonia will be reduced, and reduced significantly, across Northern Ireland and that, consequently, we can have a farm business improvement scheme that will allow growth and, at the same time, ensure that the environment is protected.

Mr T Buchanan: Thank you, Minister. Have you any plans for further tranches of tier 1?

Mr Poots: Yes, we intend to announce further tranches of the farm business improvement scheme. That is a course of work that we will continue to do, and hopefully we will make those announcements in the not-too-distant future. I did have to deal with some issues so that people would actually get the planning permission to carry out the developments that they are proposing. We need to recognise that these developments will ensure that people are able to stay in the countryside, that there are more jobs in the countryside, that there is more support for local towns and villages and the shops and businesses that are in those villages, and that there are more employment opportunities for the young people who are brought up in rural areas.

Veterinary School for Northern Ireland

T6. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he would support a business case to demonstrate the need for a veterinary school in Northern Ireland, given that he spoke earlier about the importance of vets during the COVID-19 outbreak. (AQT 326/17-22)

Mr Poots: Yes, I would, particularly on the basis that a lot of our young people are having to go outside the UK to study veterinary science. In our veterinary practices, there are many people who have come from outside Northern Ireland — outside the United Kingdom and Ireland, for that matter. It is quite common to have vets from many parts of Europe, for example, working here in Northern Ireland. I do not have any issue with those people working in Northern Ireland, by the way, but I think that it is much more sustainable to have vets who have been trained at home, have stayed here and will carry out the work here. I am very supportive. The agriculture industry needs that professionalism and that skill base. We need a facility like that, even for qualitative research to happen, so I am very supportive of that.

Mr M Bradley: I mentioned this at an Agriculture Committee meeting not that long ago and also at a recent meeting with the new Ulster University vice chancellor, Professor Paul Bartholomew. It is my view that this needs to be explored in conjunction with the Department for the Economy. An initial proposal has mooted the Coleraine campus as a possible site. I am keen to progress this proposal to a reality.

Mr Poots: I am perfectly happy to support such a proposal, if it comes forward from the Department for the Economy. Coleraine is an entirely logical site. I know that it has been talked about for some time. There was also talk, certainly some time back, of private sector support. We have significant interests, both in production and on the agriculture side, in having such a facility and that qualitative training. It would be a major boost for Ulster University to have it, and it would really help to move things forward at the Coleraine campus.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: A 10-second question, Mr Buckley. The Minister will get a 10-second answer.

Scale Fishing Rights: Lough Neagh

T7. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he and his Department are fully aware of the ongoing legal case over the ownership of scale fishing rights in Lough Neagh, with its potential implications for, in particular, the proposed new permit system, which would take responsibility away from his Department and place it into the ownership of a particular cooperative. (AQT 327/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am aware of that, and, being legal matters, those things will be tricky. I will want to have full assurances on those matters and to know that we are fully compliant with the law in how we conduct ourselves.

2.45 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. I ask Members to take their ease for a minute or so to allow Members and officials to get in and out of the Chamber.

Communities

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the first person on the list, I advise Members that questions 9 and 13 have been withdrawn, as have topical questions 7 and 10.

Domestic Violence: Support for Male Victims

1. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Communities what support her Department has given to men fleeing domestic violence since the introduction of lockdown in March 2020. (AQO 593/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): The Member will be pleased to know that I am meeting Men's Alliance NI to discuss support for male victims of domestic abuse. Last year, a total of 1,088 households fleeing domestic violence were accepted as statutorily homeless and therefore were considered as full-duty applicants. Between 1 April and 31 August this year, 59 single males presented as homeless citing domestic violence, 41 of whom have, to date, been accepted as homeless.

From its 2019-2020 budget, the Housing Executive spent just under £13 million supporting households who were homeless or were threatened with homelessness. That funding enables the Housing Executive to support men suffering from domestic abuse through the delivery of its statutory duties such as the provision of temporary accommodation and furniture storage. Additionally, the Housing Executive supports a range of organisations that provide support and services to households who are homeless or are threatened with homelessness, including men suffering from domestic abuse.

Ms Bradshaw: In the Housing Executive's list of housing-related support under the Supporting People programme, one of the categories refers to women at risk of domestic violence. Given what you have just said, it seems that practice is out of line with policy. Will you review the policy to bring it up to date so that it does not discriminate against men?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will not be discriminating against anyone. The Member will probably appreciate that the Supporting People programme has been out for a long time now. That is not to say that there was no domestic violence against men — there was — but it certainly did not reach a number that allowed it to be included in Supporting People. I am happy to look at that, because it is about being inclusive.

Dr Aiken: Will the Minister undertake a review of the practice of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, which, I understand from constituency work just today, seems to allocate only 20 points for domestic abuse issues. That figure is far too low, so I would like the Minister to make a commitment that that will be reviewed by the Housing Executive.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member's question is important. Actually, it is worse than that: anyone fleeing their home as a result of domestic violence is not even considered as being intimidated. That featured in the review of the allocation of social points for housing. I am looking at that, because, regardless of where we are as parties, we all felt, even in debates, that that was unfair and unjust.

Ms Bailey: Given that five women whom we know of so far have been murdered in their own home in Northern Ireland during the lockdown, does the Minister think that any further measures can be put in place by her Department to support the increasing need for emergency refuge space?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I absolutely think that there is a need, particularly in areas outside Belfast. For example,

Caoimhe Archibald mentioned to me that, in Coleraine, in her area, there was no emergency accommodation and people from that area had to go to Belfast or Derry. When you are going through a trauma like that in the mouth of a global pandemic and you have to go somewhere outside your family support to get succour and refuge, it is horrendous. It is something that I am absolutely looking at.

The other aspect of it is the impact on children's schools. We take for granted all the connections that we have as families. For people who have been the victim of physical or psychological abuse or whatever it is that forces them to flee their home, we need to ensure that they get emergency accommodation that is as close to their family support or support systems, including schools, as possible.

Welfare Mitigation Schemes: Primary Legislation

2. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister for Communities whether she will introduce primary legislation to extend the welfare mitigation schemes. (AQO 594/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The New Decade, New Approach deal included a commitment to extend the welfare mitigation schemes that my Department currently delivers. That was to ensure continued assistance for vulnerable people who have lost their benefit due to welfare reform. I can confirm that I absolutely intend to introduce primary legislation to amend the Welfare Reform (NI) Order 2015 to provide for an extension of welfare mitigation payments for people affected by the so-called bedroom tax. A draft Bill has been shared with my Executive colleagues, and I am personally committed to securing agreement to proceed as a matter of urgency. I will also bring forward new regulations to provide for the extension of the remaining mitigation schemes. They will be draft affirmative, and I expect that they will be laid shortly after the Bill has been introduced. While the delay in progressing the legislation to extend the mitigation schemes is not ideal, I stress that my Department continues to make payments to people who are eligible. That is possible because my Department has agreed contingency arrangements with the Department of Finance so that payments are currently made under the sole authority of the Budget (No. 2) Act. Those arrangements will continue and will be kept under review.

Ms Hunter: Will the new regulations mentioned include additional mitigation for families affected by the benefit cap and the two-child tax credit rule?

Ms Ní Chuilín: They absolutely should. There are three issues that the Cliff Edge Coalition — not just them — have mentioned: the bedroom tax, the so-called two-child rule and the benefit cap. There are many other asks, but those are the three central points that we have met those coalitions on. It is absolutely something that I envisage being included in any future legislation and regulations.

Ms Mullan: Minister, will you give a commitment to support the advice sector through the mitigation package, given the crucial role that it plays in assisting people in accessing their entitlements, particularly during this challenging time?

Ms Ní Chuilín: In short, yes. The advice sector has received money from the Department, and it will say it probably needs to receive more. I met a section of the advice sector not so long ago. I said it at the time, and I

say it again now: I appreciate the role that the independent advice sector has played, particularly through COVID-19. A lot of people were isolated, and people in the community and voluntary sector were often the first responders for people who found themselves in really difficult circumstances. We cannot take that work for granted; we need to keep investing in it. Where there are opportunities — it is about where there are opportunities — to give additional support and do specific pieces of work, this Department, particularly on Deirdre Hargey's watch, has never been found wanting.

Ms Armstrong: I start by thanking the Minister for the planned extension of the welfare mitigations. That is very much needed. Will those welfare mitigations be reviewed to see whether they work and whether there are any gaps that need to be filled that are not already being considered? Will that review come to the Committee so that we can look at it and help you with it?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will know that I have always brought any substantial changes to the Committee, even in my short time, and I will continue to do that. I still consider myself to be a member of the Committee, so I know the craic.

The issue is that there are gaps. There are always gaps and things we could do better, so, if we cannot get those reflected in the legislation, we most definitely need them to be reflected in the regulations. Certainly, the three issues that I mentioned in response to the question that Cara Hunter posed are raised with us time after time, and they need to be sorted. If we have the time and the money to sort out the rest, we will certainly look at them. However, those are three huge gaps that we must try to plug.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for her commitment to extend and strengthen the welfare mitigations. They are important for mitigating the worst impacts of welfare reform.

Minister, social sector size criteria, the bedroom tax, will be around for a long time to come. It is not going away — we all know that — and we have all given a commitment to support those affected by it. Often, constituents have approached my office wanting to downsize from properties that are larger than they require, but the current system does not allow them to do that. Will you advise what work the Department, in conjunction with the Housing Executive and housing associations, intends to undertake to support those who wish to downsize?

Ms Ní Chuilín: We need to ensure that the mitigations are kept, first of all. For people who wish to downsize, it is not straightforward, because the stock is not there. That is the problem. Often, even housing associations that attempted to build small, studio apartments in preparation for the bedroom tax did not get support for that because families end up living in shoeboxes, and we cannot have that. The Member will know that, even through their reclassification, housing associations cannot — the right to buy scheme has ended, and we are looking at proposals for the Housing Executive.

Anyone who is leaving their family home, where they have probably reared their children and grandchildren, needs appropriate accommodation that is proofed as suitable for living out their best years and has all the necessary adaptations. I am just being straight with you: it is not straightforward. It is very cumbersome, but it is something

that we absolutely have to look at, irrespective of the bedroom tax, such is the problem. The demand for social housing is increasing, but the supply is not. That will not be reconciled; it has not been. We need to be mindful of what we ask for, particularly in ensuring that we have homes that are fit for purpose. When it comes to downsizing, the experience across the board is that that is not always the case.

COVID-19: Voluntary and Community Sector Financial Support

3. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for Communities how the financial support provided by her Department has assisted the voluntary and community sector during the COVID-19 crisis. (AQO 595/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The voluntary and community sector has continued to play a front-line role over the past six months, particularly in response to the global pandemic. Very often, as has been acknowledged in the Chamber, they were seen as the first responders.

In terms of financial support, £1.5 million was directed through councils at the outset of the emergency to support community-led programmes for people in financial stress, in need of food or experiencing isolation. A further £3.2 million was allocated to support that work: £1.7 million for the COVID community support fund; £750,000 for an access-to-food fund; and £700,000 for a financial inclusion fund. The COVID-19 charities fund — £15.5 million — was opened in June; and I will shortly open applications for a £7 million social enterprise fund. My Department is also providing a safe reopening fund of £2.5 million to support safe return of provision of face-to-face community services to all of our people.

Ms Kimmins: It is important to emphasise the impact of the measures taken by your Department now and when our colleague Deirdre Hargey was Minister. It is important to commend that. In the light of that, Minister, what are your plans to continue to support the community and voluntary sector as we continue to navigate COVID-19?

3.00 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member and, indeed, other Members in the House will agree that the work initiated by Deirdre Hargey, on behalf of the Executive, to support community and voluntary groups has been exemplary. As we move with easements, hopefully out of COVID, that money and investment needs to continue, albeit in a different way. The Member will be aware, from her constituency, of the work of some of the neighbourhood renewal groups. They are already working along the lines of what they can do with regard to anti-poverty. One thing that government, right across the piece, cannot ignore is the way that the community responded to help their friends, families, neighbours and, indeed, communities that they would not normally work with throughout the pandemic. We need to protect that investment.

Mr Buckley: Does the Minister recognise the importance of community sport in a post-COVID environment and the need to financially support social sports to further build capacity in the system?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, I do recognise the role that sporting organisations have and, indeed, will continue to have.

Jonathan will remember that, when we were on the Committee, a lot of the sporting organisations were responsible for delivering food and shelter and standing at people's garden gates and talking to them, particularly people in rural communities who were isolated, and that needs to be factored in. Even the presentation that we received from Sport NI showed that a lot of people were doing their best in a very difficult situation and that they made the best use of the small bit of money that they received.

We certainly need to ensure that, as part of community development, working in partnership, co-design and co-production, sporting bodies and small sporting groups are involved.

Mr Butler: Minister, you called many of those involved in the sector first responders, and, in many cases, with regard to poverty and mental health, they indeed are. Can you tell us whether a study is being done to identify what services may be lost, as a consequence of any lack of funding, and what further support may be required to ensure that groups will survive the crisis? In particular, groups such as Atlas Womens Centre and Via Wings in Dromore.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am unaware of any group that has lost its funding, which is good news. If there are groups in the Member's constituency, he can come to me about them. If anything, most groups received additional funding because of the work that they are doing. I visited Via Wings in Dromore and it was an absolute pleasure. Via Wings, like many other groups from a community and voluntary background are involved in faith-based work. They took the food box and showed me how to make it stretch and do more with it. I do not know whether that is an urban/rural thing, but Departments certainly have a lot to learn from those groups. I commend the work that Via Wings and loads of other groups have done, and are continuing to do, to help people who are vulnerable.

Mr Durkan: I commend the community and voluntary sector for its invaluable work throughout the COVID-19 crisis and, no doubt, beyond.

The Minister referred to the fact that no groups have lost their funding. Will the Minister give a commitment to look at the community and voluntary groups — vital lifelines in their communities — that fall out of the normal funding streams of her Department? For example, Eglinton Community Hall in my constituency is not funded by DFC but it is an integral part of the fabric of the community, provides many services and has been a lifeline throughout the COVID period. However, because it cannot generate any rental income, it has had to resort to crowdfunding efforts to generate funding.

Ms Ní Chuilín: From the two questions that have come up, I will certainly take it on board to find out what groups have lost out. The charities fund was exactly for that. It was for groups that did not have access to public funds, such as the group in Eglinton, that are doing a good job, and many others across the board. Will they need funding in the future? Absolutely. There are many others out there. From COVID-19, we have learnt what people have done with a small amount of money. Certainly, if the Member wants to write to me about anything specific, I am happy to receive that and, hopefully, reply to it. I will also undertake to try and find out whether any group lost out on any funds.

Housing Executive: NDNA Proposals

4. Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Communities to outline her Department's plans to help revitalise the Housing Executive, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach. (AQO 596/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. The commitment in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) to tackle the maintenance backlog for the Housing Executive's properties reflects a much wider revitalisation programme aimed at securing the long-term future of social housing stock.

The Member will be aware that the backlog of maintenance referenced in New Decade, New Approach is really significant. Estimates in 2018 showed that £7.1 billion of investment is required over the next 30 years, with £3 billion required in the next 11 years to deal with the urgent backlog. I appreciate that those are March 2018 figures, but they are still stark. The Housing Executive simply cannot afford that level of investment on its own. This is a strategic issue of long-term significance, and it will require broad political and social consensus. Part of the solution will ensure that rents remain affordable and sustainable to Housing Executive tenants, and we are looking through the NDNA process at other ways to try and meet that requirement.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Minister for her response and for her commitment to affordable rents. What approaches is the Minister considering to provide more social housing and meet environmental protection needs?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Meeting social housing needs is a mammoth task. To be honest, I am looking at exercises that were undertaken, such as looking at the availability of land. I am meeting the newly formed partnership panel with local government to look at the whole local development plan process. I am asking officials to talk to officials from other Departments to see what land has been banked and what land is derelict because it is essential that we increase supply to reduce demand.

In relation to the environment, we have not been successful in getting the green homes grant scheme just yet, but I anticipate that we will get a Barnett consequential. That is looking at things like ensuring that we reduce fuel poverty, use new construction methods and so on, but we are committed to doing that anyway through what the housing associations do.

The challenge of increasing the supply of social housing and, indeed, affordable housing is one that we need to take for at least 10 years rights across this Executive to get met.

Mr Beggs: The Minister indicated that some £3 billion is needed over the next 10 years to maintain and modernise Housing Executive homes. Clearly, the current model is not working. What action is being taken to bring about change and improvement? Six months has passed since Stormont has returned. We need to have improvements, we need change, we need proposals. When are they coming?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is £3 billion over the next 11 years. Even with our 2018 figures, it is probably reduced. The Member is right to ask: where are the proposals? The main proposals were in New Decade, New Approach, looking

at the ability to remove corporation tax that the Housing Executive has to pay — the only social landlord that has to pay corporation tax — and also looking at getting rid of historical debt. I have already met my colleague Conor Murphy to expedite that. That, in itself, will mean that the Housing Executive can borrow money and build. That is really needed.

To be frank, we also need to stop blocking houses in each of our constituencies. There is some NIMBYism out there against people who have disabilities, Travellers and people who are one religion or another. That has held up the potential to develop sites. That needs to be knocked on the head.

We also need to ensure that the investment is there for a longer-term programme because, unless we seriously look at this and tackle this crisis in homelessness and housing, we will ensure that three generations will be reared under one roof. I do not think that any of us wants that on our watch. You are right that we need those proposals. As soon as those are advanced through the NDNA piece, my Department will be working with other colleagues in local government and right across the Executive to try and get that restored.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, you have already mentioned the corporation tax issue. Will you give an outline of the guesstimate of how much money the Housing Executive will have to repay the Treasury because that will have an impact on the ability to maintain homes?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have asked for those figures because the guesstimates are wild, to be frank, Kellie. Like me, you probably have a couple of different sets of figures, even from the Housing Executive on what it needs. Frankly, I hope that the debt is removed, for example, and that the corporation tax of over £13 million a year does not have to be paid. That in itself will ensure that Housing Executive reserves can be built up and used in a way that allows more houses to be built and more construction methods to be used — in answer to Philip's question — to make sure that those homes are energy efficient and are of the best possible standard.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, I apologise. We have six minutes left, and we are still on question 4, so I have to move on to the next question.

PIP/ESA Appeals: Oral Hearings

5. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister for Communities when oral hearings will recommence for personal independence payment (PIP) and employment and support allowance (ESA) appeals. (AQO 597/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Sorry, Paul, that was not at you; it was at the other Paul.

Oral hearings using technology options will commence with effect from 28 September this year. Face-to-face oral hearings are set to recommence from 28 September in the main hearing centre, subject to the favourable outcome of a risk assessment — that is always in brackets. Face-to-face oral hearings at venues are set to recommence from mid-October, again subject to the completion of risk assessments. I have asked that alternative accommodation options be sought to facilitate hearings in local towns and villages.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does the Minister agree that this is a critical aspect of getting support to the people who are most vulnerable? The fact that it has taken the Department so long, and it has not even completed the risk assessments yet, is failing the people who need the support the most. I have spoken to the Department of Justice, which has its court venues open and is waiting for the risk assessments. Will the Minister give the House a commitment that those risk assessments will be completed as soon as possible to allow those most vulnerable people the support that they require?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have given the Member dates for when the hearings will commence, so the risk assessments are being done. I do not want a long process or for people who are waiting and may be due substantial amounts of money if decisions are overturned to be waiting any further. I have also asked them to go out to where people are. Anybody in receipt of the payments is suffering with a substantial level of disability. It is one of the most difficult benefits to get. I want to make it as easy as possible. I am not slowing anything down. I want to give the Member that assurance. If he has evidence that I am, he needs to come to the Department.

Mr Carroll: Given that the PIP application and appeals process was already traumatic for people and the fact that the Department is still contacting appellants to say that they can have appeals over the phone or by videoconferencing, which is very unsuitable for many people, has the Department considered extending the time frame for people being moved off DLA or appealing PIPs, so that they are not under any more undue stress at the time of a health pandemic?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Let me give the Member as much reassurance as possible. I have tried to be as flexible as possible in ensuring that people who are most vulnerable are not subjected to any further trauma or stress. That is what we are trying to do. If face to face suits people, that may be the process. If videoconferencing or teleconferencing does not suit and they feel that they are at a disadvantage, we need to work to address that. If that means an extension, I will certainly look at that. From the evidence that I have had up to now, and I have asked about it regularly, that does not seem to be the case. That comes from people working in the areas that suffer the highest deprivation with those who receive the highest levels of the benefits. If it turns out to be something else, I will look at it.

Mr Allen: As highlighted, the appeals process is very stressful and daunting for those who are going through it. Will the Minister highlight any actions or steps that her Department is taking to clear any potential backlog in the system?

Ms Ní Chuilín: As I am sure that the Member will appreciate, getting the system to go out to towns and villages has been a positive step. It is better. If you are not from Belfast and have to travel to Belfast for a hearing in a court setting, it is daunting. I would feel a bit daunted. Our trying to get the hearings brought out to people is, hopefully, one way of reducing stress — but it is only a bit of stress — and ensuring that whatever option they take is one that they are most comfortable with.

That is what we have tried to do in the Department for Communities to support people who may be entitled to

a lot more money than they are receiving. I will look at anything that I can do to reduce the stress that people go through as they wait for an appeal.

3.15 pm

Ms Bailey: It has been brought to my attention that appellants for PIP and ESA are being sent multiple letters when they appeal to suggest to them that they should apply for a paper-based appeal, but those letters do not inform them that they have thirty times less chance of success with the paper-based appeal. Is the Minister aware of that practice?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am not aware of the volume of it; I am aware that people have been offered a paper-based appeal as an option. I do not want to misquote or misrepresent what you have said, but it sounds like a paper-based appeal is of such a nature that it puts people off going for face-to-face. I do not know. I am happy to talk to the Member to find out exactly what is going on. I know that paper-based appeals have been used in my constituency and have suited the clients, but that will not suit everybody.

Arts Sector: Support Measures

6. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister for Communities what measures are being taken to support the arts sector. (AQO 598/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: At the outset of the emergency, Minister Hargey announced a £1.5 million creative support fund, recognising that further support would be required. I secured an additional £4 million in June monitoring to reopen the fund, first for individuals, including freelancers and self-employed in the sector, and then for organisations. The funding is in recognition of the importance of a vibrant arts sector for wider social and economic recovery.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You have 20 seconds.

Mr Givan: I thank the Minister for her response, but the arts sector will be greatly disappointed. Through a Barnett consequential, we received £33 million, and, today, 36 signatories have penned a letter to all MLAs asking for urgent funding to be provided. As they put it, if they do not get it urgently, we will have a cultural wasteland. What action will the Minister take to deliver? Otherwise, those organisations will not survive.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: May I suggest to the Minister that, as her half hour is up, she writes to Mr Givan answering that question and outlining what actions she intends to undertake?

We move now to topical questions.

Universal Credit: Johnson Ruling

T1. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for Communities when, to help low-income families here, she will take account of the Court of Appeal's Johnson ruling, arising from a successful judicial challenge by Danielle Johnson and the Child Poverty Action Group in London, given that universal credit is a complicated and unjust benefit and the fact that she will be aware of the situation in which, depending on a claimant's other income, some month's payments are lower than others. (AQT 331/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will provide the Member with a written response, because it is very technical. When the legislation is devolved back to the Assembly, we will have the ability to ensure that, unlike in England, there are continuing mitigations. Therefore, unlike England, we will have mitigations on top, and we want to ensure that that happens. I will get the Member a fuller response on Danielle's case.

Mr McNulty: Can the Minister advise the House how many cases of people who have been impacted by the ruling her Department is dealing with? Can she give a time frame for resolution?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will add that to the written response that I will give the Member, including, if possible, any resolution.

COVID Partnerships: Thanks

T2. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for Communities to join him in thanking the many community groups, sporting groups and church groups across Northern Ireland, particularly South Antrim, that have made their facilities available to schools during the COVID pandemic. (AQT 332/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I certainly will. The Member was here throughout questions for oral answer, so he will know that I am genuinely delighted by the partnership that has developed across the community and voluntary sector, sporting groups and faith-based groups during COVID. I want that relationship to endure beyond COVID, and that needs to be recognised through investment from the Executive.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much for your remarks. I would like the Minister to engage closely with the Minister of Education so that a list is made available of the facilities that have been supported by her Department and the Executive over the past couple of years and they are available for schools. Regrettably, we may be heading for another COVID spike, and anything that we can do to keep the maximum number of children in education would be much appreciated.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am happy to write to the Minister of Education to see if we can take that forward. I have met no resistance whatever from the Department of Education or the Education Authority to using facilities and schools infrastructure such as buses to help communities. I am not saying that the Member is suggesting that, but I would be shocked. All the usual risk assessments and all the reasons why you cannot do something were overcome. People saw that the sky did not fall in when those partnerships happened, and they need to be supported for the future — hopefully, without a second spike.

Housing Allocation Scheme: Review

T3. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the housing allocation scheme, given that although a review of the scheme was undertaken and reported back many years ago, albeit that its findings do not appear to have been introduced or published. (AQT 333/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I mentioned, I think, in response to Steve Aiken's question on domestic violence that intimidation points for people suffering from domestic violence was included in a lot of the responses that parties made. I am

looking at those, and I will go to the Committee, because we need to change the way that allocations are made. We need to ensure that there is a fairer system.

I remember the debate in the House. We looked at intimidation points, and, as sure as whatever, as soon as the new scheme came, the levels of people claiming to be intimidated went through the roof. We need better and stronger verification of intimidation. The allocation process looks at many areas, and I give you and other Members a commitment that we are actively looking at that as we speak.

Mr McGrath: I welcome that. A large scheme of over 100 houses is being constructed in Downpatrick. There is concern that the latent demand in the Housing Executive identifies a need, but, when it comes to allocation, big numbers of people from outside the area are attracted. Could the idea of locality for a certain proportion of the houses in social housing schemes for local people to meet the latent demand that has been identified be considered?

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is actually illegal, but I hear what the Member says. If I understand the Member right — I do not want to put words in his mouth — local people languishing on a housing waiting list should have the aspiration, hope and, indeed, expectation to live locally. What happens is that people from other areas who claim to be intimidated come into an estate, get brand new houses and then move from one estate to another. I sympathise completely with the Member on that, and we need to ensure that that does not happen.

If local people have that area as their choice and they have the points that they need — it goes back to your first question — when will we look at the points to ensure that those people will get houses? Even a new system will not ensure that that happens. We need to look at better ways of testing genuine intimidation cases as opposed to those who, I think, across the House, were dismissed for what they were doing.

Kickstart Scheme

T4. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister for Communities to explain the delay in delivering the Northern Ireland equivalent of the Kickstart scheme, £2 billion of funding for which was announced by the Chancellor on 8 July, with the scheme being launched on 2 September. (AQT 334/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: First of all, the scheme will be launched in November, and I want to get it right. I want it to be a bespoke scheme, not just a replication of, for example, Steps to Work or anything else. I do not want young people to be sanctioned. I want to include young people who have autism and are on the spectrum. I also want to ensure that employers include those youngsters and not doing so willy-nilly or piecemeal. I want to make sure that we learn the lessons learned throughout COVID about the response by the community and voluntary sector so that they, too, can be considered as employers.

That is the position. I had a meeting on it this morning. We are looking at a bespoke response to needs that we already know. I will also meet service providers, employers and the Children's Commissioner.

Mr Muir: What are the Minister's targets for participation in the scheme? Can she assure the House today that the Barnett consequentials that have been received and the

money that will be allocated to her Department to run the scheme will not be surrendered at the end of the year as a result of inability to spend that funding?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No surrender, really [*Laughter.*] To be honest, I think that it is a mortal sin to send money back to the British Treasury. I want to ensure that the young people who, we now know, need the scheme get the best possible scheme. Lots could be said about previous schemes. I want to learn from what did not work. I want to look at the needs of young people now. I want to look at what we have come through during the pandemic and ensure that that experience and the partnership approach to getting young people meaningful employment, albeit for six months, are taken on board. That is where we are.

Arts Sector: Financial Support

T5. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the £33 million Barnett consequential that was allocated to the Executive and her efforts to use it to help the arts sector here, given that when reference was made earlier to the plight of the arts sector and the impact of COVID on arts venues, practitioners and patrons, the Minister outlined the measures that her Department has implemented to support those who are working — rather, not working at the moment — in the arts industry. (AQT 335/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have made a bid for that £33 million. I know that it will be discussed this week or, at the very latest, next week. The bid is in, and I have communicated that. I fully understand where people are in the sector. Their livelihoods stopped overnight as a result of COVID. We have had discussions with the Arts Council and with lots of fora and consortia across the board. We want to make sure that we get the bid in, the bid is accepted and we get the money out as soon as possible.

Mr Durkan: Minister, I wish you well with your bid, and I will take Mr Givan's earlier question as an indication of DUP support for that bid. Getting the money into the Department is one thing; getting it out to those who need it is another. Can the Minister assure us that her officials have been working with the Arts Council and others to design a scheme that ensures that the money gets to where it is needed and does so as quickly as possible?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, I will ensure that the money gets to people who need it. There are also lots of groups, individuals, freelancers and independents who do not get money from the Arts Council. We need to make sure, as best we can, that they are included. There is a lot of expectation. I have had no indication that there are any difficulties with the proposal. The Minister of Finance has taken a raft of bids, and mine is in the queue. He will not tell me where it is in the queue, but it is in the queue. I imagine that we will hear some announcements very shortly.

Online Gambling: Withdrawal Reversals

T6. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department has any plans to ban withdrawal reversals from online gambling accounts. (AQT 336/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: We are looking at legislation on gambling and at all the options. What happened elsewhere took 10 or 15 years of work. Despite many attempts here, we need to take it to another level. Certainly, we need to look at

online and problem gambling to protect people the best we can. We are looking at the different stages of legislation, starting as soon as possible in this mandate.

Mr McGuigan: I welcome the Minister's answer and her commitment to introduce legislation in this mandate. We will, of course, work to ensure that that works. Obviously, regulation is key to reducing gambling-related harm, but this is also a public health issue. Is the Minister working with her Executive colleague the Minister of Health to ensure that Health addresses some of the harm that results from problem gambling?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have met Robin Swann to discuss problem gambling and, indeed, the modernisation of liquor licensing. We discussed procedures for minimum alcohol pricing.

We have discussed it all. At the end of the day, it is everybody's business: mental health is every Minister's business. I want to assure the Member of the steps that we are taking to work together to try to support people with addictions whose families are going through crises. We will see what else we can do, very practically, across each of our Departments.

3.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Kellie Armstrong for a question. I warn you that you may not get to ask a supplementary question.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much.

Post Office Accounts

T8. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Communities what work she is doing to calm people's nerves about the removal of their Post Office accounts, given that we are only six months away from the Department for Work and Pensions finishing its contract with the Post Office and the fact that it is incredibly important that, in rural areas, work is done with the Commissioner for Older People and the Department for the Economy to find out how banks will allow people to get access to their accounts (AQT 338/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will know that that is a reserved issue. However, post offices are part of communities, so I will go back and ask officials what work we are doing with other Departments and take it from there. I will write to the Member with any response.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister for Communities. The next item of business is questions to the Assembly Commission. I ask Members to take their ease for a few minutes to allow the relevant people to exit and enter the Chamber.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members that question 4 has been withdrawn and that questions 2 and 6, 3 and 5 and 7 and 8 have been grouped.

Parliament Buildings: COVID-19 Safety Measures

1. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the measures being taken in Parliament Buildings to reduce the risk of COVID-19. (AQO 608/17-22)

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Member for her question. At the outset of the pandemic, the Commission established a COVID-19 response group to ensure that it could respond to developments in a timely manner. The group has continued to meet regularly and has sought to ensure that all relevant regulations and guidance is followed in Parliament Buildings.

The Assembly Commission decided to close Parliament Buildings to the public from 9.00 pm on 18 March 2020. In doing so, it decided that no public tours, events or visitor activities should take place and that members of the public would not have any access to Parliament Buildings until further notice. At that time, only permanent pass-holders and those essential to the delivery of Assembly business still had access to the Building. Shortly thereafter, the number of Members and staff attending Parliament Buildings was minimised, with homeworking facilitated through the roll-out of IT hardware and software.

Social distancing of 2 metres has been employed throughout the Building. That includes alterations to the layout of the Assembly Chamber that were agreed by the Business Committee, alterations to Committee meeting rooms, including the installation of the StarLeaf system to facilitate virtual or hybrid Committee meetings, and alterations to public access areas, such as the canteen. A strict cleaning regime has also been established to keep the Building clean, with a particular focus on contact points, such as handrails and door handles.

To ensure that all Building users maintain good hand hygiene, soap and paper towels have been made available in all toilets and at tea points throughout the Building. In addition, supplies of antibacterial wipes, hand sanitiser and hand-sanitising stations have been provided.

For some areas where social distancing is less easily maintained, including the canteen, the search facility and the entrance areas, Perspex screens have been installed. Members may wish to note that in late March, the Commission restricted access to, and egress from the Building to the front entrance only. Access and egress is now available again via the east and west doors. Signage has been erected around the Building to remind users of the need to maintain social distancing, to ensure good hand hygiene and what they should do in the event of feeling unwell.

The Commission has sought to communicate with all Building users through the provision of regular updates on emerging COVID-19 guidance and on changes required in Parliament Buildings.

The Commission and the response group have monitored and reviewed — and will continue to — the measures in place, and will adapt those measures to meet any changes in the regulations and guidance.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I would just like to make a point. Questions should be responded to in two minutes or less. I appreciate that I gave Mr Buchanan some leeway because he has not had to respond to questions before,

to be fair, but Mr O'Dowd will get no such leeway when it comes to his turn because he has a lot of experience. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Member for a very comprehensive response.

Would the Commission agree that the Assembly not only needs to follow public health advice but that it needs to be an exemplar in best practice in how it deals with COVID-19?

Mr K Buchanan: Yes, I would agree with that. My learned colleague Mr Stewart advised me earlier that the policy at the start of the pandemic was that the working group met twice a week. That meeting now happens once a week and there is a weekly review based on risk assessment and the continued guidance from the Executive.

Mr Givan: One of the measures to reduce the risk was that the Bill Office stopped printing legislation. Given that, for example, the Committee for Justice was considering that legislation, it is difficult for Members if they do not have a physical copy, although they can still work onscreen. Could the Commission look at that and perhaps have the Bill Office print the Bill, given that the Commission's primary duty is to enable Members to carry out their job properly?

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Member for his question. That is something that I will take away. I will put that on the agenda for the Commission's next meeting and will come back to the Member, if he is happy with that response.

Mr Chambers: What is the Commission's approach to homeworking by secretariat staff in the future?

Mr K Buchanan: The Commission continues to follow the guidance issued by the Executive, whereby homeworking is likely to be in place for some time. However, where attendance in Parliament Buildings by secretarial staff is required to service the Assembly and its Members, those staff will work safely in the building. Therefore, a blended approach to office and homeworking is envisaged.

Mr Chambers: Thank you.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 2 and 6 are grouped.

Commissioner for Standards: Remit

2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Assembly Commission whether the incoming Commissioner for Standards has a role to investigate the conduct of MLAs who also hold a ministerial office. (AQO 609/17-22)

6. **Mr Chambers** asked the Assembly Commission what powers the incoming Commissioner for Standards will have to investigate complaints made against MLAs. (AQO 613/17-22)

Mr O'Dowd: I am going to give you a lesson now in speed-reading. *[Laughter.]* With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 6 together, and I thank the Members for their questions.

The Commissioner for Standards is an independent office holder and that independence is set out in law. The role, functions and independence of the commissioner are provided by the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. The commissioner's functions include investigating

complaints that a breach of the Assembly's Code of Conduct has occurred.

The investigatory powers of the commissioner include the power to call for witnesses and documents. Section 31 of the 2011 Act makes it an offence in specific circumstances to refuse to comply with the commissioner's exercise of those powers.

The Assembly Commission has limited specific functions relating to the commissioner. Those include providing the commissioner with administrative and other support, including staff, services and accommodation. In addition, under section 19(5) of the 2011 Act, the Assembly has delegated specific functions to the Commission for the arrangement of the appointment of the commissioner.

The Assembly Commission has no role in assessing the circumstances in which complaints against Members who are Ministers may be investigated by the commissioner. The admissibility of any complaint is a matter to be considered by the commissioner. 'The Code of Conduct together with the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members', published under report number NIA 5/16-21 by the Committee on Standards and Privileges, sets out the scope of the code of conduct for Members.

As Members will be aware, yesterday the Assembly appointed Dr Melissa McCullough as the new Commissioner for Standards. I take this opportunity to congratulate Dr McCullough on her appointment and wish her well in her new role.

Mr Beggs: It is particularly important that MLAs who are Executive members set an example to the public and follow the guidance and regulations that they have set. I am surprised that they are not accountable to the Commissioner for Standards, if I have picked up the Commission member correctly. If the commissioner is not able to investigate such breaches, there needs to be a mechanism in order to give the public confidence and to deal with the issue seriously. Will the Commission member confirm that the Commissioner for Standards will have sufficient resources to deal with the backlog that has developed over the past three years and the administrative support to investigate those complaints?

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for his question. Commission officials and the new commissioner will meet to discuss what resources are required and available to the commissioner to carry out her duties. It is in the interests of the entire Assembly to ensure that the commissioner has the resources required to carry out her functions.

Mr Chambers: In light of the position of commissioner being vacant over the past months, will it be within the competency of the office of the Commissioner for Standards to investigate and rule on complaints relating to alleged serious breaches during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Mr O'Dowd: As emphasised in my original answer, the commissioner is independent. It is my understanding that she will be able to investigate complaints that were made during the previous period, relating to whatever matter. However, that is a matter for the commissioner.

Mr Allister: Mr Beggs identifies an obvious lacuna in the accountability provisions. In respect of there being no power in the Commission to investigate Ministers, no doubt the House will be delighted — I hope that the Assembly Commission will be delighted — by the shortly upcoming

opportunity to fill that void by passing clause 5 of my private Member's Bill, which would make the Commission accountable for complaints against Ministers as well, and therefore complete the circle of accountability, which presently has that gap. I trust that the Commission will look forward to such an opportunity to fill that gap.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Strictly speaking, I do not think that there was a question there, but if Mr O'Dowd wants to respond to the statement, it is entirely up to him.

Mr O'Dowd: I always look forward to Mr Allister's contributions. I find them interesting at times.

Let me re-emphasise for Members' information: it is up to the Commissioner for Standards to decide whether a complaint against a Minister fits within the commissioner's remit. The commissioner will decide whether a named person who happens to be a Minister, and the actions that they are accused of, falls under the investigatory powers of the commissioner.

Parliament Buildings: Public Reopening Strategy

3. **Mr McGrath** asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the reopening, with appropriate safeguards, of Parliament Buildings to the public. (AQO 610/17-22)

5. **Mr Dunne** asked the Assembly Commission when public tours and events will resume in Parliament Buildings. (AQO 612/17-22)

Mrs D Kelly: With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will group questions 3 and 5 together.

The Assembly Commission took the decision to close Parliament Buildings to the public from 9.00 pm on 18 March in light of the public health situation. The Commission decided that no public tours, events or visitor activities should take place and that members of the public would not have access to Parliament Buildings until further notice.

The Commission also recognised that the Assembly and its Committees would need to continue to meet to carry out certain political and legislative responsibilities, not least in relation to the response to COVID-19. As such, permanent pass-holders and those essential to the delivery of Assembly business have had continued access to the Building. In addition to that, arrangements have been put in place to ensure the live streaming of Assembly business and the publication of information on the Assembly website and other social media channels. There has also been increased interaction with stakeholders and the delivery of some services using virtual communication tools.

A secretariat-led COVID-19 response group was established to ensure that the Commission has planned for and is ready to respond to developments in relation to the pandemic.

That group has continued to meet regularly and, amongst other things, monitors advice from the Public Health Agency, the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Scientific Adviser and others, and seeks to ensure that all relevant guidance is followed, not least to ensure the health, safety and well-being of those who use Parliament Buildings and, indeed, the wider community.

3.45 pm

The issue of when Parliament Buildings can be reopened to the public, with tours, events and activities resumed, was considered by the Commission at its meeting on 29 July. Members agreed to maintain the current position and to reconsider this at its September meeting, which is likely to be held towards the end of this month. The Commission noted that no unnecessary risks should be taken that would increase the risk of exposure to staff, Members and Members' support staff, particularly given the importance of the work of the Assembly, the already limited capacity of experienced staff, due to the high number of vacancies, and the likely increase in the volume of work anticipated in the autumn as a result of the EU exit.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for her answer. Will any consideration be given to Members who are carrying out work, who may need to meet with one or two individuals as part of that work? It is not always appropriate to do that via Zoom or telephone. Also, some Members' constituencies are quite a distance from Belfast and they do not always have the opportunity to meet up with people in person. Could some sort of rota or booking system be considered so that we could monitor the numbers of people. We have sent out a message to the rest of society that they should be opening and gently getting back to work, whereas our situation is the same as it was back in March. I think that it should be reviewed.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for his question. In my experience, if Members seek to hold meetings with stakeholders and constituents, provided that they have completed their own risk assessment in relation to hosting that meeting in an office, there is nothing to preclude a Member doing that, if they let the booking, admissions and door staff know that they are expecting a visitor. That can be accommodated.

Mr Dunne: We all recognise the importance of Stormont being open to the public. We have lost educational visits, schools, and there is loss to charities and lobby groups. Everyone wants to meet their MLA and greet them here in Stormont, if possible. Can you give us an assurance that the risk assessment will be reviewed on a regular basis, so that these visits can recommence as soon as possible?

Mrs D Kelly: I am happy to give that reassurance. A comprehensive risk assessment was completed and a report has been presented to the Commission for consideration at the next meeting, which will take account of all those findings. However, in the meantime, the Member and others are aware that the Assembly staff have put in place extensive interactive tools, including webinars. They are also looking at outreach and how they can provide an educational experience for schools. Work has also begun on extending the Assembly's website to include a virtual tour of the Assembly. Quite a bit of work has been going on behind the scenes.

Mr Givan: The Members' Dining Room proved to be very popular, not among Members, but the public. We also have a duty to those who are employed through the private business that operates the catering. With that in mind, and our responsibility to those members of staff, when will the Commission look at reopening, for the public to access those catering facilities, which provide important employment to staff in the Building?

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for his question. The issue of catering facilities, not just for members of the public but for staff in the Building, is something that I raised earlier with the Speaker, and I assure the Member that it is on the agenda for the Commission's meeting, with the Speaker's agreement, in two weeks' time.

Centenary of Northern Ireland 2021

7. **Mr Givan** asked the Assembly Commission what plans it has in place to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021. (AQO 614/17-22)

8. **Mr Storey** asked the Assembly Commission how it will maximise the use of its buildings and resources to mark the centenary of the establishment of Northern Ireland in 2021. (AQO 615/17-22)

Mr Blair: With your permission, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will answer questions 7 and 8 together.

In 2012, the Commission agreed an approach to how anniversaries that occur within the decade of centenaries would be officially marked in Parliament Buildings, including those that fall in 2021. This was motivated by a desire to ensure that how events were handled here set a lead to the wider community and were not the cause of controversy. This approach established the "Perspectives On..." series of events and is guided by a comprehensive set of agreed principles. These include that all events will be inclusive, of a sensitive tone and respectful of our shared history and differing views on it.

In October 2018, the Commission agreed the anniversaries that would be marked in this mandate. These include the centenaries of the creation of Northern Ireland or partition and the first sitting of the Northern Ireland Parliament in 1921. In line with the agreed approach, the Commission is required to decide, by consensus early next year, the nature of the events that it will organise to mark these centenaries. The Commission is expected to commence discussions on this in the time ahead and will do so in the context of events that have already been held.

To answer Mr Storey's question on resources, the Commission's agreed principles include that proposals for events will take account of budgetary constraints and note that events within Parliament Buildings will not be the main events to mark these occasions within the wider community. However, the resources and facilities required will undoubtedly feature in the Commission's discussion on how to mark each centenary.

It is to be welcomed that a wide range of events have been held since 2012 to focus on different centenaries, without controversy. It is also extremely positive that the Commission has agreed by consensus to mark the centenaries this year. I anticipate that Commission members will similarly be constructive in deciding how that will be done.

Mr Givan: Obviously, 2021 is of huge significance, and whilst the Assembly Commission a number of years ago agreed the protocol for marking these centenaries, Members on this side are acutely aware of the views of Members on the opposite side who have referred to this place as a repugnant statelet and have used offensive language and so on in regard to it. What assurances is the Member able to give on behalf of the Commission that there will be no veto exercised in seeking a consensual

approach to something on which Members opposite have demonstrated an inability to be respectful of the creation of this place?

Mr Blair: The Member should be aware that, as a corporate body, the Commission generally works by consensus to keep the party politics apart from its responsibilities. Consensus was specifically built into the approach on centenaries to acknowledge that dealing with them collectively allowed all parties to recognise the importance of marking any events in our history, even if there were different political narratives on individual events.

It is positive that all the events so far have been well-received and that there is a consensus to mark centenaries again, next year. The events are much more likely to be successful and to avoid controversy if they are approached in that way.

Mr Storey: I thank the representative of the Commission for his answer. Given that there is a considerable number of artefacts that are held outside of this Building, and that it would be of paramount importance that they have the opportunity to be brought back into this Building, and given that they are aligned with the history and significance of the centenary, will he ensure that this goes back to the Commission and that that will be looked at as an issue of importance?

Also, there are many who have concerns about the Building being subject to a "greening" process over the last number of years. Will he also take back to the Commission the problem with weeds outside the Building, because if we are going to have a centenary and a Building that is fit for purpose, could somebody take time to get the place tidied up outside? It is absolutely disgraceful to see where weeds are, at the front of this Building, and maybe, before 2021, that could also be addressed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Blair, before you rise to your feet, Mr Storey asked two questions, so you have a choice of which one you want to answer.

Mr Blair: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I never shy away from answering questions of a greening variety, on environmental matters, of course. *[Laughter]* So I am sure that I can add a comment or two on that at the end.

In relation to the question on the involvement of the wider community, it is a point well made. There has been an opportunity for members of the public and representatives of community organisations to attend all the events so far, including church representatives and, of course, school groups. Representatives from other institutions have also been invited to attend some of the events. The events have been well-received by those who attended, and I have no doubt that the participation of others outside of the Assembly will also be part of next year's proposals.

In relation to the greening of the Building, which did not, I am disappointed to say, extend to environmental sustainability, it is a point well made, and I am sure that the Commission can feed back collectively in relation to the weeds and how they can be dealt with.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Member for his answers so far. I am conscious that Members on the opposite Benches referred to some of the commentary from my party as "offensive". However, the fact is that the process that led to the partition of Ireland was not democratic, and, as

such, it is felt by many in the nationalist and republican communities that it was fundamentally unjust. The Six County-state was created in the midst of a frenzy of sectarian violence, and that happened, obviously, on the back of violence, North and South, whilst under threat from the British Government of the day of an immediate and terrible war. In that context, does the Commission agree that it is essential that any and all events marking the centenary of the imposition of partition and the creation of the Six County-state are inclusive and that they reflect the very —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member is —

Ms Sheerin: Tá mé ag teacht.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: — in danger of moving into speech territory rather than asking a question.

Ms Sheerin: My question is coming. Events should be inclusive and reflect the very different and conflicting political and historical perspectives of the time, ensuring that the violent sectarian reality of the period is fully referenced and remembered so that lessons can be learned for the future.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: OK. Right. That is not on. We are supposed to be asking questions. There will always be very different arguments on these issues, but I think that it is really important to remember that there are other Members who want to ask questions on other matters. We could speechify at each other across the Chamber, but this is an opportunity for questions to the Commission.

Mr Blair: I could refer the Member to the answers that I gave on consensus and collective decision-making, and the Commission, of course, tries to encompass the different views that there are. If I want to take it from the angle of a different approach to next year's commemoration, I will just say that the Commission's approach deliberately dealt with all the events during the decade of centenaries as a package in order to ensure that they were inclusive and consistent in recognition of the fact that some events would be more important to some parties and Members than to others. If there is to be any change to the Commission's approach at this point, that will also have to be agreed by consensus.

Mr Carroll: Thanks for the answers so far. Following on from Mr Storey's question, does the Member agree that the buildings and resources of the state that was established in 1921 were exclusionary and discriminatory as they were based on gerrymandering and sectarian discrimination and were supported by state violence and that those facts mean that any look back at that history ought not to be a whitewash of those events — it should certainly not be a celebration of them — but should instead be an honest and balanced history of the period of partition?

Mr Blair: I thank the Member for his question and other Members for theirs. Of course, my view on this is of no consequence because it might not represent that consensus view of the Commission. I cannot possibly answer that question other than to refer the Member to previous answers about consensus, agreement and trying to strike a balance.

Mr Allister: Given what we just heard from Mr Carroll and Ms Sheerin, does the Commission agree that it will be a test of the capacity of some to show respect for how the centenary is marked? There are some who like to pay

lip service to respect, but I think that today has been an illustration of how difficult that is for some. In that regard, could I bring Mr Blair back to Mr Storey's question, which was not answered? We have a rich history that is shown in artefacts that the Commission controls, including portraits of former Prime Ministers and military figures, all of whom contributed. Will the Commission ensure that, for the centenary, those are not hidden away and are shown as part of our history? Will the —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: OK.

Mr Allister: — Commission ensure that there is no humiliating insult whereby the flag of our nation is not even flown at the centenary?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. One of the events that we may have is a panel debate, but this is not the occasion for that. These are questions to the Assembly Commission. The Member has made his point. Mr Blair, I invite you to answer.

Mr Blair: I thank the Member for the question. Similar to the position that I had to take on a previous question, I am not in a position to speak for the representative positions of others about respect or anything else. I can only refer the Member to the position of the Commission on reaching consensus and collective decision-making. Artefacts may be reflected in answers to other questions that are tabled on other occasions, and I believe that they will be.

4.00 pm

Youth Assembly

9. **Ms Dillon** asked the Assembly Commission when it plans to convene the Youth Assembly. (AQO 616/17-22)

Mr Butler: I did not realise how small I was until I sat behind that Box. Thank you for your question. As Members will be aware, the Speaker, on behalf of the Assembly Commission, announced on 22 July a framework for the establishment of an Assembly-supported Youth Assembly. That framework now allows for detailed arrangements for the establishment of that Youth Assembly to be taken forward. The Assembly's Education Service has already started on that work, and it has also planned to recruit two youth sector workers to assist in the long-term development of the same Youth Assembly. That work will involve undertaking further engagement with the youth sector and young people, because it is the Commission's clear intention that the process and procedures of the Youth Assembly, including how its members are sought and chosen, should be co-designed with those young people in mind. The Commission looks forward to seeing the results of that input.

The Children's Commissioner has been extremely helpful in providing advice and support to the Commission, and she has accepted an invitation from the Speaker to join him on a steering group to guide the next phase of the engagement with young people. She is, in fact, meeting the Speaker this afternoon. Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on progress to date and may yet slow our progress. However, the Commission is determined that the Youth Assembly will be established and operational as soon as possible, and the Speaker has said that he looks forward to hosting his first formal

plenary of the Youth Assembly in the Assembly Chamber next year.

Ms Dillon: Thank you for your answer. I am delighted to hear that the Youth Services is involved in this because I very often say in the Justice Committee that, where young people are involved, the Youth Service should be involved. Can we do anything to ensure that the work of the Youth Assembly is actually relevant to young people, because that is going to be the best way to engage them?

Mr Butler: That is an excellent question, and I believe that every Member in this Chamber will support that. The further engagement and the development has yet to be decided and is subject to further engagement, but the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Koulla Yiasouma, has provided invaluable advice and assistance in shaping and informing the proposals that have led to the framework for the Youth Assembly. There will be further engagement with her office and with other stakeholders, and that is incredibly important. As I said earlier, the Commission's clear intention is that the processes and procedures of the Youth Assembly, including how its members are sought and chosen, are co-designed by young people themselves and that we have their voices well and truly heard in the design.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the available time. I thank the Commission representatives for the answers that they provided. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments before we move on to the next item of business.

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

Private Members' Business

Public Inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health to establish a public inquiry, under the terms of the Inquiries Act 2005, into Muckamore Abbey Hospital in support of the families of residents who have campaigned for justice; and, in the interim, further calls on the Minister of Health to progress urgently the recommendations of the recent review of leadership and governance at Muckamore Abbey Hospital. — [Ms Bradshaw.]

Which amendment was:

Insert after "urgently":

"a bespoke plan to stabilise and support the current delivery of services, as well as implementing" — [Mr Gildernew.]

Mr Dickson: I support the motion in my party colleague's name. I place on record my thanks to both my colleagues for bringing this important issue to the House.

When people are under the care of our health and social care system, they should expect the highest quality of safe care and should be treated with the utmost respect and dignity. It is clear that, for so many vulnerable patients at Muckamore Abbey, that high-quality care was not being delivered. Indeed, there are criminal investigations ongoing, and patients and families have understandably lost confidence in the system.

I pay tribute to those patients and families who have campaigned on the matter; they definitely deserve justice. It is for that reason that nothing short of a public inquiry will do. The Health Minister has already issued an apology, but that is not enough. The failings in this respect are systemic. In the interim, we need to fully implement the changes, including those set out in the leadership and governance review, to address the failings. As mentioned in the proposed amendment, we need a bespoke plan to rebuild confidence in the services and, in the interim, I am very happy to support that.

Very briefly, I want to refer back to an earlier comment by, I think, Mr Clarke about the concern that, over many years, many in the community were not happy about residents from Muckamore Abbey coming into the community. I believe that that could not be further from the truth. As far back as 1984, I had the privilege to be on the board of Kilcreggan Homes, Carrickfergus, which is now Kilcreggan Urban Farm, under the inspiring leadership of Oliver and Amanda Shanks. The two doctors, who are now long retired, were involved in work in Muckamore Abbey and saw the urgent need to help residents there come into the community and be part of it.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Member for giving way. For a point of clarification, I think that it was before the Member came to the House a number of years ago that his party colleague spoke on the matter and in support of the very point that he is making, as did I and as did the Minister

at the time. The point that I was making was that, when there was resettlement of some of those people in the community and when the planning applications were going through the system, some political representatives put up opposition to prevent them from coming into the community, but his party colleague at the time David Ford spoke in favour of it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dickson: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

As far back as 1984, when Kilcreggan Homes came into existence, there was community consultation and a wonderful, warm welcome for residents whom Oliver and Amanda Shanks worked with in Muckamore Abbey to integrate them into the community. Today, we have a wonderful and vibrant community in Carrickfergus known as Kilcreggan Urban Farm.

For too long, Muckamore Abbey operated without the appropriate, proper oversight or leadership. In fact, the review of leadership and governance stated:

"The leadership ... was dysfunctional"

and the hospital:

"operated outside the sightlines and under the radar of the Trust."

Sadly, we have seen that on many occasions in other parts of the United Kingdom in similar institutions. Sadly, on reflection, the reality is that something like that was going to happen and was happening here. We have heard too many horror stories about institutions like that in other parts of the United Kingdom.

How are people to be truly assured that health and social care for some of the most vulnerable in our society is safe, unless an independent and full public inquiry assesses what went wrong, sets out the standards that are now required and imposes the appropriate reform in the system? We need that to happen, and we need it to happen without delay. That is why I am supporting the motion and the amendment today.

Mr Catney: I am sure that I am not only the MLA who has lain awake at night horrified at the stories that my constituents have told me about the scale of the problems at Muckamore Abbey. The independent report makes grim reading of the systemic issues in the Department, the trust and the hospital. I know that the Minister has had a lot on his plate over the last few months, but the recommendations must be implemented as soon as possible so that this starts to be addressed and to ensure that it will never happen again. Specifically we need to support front-line staff. The review refers to staff feeling disconnected and unsupported. That cannot happen in a high-risk environment such as Muckamore. To do so puts everyone at risk; it is a cultural problem that needs to be changed now. The lack of learning from the data is of massive concern. We cannot treat reporting as a tick-box exercise. We need to be constantly evaluating, learning from our mistakes, and doing our best to improve matters for all our patients.

The trust needs to act now to have accountability for directors and senior management. No one can be above scrutiny. The trust needs to put plans in motion

immediately to do that. I have no doubt that our present Minister of Health will see it through. Most importantly, the victims, and the families of victims, must know that we are taking the issue seriously. Many of the problems came out in the independent review, but the only way to get all the information so that all the problems can be dealt with is a full public inquiry. Now is the time to act; now is the time to implement change; now is the time to tell all the victims and their families that this will never happen again. I support the motion and the amendment.

Dr Aiken: I will keep my remarks short. As an MLA for South Antrim, I know that many of my constituents have family members who are either patients or staff at Muckamore Abbey. The staff and patients at Muckamore, and their families, have been very badly let down by a lack of responsibility and accountability and by the lack of oversight that should have been the basic function of the Belfast Trust.

The Ulster Unionist Party will support the motion and the amendment, but we need to see action. Indeed, patients and staff at Muckamore Abbey need to see some restoration of trust for the sake of their future. That restoration can come through the leadership of our Health Minister, who has been doing a sterling job so far.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Members who moved the motion and the amendment. Quite rightly, we have spent a lot of time in the Chamber discussing COVID-19 and its impact on our communities. However, we cannot lose sight of all the other issues that face those who need and who rely upon our health service. Quite rightly, during the COVID-19 period, we talked about the need to protect those who are vulnerable in our society. I believe that we should apply the same principle to the patients in Muckamore, to those who are involved in the Independent Neurology Inquiry, and to all those who are seeking redress for mistreatment or alleged miscarriages of justice.

If the health service does not work for the most vulnerable and for the unwell, can we really say that it works properly at all? Whilst we must resolutely support those who are battling for answers and for justice, we have to ensure that another Muckamore never happens. However, can we really rule that out if our health service is understaffed and under-resourced? I sincerely hope that it does not happen again, so I want to ensure that every action is taken now to ensure that it does not. I am concerned, like the Chair of the Health Committee earlier, about the over-reliance on agency staff in the care sector and in our health service generally, as people are unable to develop relationships with patients.

Of course, this issue should not be about workers versus patients, but about patients and their families up against an unfair system or a system that did not take their concerns seriously. One of the most alarming aspects of the investigation at Muckamore is that the Belfast Trust decided, in 2015, two years before the alleged abuse, to install CCTV cameras, because, in 2015, the number of adult safeguarding investigations was far too high. Installing CCTV was considered a way to protect vulnerable adults. If the reports were true then, it appears that abuse soared after CCTV was installed. I have to ask the question: how was that possible?

The recent Muckamore review into leadership and governance in the Belfast Trust seems to portray the

CCTV operation as a complete fiasco. I cannot describe it as anything but a fiasco. It appears that nobody knew for over a year that the CCTV cameras were even turned on. If people do not know if the cameras are turned on in hospitals and care settings, are they really fit to play a leading role in delivering health and care services? Those are serious questions that need to be answered.

4.15 pm

The RQIA held five serious concern meetings about Muckamore with the Belfast Trust between 2014 and 2016. How, then, was it possible for alleged large-scale abuse to take place in 2017? It appears to me, from this course of events, that either no action was taken or, at best, limited action was taken to prevent abuse from, potentially, recurring. I ask the Minister or someone who can answer this question, what happened in that two-year period?

Seanín Graham, from 'The Irish News', reported that it has cost millions to staff Muckamore because so many staff have been suspended pending an investigation. That is quite shocking and worrying. I ask the Minister directly: have any senior Belfast Trust staff, boards of directors or chief executives been suspended, sacked or are there any ongoing plans or investigations about that matter?

This is a very serious scandal, as everybody has said today, and some would argue that it is more serious than RHI and should be treated as such. Over the last few days, we have heard that the Chief Medical Officer was visiting bars at the weekend, in his own time, to ensure that COVID restrictions were being maintained. Many would ponder why the Chief Medical Officer, and other senior health staff, did not make spot-check visits to care settings to, potentially, flag up these issues.

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

Mr Carroll: I will. My party backs the call for a public inquiry to ask what happened and why it happened for so long. We commend those who have campaigned to highlight this issue and fight for justice.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I want to take the opportunity today to announce that I am calling a public inquiry, under the Inquiries Act 2005, into the abuse at Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Swann: This is not how I had planned to make the announcement. I had wanted to communicate my decision to the families and patients, both current and former, before I announced it publicly. However, because of the Assembly motion today, and not wanting to be accused of withholding important information or my decision from the House, that was impossible. Therefore, I want to apologise to those families and patients who are hearing about this now for the first time. It was not the way I wanted you to hear, but I acknowledge and respect this Chamber and its Members.

I want to take this opportunity to once again put on record my apologies, on behalf of the health and social care system, to patients and families who have been let down by a failure to protect patients from abuse — a shocking failure that has affected some of the most vulnerable members of our society who should be protected. However, families and patients want and deserve more than apologies. They want and need answers as to why

this happened and how it was allowed to happen. I hope that the public inquiry that I have announced today will give them those answers.

We have now had two reports into events at Muckamore: the serious adverse incident report and, most recently, the 'Review of Leadership and Governance at Muckamore Abbey Hospital'. The recent review of the leadership and governance does not hold back in stating very clearly that the Belfast Trust failed in its duty of care to those vulnerable adults.

I thank the review panel for their very frank assessment and conclusion. It highlights that, while the Belfast Trust had appropriate corporate governance and leadership arrangements in place, it failed to prevent abuse, identify the appropriate level of abuse that had taken place and adequately prevent further abuse from happening. The report concludes that those failures resulted in harm to patients. A previous investigation into abuse was a missed opportunity. The trust's focus on Muckamore, insofar as it had one, was on resettlement at the expense of ensuring safe, high-quality care for those who remained in hospital. That should never have been the case.

Even though the trust installed CCTV in the hospital and entered into a contract for its ongoing maintenance, no one seems to have been aware that the cameras were operational. Footage was recorded, stored and even deleted without anyone looking at the images. Indeed, they only viewed this material following the persistence of a parent who was desperate to get to the bottom of what had happened to his son. When the trust finally did look at the images from the CCTV, they revealed thousands of incidents of poor practice and the abuse of the most vulnerable in our society.

The fact that this situation was able to arise is probably indicative of another conclusion of the leadership and governance review. The report also found that, for years, at the top of the Belfast Trust, there was scant evidence of any corporate curiosity about the facility. It did not feature in the trust's annual reports and was not regularly visited by board members. Despite being the largest facility of its kind in the region and despite it being widely known that this type of facility carries an inherent risk of abuse given the vulnerability of its patients, it was not in their line of sight. It was, as Members have reported, a place apart from the rest of the trust. When that lack of interest collided with the failure of managers in Muckamore to escalate issues, a perfect storm was created whereby abuse was able to go unchecked. I cannot find words to adequately describe the scale of this betrayal of trust, this scandal.

Members will be aware that, whilst I was leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, I backed calls for a public inquiry into the appalling allegations of abuse. I signed the letter at that stage. I believed that a public inquiry was the only outcome. Whilst my opinion did not change from coming into this office on 11 January 2020, I made it clear that whatever decision I ultimately took as Minister would be informed by the views of the people who use the services at Muckamore and their families.

I visited the hospital on 22 January to meet patients, families, carers and staff and hear from them as early as possible. I also met the Action for Muckamore group on 17 February. I said that I wanted to wait to see the findings of the report of the leadership and governance review, which

was due at the end of June, before I made my decision. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, that report was delayed until 5 August. We now have the report.

I confirmed on 5 August that it is my clear intention to establish an inquiry but that I would take time to consider the report in detail to establish what questions remain unanswered and to consider all the options available for an inquiry. Since then, I have read the report and I was appalled. For the record, I confirm that I accept all the recommendations in the report and will progress them as a matter of urgency.

My officials examined the findings of the report and provided me with their advice last week. After considering their advice, the only option that I could see to get the answers that everyone is seeking is a statutory public inquiry. As I have outlined, I wanted to engage with families and patients at Muckamore on the best way forward and for them to be the first to hear of my decision.

My officials have a programme of work to get this inquiry up and running. That is likely to take time. It is not work that can be rushed. Families and patients, both current and former, will have the opportunity to influence the terms of reference of the inquiry, and I will be in touch with arrangements for that. I can, however, advise that, in anticipation of an inquiry, the Chief Social Work Officer and the Chief Nursing Officer wrote to all HSC organisations and to staff in the Department in early February. They were asked to take all necessary steps to preserve any documents, records and other relevant material relating to Muckamore Abbey Hospital and to ensure that those be retained and not be subject to scheduled disposal.

I understand the demands of those who believe that a statutory public inquiry under the Inquiries Act 2005, with its powers to call witnesses and cross-examine them in public, is the only way in which to get the answers that they need, particularly as some retired Belfast Trust managers did not engage with the leadership and governance review. I do not just understand those demands; I agree with them. I am keen to ensure that we find a way to take forward an inquiry process that will address the unanswered questions and the crucial issue of how we ensure that this never happens again. What led to a significant number of staff either to participate in or to turn a blind eye to abuse of the very people whom they were employed to care for? Why did the systems designed to identify and put a stop to abuse when it did happen fail? How could the leadership of the Belfast Trust go for so long without understanding the risks inherent in that type of facility?

We need to ensure, however, that the process does not duplicate the work already taken forward by the external, independently led, level 3 serious adverse incident review and by the independent leadership and governance review. We must also take account of the ongoing major police investigation, because I want to ensure that any process that is put in place does not jeopardise this investigation and allow those who deserve to be prosecuted for their crimes to be let off the hook.

As I said, the police investigation into the abuse at Muckamore is ongoing and is likely to continue for some time. I understand that eight individuals who worked in Muckamore have been arrested, with the most recent arrest only yesterday. Files on seven of those individuals have been submitted to the Public Prosecution Service

(PPS) for it to consider charges. To date, 62 members or former members of staff have been placed on precautionary suspension. I anticipate that there will be more arrests and more suspensions going forward.

I understand that families and patients want to know what is planned for the future of Muckamore, and I can assure them that no decision has been made to close the hospital. Let me be very clear: the immediate priority for Muckamore remains the safety and stability of care provided there. There will continue to be a focus on resettlement, but not at the expense of those who require to be in hospital. When resettlement happens, it must always be for the betterment of the individual concerned and never simply to meet a target, no matter how well intentioned that target may be.

Looking to the long term, I can say that there is a clear need to transform services for adults with learning disabilities in Northern Ireland. Work is being taken forward through the transformation agenda to develop a new service model for learning disability services. The reshaping of services will cover different aspects of care, including inpatient assessment and treatment of patients with learning disabilities, respite care, outreach work to support community placements and provision in circumstances in which placements might break down. Identifying the best long-term location for inpatient and respite care will form part of the work. The best interests of patients will be the paramount consideration at all times, because any changes will be taken forward in detailed consultation with patients, with their families and carers and with staff.

This is a sad chapter in the history of health and social care services in Northern Ireland, in particular for the Belfast Trust and Muckamore Abbey Hospital. They have failed in their duty to protect those patients.

They have failed in their duty to the family members. This abuse should never have happened and, as the Minister, I will do all that I can to make sure that it never happens again. That is why I am announcing a statutory public inquiry into the events at Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

4.30 pm

Ms Flynn: First, I warmly welcome the Minister's announcement, and I also concur with comments that were made by numerous Members throughout today's debate. I do not see this motion as being contentious or as being party political. Obviously, I thank Paula and John for bringing it to the Floor.

The motion and discussion was all about the families. It is about all the families who have been fighting for truth and justice into how their loved ones were treated in the health and social care system. We cannot forget that there are families and patients at the centre of this scandal who are simply trying to get to the truth of what has happened to their loved ones: their sons, daughters, brothers and sisters. It is right that a shining light is cast into the quality of care and governance. That is not only in Muckamore Abbey Hospital but, as the Minister said, in the wider health and social care system. I fully support the decision that has been made around a public inquiry to get to the truth. Hopefully, this will make sure that nothing like this can ever happen again.

I am fairly sure that the Minister will agree me that no one, regardless of their condition, should ever have to call an

acute hospital or a ward their home. Those who can live in the community must be fully supported to do so, and that means completing the programme of resettlement and building sustainable packages of care in our community.

On the topic of community care, one of the first questions that I asked in this mandate was about the number of admissions and discharges from Muckamore Abbey Hospital. At the time, I was concerned that the sustainability of care in the community was at breaking point. A package of care can be many things but it is essentially about people and services and, when it breaks down, it can be for many genuine reasons. However, it can also be because a family or a carer can no longer cope, and the stress and the pressure that that can cause can be devastating.

I remember hearing the families at the centre of the abuse talking about the difficult choices that they had to make, and hearing from families who were struggling to cope when things were not working out, and particularly hearing about the fear and the anxiety of sending their loved ones to a hospital that was at the centre of one of the largest safeguarding probes in these islands. That is why I am still concerned about the sustainability and delivery of services in Muckamore Abbey Hospital today. This does not take away from supporting the Muckamore Abbey families and their quest for answers and justice, which we all fully support. However, it is about ensuring that, going into the future, the public have access to high-quality, safe and reliable services that support staff and patients.

I welcome the Minister's decision and I sincerely hope, as do all the Members who have spoken today, that this decision and move will bring answers, closure and, more importantly, meaningful change for the future.

Mr Blair: I cannot start in any way other than to thank the Minister sincerely for coming here to make an announcement on the decision that has been made and the action that he intends to take, and I am sure that all Members will join with me in thanking him for that. I also thank my colleague Paula Bradshaw for bringing the motion to the Chamber in the first place and for bringing me on board with it. In the light of the relevant points that she made in her speech and the points raised by Members during the debate, I want to say that I understand the huge public concern surrounding this facility, which is based, as some Members will know, in my constituency. Indeed, other South Antrim Members spoke during the debate.

Before I respond to the points raised by Members — I thank them for those — I will briefly make a couple of observations and points of my own. First, I draw Members' attention to a very serious consequence of the outworkings of recent reviews and, indeed, of other reviews, which is the spiralling cost of the Muckamore abuse scandal. It has been revealed that millions of pounds have been spent on keeping the hospital operational. The reported cost to the health service is £12 million, incorporating issues around suspended staff, paying agency nurses and sick leave at Muckamore Abbey. The list is much longer than that. The cost of £12 million from what we can only term an abuse scandal that broke three years ago is to the detriment of other public services and, crucially and specifically, to the detriment of much-needed health service resource and facilities. I do not need to remind Members or the Minister of that reality.

Secondly, I take the opportunity, as a Policing Board member, to commend the sterling work done by the PSNI investigation team on this matter and for its extensive examination, which has been separate to any health- and care-based reports, that has involved hundreds of hours of CCTV footage. I know some of that through my membership of the Policing Board, and I should inform Members that we have been updated there on a regular basis.

Finally, I want to mention staff. We are aware — it has been mentioned today — that staff have been continuing to do their job shrouded in controversy and wary of suspicion. It is not good, positive or productive for people to continue to do their tasks in those circumstances.

I now want to respond to Members. I will not do it in detail, but I want to do it. The Minister's announcement and those events have kind of overtaken the debate, but I would like to do it in a way that brings out the consistent cross-party concern that has been expressed today.

I will start with the Committee Chair, Colm Gildernew, who clearly highlighted the plight of families and talked about meetings that he has had with the police and others about this. That was followed by comments from the Health Committee Deputy Chairperson, Pam Cameron, who also referred to families and mentioned the scale of the provision and the issue. Colin McGrath, on behalf of the SDLP, said that the findings of the reviews were so disturbing.

Trevor Clarke spoke, as I mentioned before, as a South Antrim Member, and my colleague Stewart Dickson spoke about previous experience of good examples of resettlement in the community. Steve Aiken spoke as a party leader and, before the announcement from the Minister, expressed his party's support for the motion, for Paula and I and for the amendment. We are grateful for that. Gerry Carroll spoke towards the end of the debate and emphasised that we must do what we can to ensure that a similar set of circumstances does not arise again.

Those comments broadly reflect that we were justified in our call, through the motion and the amendment, for a public inquiry. Today, the Minister has ensured that that will happen, with the support the House. I formally urge support for the motion and the amendment.

Before I close, I again thank the Minister for his announcement that there will be a public inquiry and for his acceptance of crucial report findings. We understand and respect that he came to the House to announce the inquiry. We know that, in different circumstances, he might have done it differently so that families, agencies, Members and others were informed in order, but we are grateful for that, and I urge support.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health to establish a public inquiry, under the terms of the Inquiries Act 2005, into Muckamore Abbey Hospital in support of the families of residents who have campaigned for justice; and, in the interim, further calls on the Minister of Health to progress urgently a bespoke plan to stabilise and support the current delivery of services, as well as implementing the

recommendations of the recent review of leadership and governance at Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

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

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

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone).]

Adjournment

Recurring Flooding in the Newcastle Area

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): In conjunction with the Business Committee, I have given leave to Ms Emma Rogan to raise the matter of recurring flooding in the Newcastle area. She will have 15 minutes. Just so that Members realise the timing of it, the total allocated time for this is one hour, and the Minister will have 10 minutes to respond. For Members who want to slot in around that and cover their colleagues, it will probably be in and around four or five minutes, but we will try to keep it managed as well as we can.

Ms Rogan: On Tuesday 25 August at approximately 9.15 am, the Shimna river again burst its banks and flowed through streets and gardens into homes. This is not the first time that it has happened in the area. The same devastation occurred in 2008, almost to the day, when homes, gardens and streets were flooded and havoc was created for local residents. Personally, I can think of nothing worse. The impact on the residents of Newcastle has been immeasurable. They have been left to deal with homes and contents that were ruined in a matter of minutes. The longer-term implications will be far-reaching — displaced and homeless for months ahead. What has resonated with me is the unseen damage to their homes: the sheer destruction that was caused to anything that got in the way of the raging floodwaters.

On that Tuesday morning, I stood alongside my Sinn Féin colleagues, unable to comprehend the scale of the disaster that was unfolding before my eyes. There was a need for quick thinking and reactions to help people prevent any more flooding to homes and to help those who had already been flooded. There was a realisation that accommodation was going to be needed for those who could not return to their home. The scene that greeted us was like something from an action film. The water was up over the windscreens of cars that were completely submerged. The emergency services and specialised teams arrived on the scene to rescue those in danger and make the area as safe as possible. Agencies were on the ground, working together to provide sandbags and pump out what they could to limit the damage to homes.

People were in a state of high anxiety, fearful of another deluge of water. You could clearly see the water flowing down the mountain at great pace.

4.45 pm

Residents had to leave their waterlogged homes with little time to pack a small bag of essentials. The key workers from DFI Roads and DFI Rivers worked tirelessly on the ground, for which they must be commended greatly. However, some might say that the flooding could have been better prepared for. Forward planning might just have been the key to avoiding situations like the one that we witnessed in Newcastle. Could sandbags have been delivered before the onset of the storm? Could the Shimna

and Burren rivers have been surveyed for any potential flooding issues, such as falling trees and debris? Could greater measures have been put in place to alleviate the potential threat of the flooding?

Now that we are facing a climate emergency, it is essential that the Department for Infrastructure puts the necessary provisions in place to protect communities such as Newcastle from recurring flooding disasters. The flood alleviation plan needs to be carried out now; it cannot wait until next summer, because residents are living in fear of what this winter will bring. Measures need to be put in place now to remedy some of the flooding issues. For example, the Burren River flood defence wall created a dam effect and the water could not get away. Garden sheds, summer houses and garages were all flooded. The wall has double valves to let the water into the river but they are too low. When the water is high, it cannot get back into the river, so the valves need to be raised; that could be done now.

The culvert under Shimna Road has collapsed and the water backs up and has nowhere to go; that needs fixed now. The sewerage system in Newcastle mixes river water and sewage in the same system and that needs fixed now. Homeowners, businesses and schools are living in fear of the next storm, the next high tide or the next flooding incident. Homeowners find getting home insurance almost impossible. I witnessed the aftermath on the ground in the days after the flood. The contents of people's homes were being taken away in skips or were lying in front gardens. Homes were being fumigated and children's toys were being put into bin bags; everything was contaminated. People's lives were turned upside down.

Minister, your Department received the most money after the Department of Health throughout the pandemic. The people of Newcastle need robust measures to be put in place now. Another disaster like that should not happen again. People are wondering why it will take until next summer for flood alleviation schemes to be put in place. Will the Minister provide clarity on that issue and elaborate on how the Department is looking at ways to accelerate the process as a matter of urgency?

Mr Wells: I support the sentiments that have already been expressed. Like many other MLAs, I was in Newcastle following the flooding and witnessed for myself the dreadful damage that had occurred. It reminded me of the situation in 2008, when similar devastation happened. At that time, there were calls for remedial action to be taken immediately.

I applaud the Minister for coming down to Newcastle; that was appreciated by all of the local residents and I thank her for that. She heard at first-hand what was going on and about the amount of damage and suffering that had been inflicted on the residents of Shimna Road and Bryansford Road in particular. I am sure that the same points will be made time and time again by the Members for South Down and others as to why the flooding happened so, therefore, I am going to take a slightly different tack.

First, I would like the Minister to address an allegation that was made that, although systems were in place to prevent a reoccurrence of the 2008 situation, various controls that are operated from a central control room and which would have diverted water away from the Bryansford Road and Shimna Road area into the Burren River — I believe

that that system is located somewhere up in the vicinity of Tollymore Forest Park — were not operational. That allegation was made to me by several individuals on the day. I have no idea whether it is true or otherwise, but it would be very useful in the debate for the Minister to deal with that.

Secondly, as has already been mentioned, there are residents in the area who have made insurance claims. Indeed, the assessors have been out, the damage has been totted up and claims are already beginning to be paid. Indeed, I applaud the action of Newry, Mourne and Down council, which has been out and has already authorised the payment of £1,000 to each person affected by the flood. The speed with which it moved, and the very flexible approach that it showed to the residents, is to be applauded. However, the bulk of the damage will have to be covered by insurance. There is a system in place called Flood Re, which is a fund of £180 million that has been set up by all the major insurance companies in the United Kingdom. I have two questions for the Minister. I looked up the conditions for Flood Re. First, it said that the dwelling has to be domestic, which is fine. Secondly, it has to be on mainland UK. I am always worried by that phrase "mainland UK"; I think, "Does it include Northern Ireland or not?". Maybe that is aimed at the Hebrides, Orkney, the Isle of Man or whatever. I want clarification that it includes Northern Ireland.

The condition of the Flood Re scheme that I found the most difficult to understand is that it precludes a claim coming in for any house built after 2009. I cannot understand the logic of that exclusion. A house built after 2009 is as likely to flood as a house built before 2009. I am dealing with a case at the moment involving a house that was built in 2013; it looks, on the face of it, as though the Flood Re scheme, which would have been a godsend to that particular family, does not apply in that situation. I want to know — I am trying to get an answer from the Association of British Insurers — the reason for that very unusual stipulation. There are houses that have been rebuilt since 2010 in situ; why should they be left out of that scheme while others are not? I want to hear from the Minister what she intends to do, through the Rivers Agency, to ensure that we do not get a repeat of that.

Some people believe in climate change and some do not. I do. I believe that it is man-made and that it is having a profound influence on the weather systems in our country. People talk about global warming. It is not so much about global warming as it is about erratic weather and extreme weather conditions. Newcastle has had three once-in-100-years floods in 22 years. That is a clear indication of where we are going. Those situations will continue to arise. Therefore, I think that we are all waiting with bated breath to hear what the Minister is going to say about how she believes that that awful situation can be prevented in the future.

Mr McGrath: I welcome the opportunity to discuss this topic today. A number of questions were posed to the Infrastructure Minister over the last number of weeks, and a number were posed yesterday, so, I welcome the fact that, today, we will get another opportunity to get those answers and the reconfirmation that the flood alleviation scheme will be delivered in Newcastle.

I was present in Newcastle on Tuesday 25 August and witnessed at first hand the devastation that the flood

caused. It was horrendous. It was heartbreaking to witness cars abandoned, furniture floating in people's living rooms, and people and pets having to be rescued by our heroic emergency services. People were in real danger. It was difficult for me to watch, but it was far more so — unbelievably so — for the residents who had to experience that. After all, cars, furniture and possessions can be replaced, but the fear of injury, and even the fear for one's life, are the sort of thoughts that do not go away easily. There were real heroes on that day in Newcastle from not just our Fire and Rescue Service, whose members were there from Newcastle, Belfast and Armagh, but ambulance staff, the Police Service, Search and Rescue Dogs Association Ireland North, and our coastguard team from Newcastle and Kilkeel. There were teachers from local schools. There were local businesses that went the extra mile to help. Individuals and families offered help and support. Truly, Newcastle had a vast army of true heroes in its midst on that day and that was great to see.

There is no doubt that the flood alleviation scheme has taken too long to deliver. It must now be delivered. People knew that the flood was on the cards. Just six days before the flood, I was sitting in a constituent's house talking about the scheme and the delays. We discussed how the next flood could be very soon as it had been 12 years since the last one. Little did we know that it would be just six days later.

Newcastle has a complicated topography. There are mountains with watercourses and high ground to one side and the sea to the other. When you couple heavy rain with high tides, the ingredients are there for flooding. The question is not will there be a flood, but when. That can be quite frightening for people. However, no one could have foreseen the amount of rainfall that fell when the tide came in and water levels rose, and we had all the ingredients for that perfect storm.

Some will ask, "Why were all the necessary precautions not in place?". It is harsh, but on that night the weather warning was for the whole eastern half of the North, so no-one knew exactly where or when it would strike. When it did strike, it happened at a frightening pace. People told me that it took just 30 minutes for their living rooms to fill with water, for their entire downstairs area to be flooded. So people are rightly to be asking questions. They do not want to see some cheap point-scoring taking place. They want to see that, the flood having taken place, there is a resolution, and they want to know when that resolution will take place.

There have been delays in the scheme, not least because we did not have this place for three years. I understand that it is going to take some Ministerial oversight to hurry this scheme up. The fact that we did not have a Minister for Infrastructure for three years meant that it was very difficult for decisions to be taken to hurry that scheme along on the ground. People were asking and asking for the scheme, and they looked up the hill to Stormont, but the Executive was not here for three years, and that made it very difficult to get delivery on the ground.

Residents wanted to see action, and, thankfully, action is what they got from Minister Mallon on the day. Minister, I am very grateful and thankful to you for coming down on the day and going round, meeting the people, looking them square in the eye and seeing their pain and suffering. You looked into their houses to see the devastation that was

caused, and I know that you took resolute action that day that you were going to deliver for the people of Newcastle. I know, from conversations that I have had with you since then, that that was what you went back to the Department to do. I hope that, in responding to this debate, you will be able to update people on the action that will take place. The residents definitely need to hear that reassurance. As I said, I thank you for coming down on the day to give us the information.

I welcome the opportunity to seek and get reassurance about the delivery of the scheme. I welcome that people will now know that an end to this matter is close at hand. I want to see the scheme commence as soon as possible and to know that, once it is complete, nearly £6 million of investment in Newcastle will be welcome and will provide the protections that are needed. I hope that we do not see a repeat of such flooding between now and the completion of the scheme, and I hope that there will be no delays in its delivery. As Ministers, MLAs and Departments, here in Stormont, we must all be on the side of the residents. Delivering for them is crucial, so let us get this scheme delivered.

Ms S Bradley: I, too, thank the Member for bringing this topic to the Chamber today. It is timely because, although the flood arrived and, thankfully, moved away, the aftermath is quite raw, and the residents are, rightly, now living with concerns. Having followed and spoken with residents in the area, I was alarmed to see the volume of water that could arrive in one area in such a short time. It was devastating to watch homes being absolutely ruined. There is no other word that I could use to describe what happened that day.

What also happened quickly — and I must thank her — was that the Minister arrived. In a moment of chaos and in the confusion that follows it, it is reassuring to see somebody with ministerial portfolio arrive on the scene to let the residents know that we are with them and that we understand fully what is happening. On behalf of the residents, and as a representative of South Down, I want to record my thanks to the Minister.

Plenty of people stepped up, as is often the case in Northern Ireland. In a moment of crisis, we see heroes rise. That is true, and my South Down constituency colleague Colin McGrath referred to it.

It was reassuring to see community spirit, even in the midst of a pandemic, as active as ever: local businesses taking in residents, offering a much-needed cup of tea and a reassuring ear from a neighbour or friend in that critical moment. Teachers, individuals and people everywhere were doing everything that they could, and it was everything that is good about Newcastle and Northern Ireland.

5.00 pm

It is ordinarily an absolute privilege to live in Newcastle and that area, but, on that day at that moment, it was chaos. Residents are now left with trying to deal with the insurance and how they can resolve the matter; that is in the immediacy. I take on board the comments made by Mr Wells about the insurance companies. That is a valid question for investigation. I really cannot understand the 2009 stipulation; it makes absolutely no sense. It only adds to the concern and worry for those households. Does that year move with time? As houses become older, do more

and more people fall into that category? There is no logic to it, and it is important that we understand further how that ever came about and work with the Association of British Insurers and others to find out that that is not the case.

Going forward, Members will assist residents to get through the chaos. They will then be confronted with the reality of how easy it will be to get insurance until the flood alleviation scheme is in place. The clock is ticking. I appreciate the Minister's commitment to this, but it is really difficult to say to somebody that we live in hope that there is no other flood before the alleviation scheme is in place. Whilst I thank the Minister, I urge her to do everything in her power to bring forward the scheme as early as possible, because people are depending on it and will not rest easy in their bed at night until they know that it is in place.

Mr Beggs: As the Ulster Unionist spokesperson, I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important debate. The flooding of homes is devastating for the individuals affected. Many priceless possessions are destroyed; their lives are turned upside down; and they may not get back into their houses for months, even a year in some instances. It takes a lot of time to put right the wrong. Frequently, raw sewage is in the mix as well, and that causes much of the damage. It is important that we do all that we can to prevent this happening.

In 2002, my colleague, Dermot Nesbitt, commented on the relatively new principle of climate change, and I am sure that he had County Down in mind, being a representative of South Down. He highlighted the issue of higher levels of rainfall and the potential for increased flooding and said that this would particularly affect coastal communities. My colleague, Harold McKee, who was a councillor for the area, was working on a site in the area. He has advised me that sandbags would not have solved any problems there. It was a wall of water that came. Some five feet of water hit the site where he was, so a few sandbags would not have done anything. Long-term changes and investment are needed, perhaps managing some of the water upstream, which has been of benefit in other places, and compensating the farmers involved etc and looking at structural improvements in the areas that have flooded.

I understand that the Shimna river flooded in 2008. There is also the issue of the Burren river, where a flood alleviation scheme has been carried out. There has been significant time, and, as others have said, it could have been reasonably well predicted that this could happen again. The 100-year storms are happening very frequently. They are happening every 10 or 20 years, if not more often. It is important that, as a community, an Assembly and an Executive, we try to manage the process as much as possible. It is not good enough just to blame civil servants who were there on the day to provide sandbags: long-term change needs to happen, and the Assembly and Executive need to get involved in that.

Until recently, the Rivers Agency was part of the Department of Agriculture. An interesting thing about that is that, whilst criticism has been directed at our administrators, the Minister of Agriculture from 2011 to 2015, if I am right, was Michelle O'Neill. What happened during that period since 2008 when we had that flooding? Subsequently, in 2016, we had Chris Hazzard, and then the whole Executive were disrupted and a further two years passed. It is important not just to shove the blame

onto someone who happens to occupy the seat at this time. There is a responsibility on everybody concerned to recognise the failings that happened and to put them right.

I hope that we can work together constructively. There may well be a need for intensive discussions with landowners to bring that to a conclusion. I hope that they and the Department will act reasonably and accommodate reasonable solutions to enable this important work to happen, but we have to be realistic. This will be expensive and will be very disruptive to the environment, but are we going to protect people's houses? It is vital that we do. In Newcastle, major construction work will be required. As I and others have said, the risk of high tides and the geography of the area, with the unpredictability of intensive rainfall, the extent of the catchment of the Shimna river and the height that the water falls from, means that there is considerable risk of large movements of water. It would take considerable investment and much planning to give badly needed protection to the people of Newcastle, and I hope that that will happen as soon as possible.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for bringing this important issue to the Assembly today. I speak as the Alliance Party spokesperson on infrastructure.

I was in Newcastle visiting my grandparents when the floods of 2008 struck. I will never forget the scenes of that day. On our return home, we were lucky not to get stranded. I remember the amazing generosity of the local people, who went out of their way to clear water. They could easily have sat back and not offered assistance. There were terrible scenes. As Roy Beggs outlined, often the floodwater contains sewage, and the clean-up has a long-term impact on properties. I remember that, in the aftermath, there was talk of a once-in-a-generation event and of how a forthcoming flood alleviation scheme was being rolled out to ensure that locals would never again have to suffer that flooding. It is incredibly worrying but, sadly, perhaps not surprising that "once in a generation" in Newcastle has sadly turned into a much more regular event.

The impact of climate change means that extreme weather events are becoming increasingly frequent in Northern Ireland and across the globe. Climate change is the greatest challenge of our times, and the Assembly recognised that fact in declaring a climate emergency earlier this year. The scenes in Newcastle on 26 August and other areas in Northern Ireland were frightening. I join colleagues across the Assembly in commending the amazing work of our emergency services and local volunteers. In rescuing dozens of people and animals from their homes and cars, they prevented an awful situation getting much worse. They are an absolute credit to our community.

The serious shortcomings in the local flood defence systems were clear from the events of 2008, and Storm Francis brutally exposed them once again. I, like other Members, want to see the flood alleviation scheme in Newcastle brought forward as early as possible. In the meantime, we need to hear from Ministers whether all the actions that can be taken in the short term to alleviate the threat of flooding have been taken. Locals have reported water from the overflowing Shimna river travelling over the bridge across the Burren river when a simple drainage mechanism on the bridge might have provided some relief. We also need to know whether DFI and DAERA

are actively working together so that upstream land management in the area has been fully investigated as a way of alleviating further flooding. Furthermore, we need to ensure that, as well as preparing for recurring flooding in the future, the devastating effects of last month's floods have been fully addressed. Local paths and footbridges that were badly damaged need to be repaired. People in the area will need help and support with their home and contents insurance claims. Many of them have businesses that have already been pushed to the brink as a result of the pandemic.

I have even heard reports of local people who do not want to make a claim on their insurance now for fear that they will not be able to rely on an insurance claim in the event of future flooding that may be worse.

I will end by making two general points about flooding in Newcastle and across Northern Ireland. The lack of an Assembly for three years prior to New Decade, New Approach meant that MLAs could not hold the Minister to account for the inaction on the flood alleviation scheme. That is shameful. It is more evidence of why we need these institutions and the Infrastructure Committee to hold the Minister and the Department to account for bringing forward the scheme.

The infrastructure budget in Northern Ireland has been consistently cut over the past decade, and, in spite of a small increase this year for day-to-day running, it remains well below what it was in 2010 and far below what is required to address Northern Ireland's infrastructure backlog. Many of the issues that fall under the Department for Infrastructure, such as flooding, Northern Ireland Water and roads, do not regularly command the attention of the media or politicians, but, as we have seen, if infrastructure in those areas is not properly funded and actioned, local people bear the costs. We should not accept that situation.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I thank Ms Rogan for bringing the debate to the House, and I have listened with interest to the comments made and the issues raised by Members. A number of Members addressed issues of a similar type, so I will address them generally, and then I will drill down into some of the specific questions and Members' concerns.

Since I was appointed Minister for Infrastructure nine months ago, I have made it clear that my focus is on doing what I can to improve the lives of people here. An important part of that focus is the flood risk management activities of my Department. Those activities are aimed at reducing the potential adverse consequences of significant floods on human health, economic activity and the environment. Without continued investment in infrastructure, as Mr Muir pointed out, and in the face of the climate emergency, which Mr Beggs and other Members referred to, many of the services that we provide will continue to be under extreme strain. For example, approximately 45,000 properties here, which is equivalent to 5.2% of all properties, are currently identified as being at flood risk from rivers, the sea or surface water. Investment in flood risk management expertise and infrastructure is required to reduce the risk of flooding.

As Jim Wells pointed out, I was in Newcastle, on Tuesday 25 August, with party colleagues and others. I visited homes and met residents, and I could see for myself the

extent of the flooding, the damage, the disruption and the very understandable upset for people.

My Department continues to work with multi-agency partners in the recovery phase following the flooding. In relation to support for those impacted by the flooding, which a number of Members raised, the Department for Communities' scheme of emergency financial assistance was activated. Under the scheme, which is administered through councils, householders could potentially receive £1,000. That financial assistance is to help to make a home fit to live in as quickly as possible.

I thank Ms Rogan for acknowledging the tireless work of Roads and Rivers staff and Members for their acknowledgement of the efforts of those in our emergency services.

My Department has developed very effective emergency planning arrangements. We are always very willing to learn from experiences, and our analysis has shown that the systems worked well during the recent flooding. Following the weather warning issued by the Met Office, my Department's operational teams and multi-agency partners were in a heightened state of awareness from Monday 24 August and were ready to respond to the threat of flooding. My Department also carried out its usual preparations, including placing staff on standby throughout the North, to ensure that we were in a state of readiness and able to respond quickly. Subsequently, on the Tuesday morning, a multi-agency response in Newcastle was quickly established, with operational teams present from the early morning. It is important, given the tireless efforts of staff in this incident, to say that staff were on site even before we received the first flood call for assistance. They distributed 4,000 sandbags and, with four pumps, provided assistance to property owners. It is believed that approximately 40 millimetres of rain fell in just under six hours. That is roughly 50% of the monthly average. As a number of Members have highlighted, it was unprecedented. It was very difficult for anyone to foresee the level of flooding that occurred in such a short time.

5.15 pm

I understand why Members, including Ms Rogan, have asked, but the thousands of sandbags and pumping equipment required to respond to the flooding in Newcastle could not have been deployed well in advance of the flooding. That is because the severe weather warning covered all of the North, and to pre-deploy to one area could significantly disadvantage another if the flooding does not occur as anticipated. Therefore the approach of my Department and our multi-agency partners is to be in a state of readiness to deploy to any area that may be affected. We believe that that is appropriate.

Given the prolonged period of intense rainfall that fell in the Mourne mountains and Newcastle area, the run-off, as Mr McGrath pointed out was, by all accounts, excessive. My Department is mindful of the need to provide and maintain its infrastructure. Unfortunately however, it is not always possible to ensure that all flooding can be avoided as, during severe weather events, the volume of rainfall can exceed the design capacity of drainage infrastructure and, on occasion, flood defences. At this stage, a partial blockage to a bridge on the Bryansford Road that occurred as a result of the high water levels in the Shimna river carrying debris down the watercourse

is also thought to have been a contributory factor to the flooding. That debris was removed around 6.00 pm on Tuesday 25 August. It was removed after the PSNI closed off the road because it was a significant operation. Once the flooding began to subside, many gullies were blocked. However, that was due to floodwaters depositing debris on top of gully gratings, which restricted the flow of water into the drainage system. The majority of gully pots were not blocked prior to the flooding and, other than the surface gratings being covered, they were generally clear of obstruction.

Ms Rogan is right to point out that this is not the first time that residents in Newcastle have had to endure such flooding. In 2008, there was a flooding incident. Mr Wells asked me what I am going to do to try to make sure that this does not reoccur. We need to move to a long-term solution. That is why I have committed to delivering on the Shimna flood alleviation scheme. The detailed design of the scheme commenced in September 2017 and is now complete. The scheme, which was due to start on site in the 2020-21 financial year, has encountered some slippage in the programme, not least due to protracted land agreements. However, my Department intends to use its powers of entry under the drainage order to proceed with the scheme, and it had commenced that process prior to the flooding. The flood defences will be 1,400 metres in length and will require some £6.5 million of investment. The scheme will include a back-drainage system that will allow surface water to drain to the river at suitable outlet points.

Ms Rogan asked why we cannot have the scheme up and running now. Why can we not make it happen today? I understand that, and I understand residents' frustrations, but we have to follow processes with detailed design and contractors going out to procurement. That work is ongoing. When I was with the residents, I gave them my commitment — in front of officials — that we would do everything that we could to expedite that scheme and to get delivery on it at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Mallon: Of course.

Mr Wells: I think the question on everyone's lips, particularly in Newcastle, is this: when will she as Minister come and cut the ribbon to announce that that scheme has been completed?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The scheme is due to commence next summer. I have asked for that to be expedited. We expect that the works will take around 12 months to complete. I will be very keen to be on site to cut that ribbon, not for the photo opportunity, but because this is a long-term solution to preventing this from happening again to the residents of Newcastle.

I turn now to points that were raised by Members. Mr Wells mentioned the system of controls that people had shared with you. That is not the case. There are no systems of controls to divert flows, but there is a water-level alert system, which is what prompted and informed my Department's swift action, and that of our multi-agency partners. You rightly asked about Flood Re. I can confirm that Flood Re, a UK Government scheme, applies to Northern Ireland. You are right about the exclusion of development after 2009. My understanding of that, and it is a UK Government scheme, so we have not been involved

in its design, is that that decision was taken after more-detailed information about flood risk emerged, so planning and development have responded.

I want to reassure you that planning policy in relation to flood risk in Northern Ireland is strong. It supports my Department's work in prevention and managing flooding. I encourage Members to raise concerns about the scheme with the UK Government and I would be happy to support those and make representations.

Andrew Muir and Mr Beggs mentioned the climate emergency. The reality of the climate emergency, coupled with significant underinvestment in infrastructure over many years, has presented us with the reality that, unfortunately, flooding incidents have occurred and more and more homes will be affected. As the Minister for Infrastructure, I am saying clearly that this is a priority for me, and I hope that it is a priority for the Executive. We have a collective effort to make here in policy changes, in investment and in our action. I am giving my clear commitment to this project and to see the scheme delivered so that residents in the area do not have to undergo that horrendous ordeal again.

I want to end on the point that was raised by Mr McGrath and Ms Bradley. It was a horrendous scene, Ms Rogan. You are absolutely right, the level of the water was like something out of an action film. Also apparent was the strong sense of community spirit in Newcastle. In even that distressing situation, people were doing what they could. When even their own homes were flooded, they were helping their vulnerable neighbours.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I just advise the Minister that we have gone slightly over. I have given a wee bit of latitude because others did not take so much time. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Mallon: Yes, I thank you for your latitude. I just want to end on that point, and to say that, even during those distressing scenes, I took great heart from the strong sense of community spirit and pride in Newcastle.

Adjourned at 5.22 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 14 September 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Miss McIlveen: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 7 July, the Assembly passed a motion that asked the Minister for Infrastructure to bring forward a support package for our hard-pressed taxi, haulage and coach industries. Two months later, it has taken a letter from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to move that along. Is it in order for Minister Mallon to ignore the will of the House? Will the Speaker write to the Minister and urge her to respect this place?

Mr Speaker: The Member will be aware that I have written on a number of occasions to the Executive Office and, indeed, all Executive Ministers reminding and advising them to respect the various courtesies, conventions and entitlements of the House.

The Member has made her point. I have not gone into the detail of the point that you raised, but you have made your point on the record, and I will have something further to say later in the day, when I deal with the first question for urgent oral answer.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, is it not the case that, in order to enable Minister Mallon to make the provisions, she is now going to be given powers that she hitherto did not have? Is that not what has been declared today?

Mr Speaker: The Member has raised that point, and it is a further point. I will take note of it, the House will take note of it and the Ministers on the Executive will take note of it, I dare say. As I said, I will return to the matter later.

Flags (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) (No 2) Regulations 2020

Mr K Buchanan: I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the proposed changes to the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 as set out in the draft Flags (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) (No 2) Regulations 2020.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed that there will be no time limit for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have up to five minutes in which to propose and up to five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have three minutes.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am interested to know under what Standing Order Members are being restricted to three minutes? Standing Order 17 relates to speeches in the Assembly. Standing Order 17(4) says:

"The Business Committee shall consult with the Speaker in order to establish the total time to be allocated to each debate".

It does not bestow on the Business Committee the power to limit the Members who wish to speak to three minutes. It bestows only on the Business Committee, in consultation with yourself, the power to set the totality of the time. Where has the three-minute limit come from?

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee considered the proposal. The Member will be aware that the Secretary of State has written to me. The Business Committee, then, decided to table the motion for a take-note debate. The unusual and interesting situation is that, whilst legislation in this House is dealt with by way of no-time limit on speaking rights, this legislation is not being dealt with or processed by the Assembly. I am satisfied that the Business Committee took a proper and appropriate decision to leave the debate un-timed, but to limit the speaking time for Members to three minutes. I am satisfied that that decision is in line with our right to do that. We will review the approach if it appears that there is something wrong with it and in the light of any Member's contributions, including your own. We can do that in due course. Thank you.

Mr K Buchanan: The Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 made provision for the flying of flags at government buildings on specific days. Under the Flags (Northern Ireland) Order 2000, it is the Secretary of State who has the power to make and amend such regulations. However, in doing so, the Secretary of State is required to refer a

draft of the proposed regulations to the Assembly. The Assembly must then report to the Secretary of State the views expressed in the Assembly on the proposed regulations by the date specified by the Secretary of State. Following this, the Secretary of State has a duty to consider this report. The Secretary of State may amend the proposed regulations as a result of the report before laying the regulations for approval by resolution of each House of Parliament.

The Business Committee was made aware that the Secretary of State had written to the Speaker on 1 September 2020. The Secretary of State advised that he intended to amend the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 to implement the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement commitment to bring the list of designated flag-flying days for Northern Ireland government buildings and courthouses into line with the designated days. This means an increase of three days. The Secretary of State also advised that he intended to amend the list of specified government buildings from which the flag will fly. A copy of the proposed regulations and an accompanying explanatory memorandum was circulated to all Members last week.

The Secretary of State has asked the Assembly to consider these draft regulations and provide a report of the Assembly's views by 14 September 2020. The Business Committee did not take a view on these proposals in line with previous practice. Instead, the Business Committee agreed to bring forward today's motion to create an opportunity for Members to consider the draft regulations. The Official Report of the debate will record the views expressed in the Assembly on the proposal.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make some remarks as an Assembly Member for Mid Ulster and Democratic Unionist Party Chief Whip. The DUP regards the display of our national symbols, including the national flag, as a basic but central expression of pride in Northern Ireland's Britishness and membership of the United Kingdom. We have consistently supported its display from public buildings on a 365-day basis. This, we feel, is entirely appropriate for major civic buildings such as Parliament Buildings and Belfast City Hall and reflects practice that is increasingly being seen elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Therefore, although we welcome the addition of three designated days and two government buildings under these draft regulations as committed to in New Decade, New Approach, it does not address our overarching concerns about the general direction of travel.

Nowhere else in the United Kingdom has designated flags legislation. The fact remains that it is unwieldy and not fit for purpose. For several years, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) has recognised the three royal birthdays that we are adding to the designated-day list. Northern Ireland has been left behind due to the absence of a political agreement or proactive steps by the Secretary of State. It is wrong that Northern Ireland faces such upheaval to, simply, keep pace with the expression of our Britishness as it is expressed elsewhere in our nation. It is unjust that our national pride is subject to the veto of certain political parties. We, on these Benches, seek a fundamental reform of those structures. As we approach the centenary of the foundation of Northern Ireland, we will be strongly making a case to Her Majesty's Government for greater assurances that the celebrations

do not fall victim to the inflexibility of the current legislation. The Northern Ireland Secretary may be required to give due regard to the Belfast Agreement before making any changes, but we are clear that a failure to act, in itself, violates the constitutional provisions that are already set out in that agreement.

The flying of the national flag is not divisive or disproportionate. Its display from public or civic buildings does not invoke fear or division; it simply recognises Northern Ireland's constitutional status and gives due regard to the principle of consent. I encourage all Members who share our position on these matters to passionately make their views known in this debate.

Ms Sheerin: Like most people on a Monday in the middle of a global pandemic, the Union flag is not my top priority. It is fair to say that the Union flag is never my top priority. As Irish republicans, additional flying days for the flag are never going to be something that we, in Sinn Féin, will celebrate. Indeed, the presence of the Union flag above Parliament Buildings and other civic spaces — at one time intimidating to people who identified as Irish and to republicans — is now somewhat tired.

I do not feel welcomed when I drive up that hill and I see the red, white and blue flying, but it does not threaten my Irishness. I am confident in my identity. I can be Irish in a place that does not recognise me as such and seeing a Union flag does not take away from that. That said, respect is an important commodity, and the North of Ireland is contested territory. The dominance of one community over another should be left in the past. It is our belief that there should be parity of esteem for British and Irish identities here. We should have neutrality or equality when it comes to flags and emblems; either both or neither.

Obviously, that is not something that political unionism is ready to accept. We have seen and heard talk in recent days and weeks hyping up the need for artefacts and memorials to the creation of the state in the lead-up to the centenary of partition. If we are honest with ourselves, anyone can see from a quick walk around this Building or the estate — indeed, around this city — that there is no shortage of British imperialism reflected in architecture, statues and memorials and even in street names.

In the current context, the motion is at best bizarre and inappropriate and at worst insulting. We are in the middle of a global pandemic in which thousands are worrying about their business going bust, being made redundant or balancing and managing the threat of COVID with the need to maintain employment and put food on the table.

Mr Stalford: I thank the Member for giving way. She says that the motion is bizarre. She knows that the issue is a direct consequence of New Decade, New Approach — an agreement that her party signed up to support.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Member for his input. I am coming on to the fact that the British Government have got other commitments as per NDNA that they have not yet signed up to or implemented. That is why I am saying that the motion is bizarre.

With everything that is going on around us right now, ensuring the increased flying of a flag seems like a strange item to put at the top of the agenda. Of course, the virus that is Brexit is still trundling along in the background of our

new normal, and given the British Government's failures to honour their commitments as set out in NDNA, as in previous agreements, it is a damning indictment that this is something that they are choosing to prioritise.

We have been waiting for 22 years for a bill of rights for the North, and, in our Ad Hoc Committee, we still have members questioning the merits of creating one. Two pages before the paragraph on flag regulations in NDNA, the British Government commit to:

"close engagement with a restored Executive"

in relation to our priorities in the next phase of Brexit negotiations. Disregarding the fact that the North voted to Remain, the fact that, three months ago, the Assembly voted to support a motion calling on the British to extend the transition period has been ignored. Just last week, they actually admitted publicly to their intention to break international law.

Considering all the important commitments that the British Government are not honouring, it is nothing short of absurd to me that we are standing here today discussing flags.

Mr McGrath: The flag regulations that are in front of us today are, as has been highlighted, presented as a consultation because they are being progressed in another place. We are asked simply to give our opinion on the matter, and that will be considered by the Secretary of State when he takes his decision.

Flags are controversial in Northern Ireland and are often not used for their purpose. They can be a sign of division and can be used to create feelings of unease.

I am always struck by how it is often the intention of the people who are putting them up not to celebrate or to create pride but to show negative or unhelpful things like the marking of division of territory and creating a sense of saying, "This is our place, not yours".

12.15 pm

'New Decade, New Approach' was a difficult document to develop. It was a bit of a pick-and-mix, with something for everyone in the audience. It was not so much of a deal as a collection of aspirations that were laced with items that were imperative on one side and not necessarily, but just, bearable to the other. However, it got this place back up and running, and with major issues like nurses' pay, health and education reform and then COVID-19, we are better served having this place functioning than not.

One item on the NDNA list was flag flying on additional designated days and from certain designated buildings. That is important to many in our community. It is not to me or to many of the people whom I represent, but it is to others, and in recognition of this being a shared space and a shared place, I am happy to support what is going through today.

I want to be clear that it is being delivered in the context of NDNA, which contains many more elements that are to be delivered and ones that I want to see introduced and introduced quickly. We need health service reform; we need to see the medical school at Magee delivered, and I welcome the progress on that to date; and we need to see the continued reform of these institutions in order to make them fairer, more democratic and more accountable to the

people whom we serve. We want to see extra childcare hours for hard-working families and parents in order to ease the burden on their monthly pay packet. We want to see more social and affordable housing in order to tackle the unacceptable housing stress that there is here in the North. We want additional accountability for that housing matter, too, with a separate element in our Programme for Government (PFG) on housing so that we can measure its success. Those, we believe, are the issues that affect people. They impact their life and the matters that they want to see progress on. I want to see this place working, the people in it working and the people whom we are here to work for seeing improvements in their life. I want to see much more delivered than the flags.

Ms Armstrong: In response to the legislation, I acknowledge the sovereignty of our flags. Alliance has supported the designated days for many years. It shows respect for people who want the Union flag, and it shows respect for those who do not want the Union flag. What it says, which many others here have said, is that we are a community that appears to be divided. However, we are actually just one community; we are all from this place, and we want something better. New Decade, New Approach was that, and we all signed up to it.

The designated days have been equality proofed so many times. If I am to be in this Chamber, stuck in the middle here with you, all I ask is that we show each other respect. The flag is the flag; people want it and people do not want it, and it is time for us to move forward. As others said, we are in the middle of a pandemic. A virus is killing our people. We have an education system that is not being reformed and the Bengoa report has not been brought through from Health. There are a lot of priorities here. I respect this legislation, which is adding only three more days — the birthdays of the Duchess of Cambridge, the Duke of Cambridge and the Duchess of Cornwall. That will change when, unfortunately, people pass away and days are removed, and, when other people are born, days will be added. Those are designated days. All I will ask is this: we have a lot of work to do in this place so can we move on with that?

Mr Stalford: As other Members mentioned, this development arises out of New Decade, New Approach, and, as such, I welcome it. It has also been said that New Decade, New Approach represented a compromise, and I accept that there are things that people on the other side of the House might not like but are going to have to tolerate going through as part of that compromise and that there will be things that people on this side of the House might not be that fussed on either will but have to tolerate going through. Politics is the art of the possible, and New Decade, New Approach reflected a compromise between the two major political traditions that exist in this community. I think that this is a welcome development, and I speak as someone who puts a flag on his house during July and August. I do so because I am loyal to the United Kingdom and I am a loyal subject to Her Majesty the Queen. It is part of who I am and my identity. It is important to me, and it is something that I value. I value the flag of my country, and I want to see it treated with respect. That is why, for example, I do not like to see flags left on lamp posts to become tattered rags. The flag of our country should be treated with respect.

I welcome the provision of these additional flag days, and the expansion to two other government buildings. It is right and appropriate. Mention was made of the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, and its list. My understanding of the list that we are now being brought into line with is that that is the minimum recommendation from the Government at Whitehall for the total number of days when the flag is flown. It may be that other days can be added to the list, either on a one-off basis, such as a significant national event, or permanently, if it is so decided.

I have heard some of the comments that have been made. I sat in the Chair where you are, Mr Speaker, the last time that Assembly Commission business was considered. It would be the worst possible thing for us as a community to descend into the trenches over the issue of the foundation of the state. People will have very different interpretations of it — I accept that — but we should show a bit of give and take towards each other. On the actual day itself, why should the flag not be on the roof of the Building? What would it cost? How would it hurt anyone, on that one-off day, to accede to that request and show a bit of generosity to people who believe different things to you, but want to work with you to run the country?

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Ennis: As my colleague Emma Sheerin said, for some who are looking in on the debate there will be a certain and not unjustified sense of frustration that, in the middle of a global pandemic, with Brexit looming and all the other crises that are coming our way, here we are again talking about flags and emblems.

The debate is about more than flags. It is about us deciding what type of society and place we want to live in, how we are going to treat each other and, more importantly, how we acknowledge and respect each other's identities. In the context of Brexit, we are reminded of the British Government's total and unequivocal lack of respect for Ireland and the legally binding international agreement they signed up to. Talk is now emerging that the British Government are manoeuvring themselves to, perhaps, abandon and renege on major parts of European human rights law. Of course, in the North, we know only too well that the British Government have form in that regard. It is unsurprising then that the British Government refuse to implement key human rights components of the Good Friday Agreement, specifically a bill of rights.

The Good Friday Agreement provided for an equality of treatment duty on public authorities, and that statutory duty was explicitly singled out in the agreement to be enshrined within a bill of rights. It said:

“the formulation of a general obligation on government and public bodies fully to respect, on the basis of equality of treatment, the identity and ethos of both communities”.

The Human Rights Commission, which was tasked with the formation of the bill, recommended in its 2008 advice to the Government:

“Public authorities must fully respect, on the basis of equality of treatment, the identity and ethos of both main communities in”

the North.

“No one relying on this provision may do so in a manner inconsistent with the rights and freedoms of others.”

As my colleague said, look around the Building that we have to come to and work in everyday. I do not see my identity or ethos reflected anywhere in the Building. It is absolutely nowhere.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ennis: No, I will finish if you do not mind.

Instead of asking us to roll out the flags to celebrate the birth of yet another unelected British royal, perhaps the British Government and this House might consider Sinn Féin's reasonable proposals on equality and neutrality: both flags or none at all.

The Secretary of State has said that he will read the Hansard report of this debate, so I take the opportunity to call on him and the Government to reflect on why they have yet to implement a bill of rights, and their apparent inability to honour international agreements and the commitments that they made in them. The British Government and this House need to demonstrate that we are serious about a peaceful and progressive shared future for the people on this island, a future that has to be based on equality, parity of esteem, tolerance and respect for all.

Mr O'Dowd: I was just again reading through the 'New Decade, New Approach' document that was published by the two Governments and led to the restoration of this institution. Ironically, one of the titles in the British Government's paper is, "Delivering on our Commitments". Delivering on our commitments: we have seen from the British Government in recent days what exactly that means. They will cherry-pick what they want to deliver, and they will deliver what suits them when it suits them, and sometimes it will never suit them. That is where the difficulty lies with the proposal. This is a take-note debate, and, at the end of this, we will vote that we have taken note of it. That should be in no way interpreted by the Secretary of State or by anyone in or beyond the Chamber that we support the notion that we need to fly more flags, because we do not. What we need to do is ensure that the parts of the paper that was published by the two Governments and that are the responsibility of the Assembly are implemented in full. That will cause challenges on either side of the House, but we have to do that. What the Governments do with their commitments, we will see, but they cannot cherry-pick. We have seen this from the British Government time and time again.

When you read through what is entitled:

“Annex A: UK Government Commitments to Northern Ireland”

it is as though those with an Irish identity do not exist. The UK Government — one of the co-guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement — seem to have forgotten that they signed up to the Good Friday Agreement, that the institutions are built on the Good Friday Agreement and that a significant and growing proportion of the population in this part of the island is Irish, wants to be seen as Irish and wants their identity recognised and acknowledged, but the Government do not do that in any part of this document.

The clear message that I am sending out, through Hansard, is this: the vote will go through today, but it is not an endorsement of the proposal. What we as a society have to do is acknowledge that there are different identities on this island, and they have to be acknowledged not only in word but in deed and in symbolism. Flags are about marking territory. Flags are a symbol of power; that you have power in a certain area or that you have control of a certain territory. You can put one above this Building or one on a flagpole somewhere, and they will send out the same message: it is about power. What we have here is power-sharing, so in terms of symbols and in our acknowledgement of this society, there has to be equality or neutrality in that regard.

Mr O'Toole: To say that flags are a vexed subject in this place would be to understate matters. No one in this part of the world is ever given to understatement, certainly not those in the Assembly. These regulations, as Members have said, implement one particular commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement, which was signed at the beginning of this year, on increasing designated flag days.

I want to say two connected things about today's regulations: the first is about respect; and the second is about consistency. First, on respect, it cannot be said often enough that Northern Ireland is a shared space, and it will continue to be, whatever our constitutional future. Mutual respect cannot simply be a phrase; it must be ingrained in how we think and talk about one another, our identities, our symbols and the space that we share. It is often said that we talk far too much about flags and identity. Many of the young people who leave here and cringe at the idea of coming back do so because they feel weighed down by the monotony of debates over symbolism and identity.

It is true that we talk too much about the questions of flags and identity, but it is also true that we do not talk about them in the right way. Too often, we do not speak respectfully about what is valued and precious to others. We are quick to take offence but are slow to see why others might be offended, so it is worth my saying clearly that I respect the Union flag, and I respect the importance of the flag to many people in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in the Chamber. In response to what my constituency colleague Mr Stalford said, I do not just tolerate symbols of Britishness or, indeed, symbols of other things; I hope that I actively respect them. The flag may not command my loyalty, but it should command my respect. If it matters to my neighbours, some of my friends, many of my constituents and, indeed, many of my Assembly colleagues, it should matter to me. Indeed, it is incumbent on those of us who seek constitutional change on this island to be clear that, if we are serious about having respect for Britishness in Ireland, it needs to be done not in a grudging way but in a clear and positive way.

12.30 pm

However, to be clear, mutual respect also means that, in addition to the additional designated flag days, we need to have a better approach to unauthorised flag flying in streets and neighbourhoods across Northern Ireland. In many communities, flag flying clearly has the consent, either active or passive, of the people who live there. However, in other places, there is limited, or no, consent. Many of my constituents in places like Carryduff, Rosetta

or Finaghy live in communities that are proud of their integrated nature. They have a multiplicity of identities and constitutional viewpoints, but they also dislike public spaces being used to assert one viewpoint or identity for large parts of the year. Very often, the people who put up the flags are not known to the people of those communities, let alone accountable to them.

I welcome what Mr Stalford said about tattered rags. He is completely right: anybody who cares about a flag, whatever national flag it may be, should not want to see it become a tattered rag that intimidates people. However, in the absence of an agreed and consistent approach to regulation, many communities feel powerless on the issue. They do not want to remove all symbols of identity — I certainly do not — rather they want more transparency and accountability over these matters, as well as the ability to have their voice heard.

The two points are interrelated: respect for tolerance and symbols of identity but a consistency of approach. That is why we need to see the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition, which is another part of New Decade, New Approach, report to the First Ministers to create a more consistent approach on the interrelated issue of flags.

Mr McNulty: Accommodation can be reached. In the darkest of times, accommodation was reached on flags. In this time of turmoil, I recall a different time of turmoil. Tuesday 3 March, I, along with my teammates, was training in a cut-and-thrust, dogged training session in Davitt Park in Lurgan when one of our joint managers, Brian Canavan, was called away urgently because there had just been a double murder in his family bar in Poyntzpass.

In the following days, two great leaders walked the main street in Poyntzpass together. They quelled anger and fear by their actions and their words. The spirit of accommodation exhibited by Seamus Mallon and David Trimble in those days has been shared by everybody in the community of Poyntzpass. Fortunately, the following month the Good Friday Agreement was signed. Further subsequent agreements were brokered in Poyntzpass by Tom Canavan, God rest his soul, and by Robert Turner.

The following year, that same team was in the Ulster final. The local GAA club approached the Orange Order, seeking guidance on where to source orange and white bunting. I believe that the GAA and the Orange Order worked together to take down the red, white and blue bunting, which had been up since the Twelfth, in order to erect the orange and white bunting for the Ulster final. Fortunately, my team was victorious on that day.

That spirit of accommodation still exists in Poyntzpass. The community there knows that we live in a shared home place. That is the type of shared home place that I want to work towards on this island: a new Ireland of tolerance and respect and ambition; a new Ireland of energy, endeavour, enterprise and equality; a new Ireland where we spill our sweat and nobody's blood. Let us all work towards that new Ireland, a new shared home place.

Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireas na daoine. We rely on one another for shelter.

Mr Robinson: I welcome the proposals, which correct mistakes in the original regulations from 2000 and ensure

that Northern Ireland is brought into line with the rest of the United Kingdom. In other words, equality for Northern Ireland. When the original regulations were drafted, the Queen Mother was still alive, as was Princess Margaret. With their deaths, there was a net loss of days on which the flag could fly. New members were added to the royal family, for example, the Duchess of Cambridge. Her birthday is a day on which the flag is flown in celebration. The proposed new arrangements ensure that Northern Ireland can mark that occasion, along with the rest of the United Kingdom. Indeed, under the proposals, Northern Ireland will have three additional days.

The proposals recognise that change occurs and that a proactive response to change is essential to ensure that Northern Ireland maintains the same statutory days as the rest of the United Kingdom.

For many in Northern Ireland, the ability to mark significant birthdays by the flying of our national flag is welcome, both culturally and historically. I sincerely believe that these proposals are a positive move and urge the Assembly to support the motion.

Mr Speaker: I was to call Dolores Kelly but she is not in the Chamber.

Mr Allister: John O'Dowd said that some people seem to have forgotten that they had signed up to what he called the Good Friday Agreement. That is a message that he and his party should take themselves. Whatever else the Belfast Agreement can be faulted for, it involved — we were told — an acceptance that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom. If that is correct, how can there be resistance to the flying of the flag of the United Kingdom on government buildings in Northern Ireland? If there is a recognition that we are part of the United Kingdom, one inevitably follows the other. Instead, we have had today, particularly from the first Sinn Féin Member to speak, Ms Sheerin, was bile against all things British and the flag. Yet these are the people who tell us that a great new dawn awaits us in a new Ireland. Here they are today, happy to take all the privileges of being part of the United Kingdom, bursting to get us out of the United Kingdom, promising a new Ireland and, yet, within Northern Ireland, they cannot even accept the flying of the flag.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: I do not get extra time so I will not.

Ms Ennis said that she sees nothing in this Building that accommodates her culture. My goodness, if I walk into this Building and walk up the steps from the main hall, I am faced with the portrait of an IRA commander who was responsible for multiple murders of my constituents and others.

To get back to the regulations. I welcome the fact that they are bringing things up to date. I welcome the fact that the two Sinn Féin Ministers — Communities and Finance — will now have the Union flag flying from their headquarters. I welcome the additional days. However, I say to the Assembly Commission that there is a test coming for respect within this community: 7 June 2021 is the centenary of the formation — the first sitting — of the Northern Ireland Parliament. If the flag flies on this Building, it will show whether or not there is any respect, from the Assembly Commission and those who govern this place, for the people who want to be part of the United

Kingdom. If the flag does not fly, it will be a calculated and deliberate insult to everyone who values their place in the United Kingdom and another confirmation of just what would await us if we were so foolish to leave the United Kingdom.

Mr Carroll: Clearly, we have more pressing matters to discuss today than the flying of flags, so I will not speak for long on the issue. I put on record my opposition to the extra days, contained in the motion. I believe that we, as a society, need to get away from the flying of communal flags. As a socialist, I do not support the expansion of flying flags to honour, and to glorify, any monarchy, never mind the British monarchy, in the role of British imperialism in Ireland, which, for the record, was not good for any working-class communities in the North.

This motion on flags, of course, stems from agreements that were signed up to by Sinn Féin and the DUP in the New Decade, New Approach agreement and, in a small way, sums up a major problem with the agreement; namely, how it doubles down on the two traditions — a schema — where communal forces are elevated in politics and certain sectarian practices are given cover by the law. For example, this agreement on flag flying came alongside a proposal to create a commissioner, whose tasks will include

“protecting the Ulster British tradition”

as if such a thing was an endangered species and not the historic ideology of elites here.

All these things are connected to the way that the state is the ultimate guarantor and cements sectarianism at the heart of it. People Before Profit, for our part, will continue to be a voice for social politics, inside and outside the Chamber, and will have no truck with this approach.

Mr Butler: I may not use the five minutes. I will speak first on behalf of the Business Committee. Thanks to all the Members who made a contribution. I intend to be very brief in concluding the debate. The Business Committee's intention in bringing forward this motion was to give Members an opportunity to express their views on proposed amendments to the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000. The Business Committee has not considered the proposals or taken a view on them as a corporate body. However, the Secretary of State, when he wrote to the Speaker on 1 September, asked that the Assembly considers these draft regulations, which is what we are about today.

The Secretary of State asked for the Assembly to provide a report of its views by 14 September 2020. Consequently and in order to meet that very tight deadline, the Business Committee was required to ensure that the Assembly had an opportunity to debate those proposals today. Members have now set out their views on them. I will not go through those views on behalf of the Business Committee, although I may pick them up myself. The Official Report records those views. The Business Committee has been advised, Mr Speaker, that you will send a copy of today's Official Report to the Secretary of State, who may then choose to amend the proposed regulations before laying them for approval by resolution of each House of Parliament. On behalf of the Business Committee, I ask all Members to support the motion.

I will now speak on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party and myself. First, I commend all the Members who spoke for the manner and tone of the speeches on this issue.

Flags have, for many years, been an issue of pride from a unionist perspective or a nationalist perspective, depending on the flag that you like. However, they have also been a cause of much angst and many sad debates in this country. These are regulations that the Secretary of State is bringing before us as part of New Decade, New Approach, which, as was pointed out by a number of Members, is a mixed bag of regulations and priorities for many of us. We will have to show each other a lot of respect to bring it into line.

A number of points were picked out by Members today. The motion was moved by Keith Buchanan, who talked about the value of British identity to unionists. That is something that I and the Ulster Unionist Party share. Emma Sheerin has her background and her pain, and she does not feel that her Irish identity has been celebrated. However, I am British and have lived for over 48 years somewhere which is supposed to be British and part of the United Kingdom. You want to try it in my shoes, with people picking at you all your life from 1972; it is not an easy ride. I am proud of the flag. I understand the need to be respectful and fly it appropriately. I do not see that as thumbing the nose to anybody's identity at all.

Colin McGrath is not here now but he was actually very good. He talked about how, sometimes, it is controversial and has negative connotations. However, he at least showed the respect that has probably been missing at times over the past few years with regard to the institutions not running. He indicated the need, which is probably borne out of the Good Friday Agreement, for us all to move a little bit and show respect; that was welcome. Kellie Armstrong talked about the sovereignty of the flag. She also talked about the priorities that need to be addressed. Whilst this debate might be important to some of us and less important to others, there are other priorities that need to be talked about. Christopher Stalford actually spoke really well. I do not think that he is here, but I will give him a compliment. He spoke about the need to fly flags appropriately. He spoke about his distaste for tattered flags on lamp posts. I do not think that too many in the House, including me, would disagree with that statement. He talked about the need to embrace the centenary and show generosity, which obviously works both ways.

Sinéad Ennis spoke about her frustration about this type of society and how we treat each other, but I believe that that is a mirror that we need to hold up to ourselves. Matthew O'Toole talked about respect and consistency, which I echo. Justin McNulty spoke, in Irish, about relying on each other for shelter. I cannot do it in Irish, Justin, but thank you for those words. Jim Allister reminded us of the need to show generosity in next year's centenary celebrations. The final comments were made by Gerry Carroll. That is why I will not be a socialist. If socialism cannot show anything but opposition and fails to show tolerance or accommodation, it will not be for me.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the proposed changes to the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 as set out in the draft Flags (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) (No 2) Regulations 2020.

12.45 pm

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment while we change the Table.

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

Private Members' Business

Living over the Shop Scheme

Mr Buckley: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the role that repurposed and attractive residential space above retail premises can play in promoting the success of town centres across Northern Ireland; notes that making high streets high-quality locations to live as well as work can aid the economic recovery from COVID-19; and calls on the Minister for Communities to consider establishing a living over the shop grant scheme to assist landlords to convert space above retail premises into residential accommodation.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Mr Buckley: This year has brought challenges that were previously unimagined by Members in every corner of the House. We face a battle that was entirely unforeseen, and it is hard to estimate when we will be able to resume some element of normality. When the Assembly was restored in January this year, after a long absence, we joined with a keen desire to confront issues that have long plagued this country. One such issue is the decline of the high street and economic activity in our town centres, coupled with chronic housing stress. Of course, those particular challenges long predate the viral pandemic, and societal trends have long forecast fewer people shopping and living in our town centres. With that in mind, we need to be prepared for the realistic possibility that COVID-19 will vastly accelerate the decline of the high street and to take action to mitigate that.

That is why I support the establishment of a Living over the Shop (LOTS) grant scheme and call on the Minister for Communities to take that into serious consideration, alongside direct actions across the Executive to reinvent our town centres and address the lack of affordable housing stock.

The Northern Ireland Executive first introduced the Living over the Shop scheme in 2002 to provide grants for the conversion of empty or underused space above rental retail and commercial premises into private rental units. That grant scheme ran until 2008/09 and contributed to the creation of 101 new properties in our town centres before it closed due to budgetary pressures.

An analysis of the need and demand for a new LOTS-type initiative, commissioned by the Department for Communities, was published in January 2017. The analysis reported that, over the last decade, demand has strengthened considerably for private rented units in our town centres due to reduced mortgage availability to younger householders. That demand is combined with an increase in the vacancy levels of non-domestic properties across Northern Ireland.

Another report commissioned by the Department indicated that, in 2016, the vacancy rate of non-domestic properties in 41 towns across Northern Ireland was estimated to be 22.3%, which is considerably higher than any other UK region. It was a total of 3,595 non-domestic property vacancies, of which 1,015 were quantified by Northern Irish councils as being suitable for residential conversion.

Those statistics are clear and are visible proof that the total vacancies of non-domestic properties in town centres more than satisfies supply if we are proactive in encouraging conversion under the Living over the Shop scheme. That potential supply could meet a convincing demand.

As I alluded to, there are substantive demographic and population trends that impact considerably on housing needs. Northern Ireland's population is expected to grow by an estimated 8.6% by 2039, taking the total population to over two million. That increase, coupled with an ageing population and changing trends in home ownership and composition, places further pressure on the need to improve housing supply and stock across Northern Ireland.

Age-based demographics also tell us that Northern Ireland is projected to face the challenge of supporting an ageing population, with the number of people over the age of 65 set to increase from approximately 260,000 in 2016 to approximately 410,000 by 2039 — an increase of almost 60% over 23 years. A falling birth rate also suggests that the working-age population will decrease. That will have the same knock-on effect and implications for housing. The supply of smaller homes — one- or two-bed units — will be important in meeting demand, particularly as younger generations have smaller families, on average, and as older people seek to downsize from larger homes in their latter years.

Whilst this serves as evidence for the long-term challenges that we are set to encounter, we must also recognise the present task at hand in relation to COVID-19. The viral pandemic has already compounded the difficulties faced within many Departments, and we need to be realistic about how that will directly impact the high street. Emerging evidence suggests that lockdown is set to change consumer and business behaviour on a long-lasting basis, with a more permanent shift towards working from home and favouring of digital retail. The knock-on effect of less footfall has been well-documented in Belfast in previous months. Offices adapting to a new normal and droves of staff working remotely have weakened retail and hospitality units that were heavily reliant on their custom.

In addition, the seismic shift in internet sales presents a real threat to the high street. Online sales have soared and now account for over a third of all sales across the United Kingdom, up from less than a fifth the previous year. Statistics produced by retail experts Springboard estimate that the footfall in our high streets fell by a staggering 79% in April 2020, compared with the same period last year.

That evidence very clearly raises profound questions about the future of our town centres, which must be scrutinised and addressed to prevent the continued decline of our Northern Ireland high street. If COVID-19 continues to accelerate the shift towards online retailing and service access, shop vacancy rates on the high street and in retail parks could rise rapidly, as stores inevitably become financially unviable.

With all that in mind, we must ask ourselves whether now is the time to seriously re-image and reimagine our approach to urban planning. In addressing the onset of the struggles we face with COVID-19 we must now be willing to reflect the changing role of town centres, from retail-led to multifunctional.

With respect to behavioural change, we must recognise that there is less demand for retail space in our urban centres, and rather than letting high streets fall into urban decay, we can revive our urban spaces by repurposing them by replacing shops and offices with desirable and affordable accommodation.

Further provision of housing in our town centres has the potential to generate social and economic benefits, including increased investment and spending, and the creation of jobs. Following that path has the potential to curve behavioural changes and to broaden the appeal of our town and city centres. The case for the demand of such residential properties is compelling, and, in establishing a Living over the Shop scheme, we can grasp the opportunity to revitalise and re-image our town centres.

With a vast array of vacant non-domestic properties in our town and city centres, there is a role for government to take the initiative in encouraging such plans to repurpose urban centres. Now is the time for action; now is the time to re-image our towns. I fully recognise that a Living over the Shop grant scheme cannot in itself address the challenges facing Northern Ireland's housing supply and regeneration of local communities, but it is a start, and it can help set the tone following the global pandemic that we faced in COVID-19.

As a party, we have, in the past, raised with local councils the prospect of town centre regeneration challenge funds, and the fact that chambers of trade, and others, could bid for annual money to help them develop a range of projects in town centres. We are clear that there is a need for a comprehensive look at whether the current structures with regard to housing are fit for purpose. We must accept that there is a need to work together — holistically, but proactively — in the days ahead. It is vital that any future programme reflects the challenges of COVID-19 and market fluctuations, as well as the ideas of those who stand to be affected if it is to command confidence and, ultimately, realise its clear potential. We accept that that is not something that one Minister should be left to take forward on their own. The establishment of a high street task force would provide a useful vehicle to take forward the work in a timely and effective manner.

I appeal to the House to support me in my desire to re-image and reimagine our town centres, as we react to one of the most affected periods in our time, the reaction and the response of government in tackling the decline of our high street, and to the demand for social housing in a post-COVID environment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the Member to move the amendment, can this auld Belfast councillor welcome that auld Belfast councillor back from his period in isolation? You are very welcome back, Mr McCann.

I call Mr Fra McCann to move the amendment.

Mr McCann: How long have I got, Chair?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Ten minutes.

Mr McCann: That is good. Cheann Comhairle, I begin by thanking you and all Members who have sent me kind words during the course of my illness. It was much appreciated.

The motion before the House calls on the Minister for Communities to:

“to consider establishing a living over the shop grant scheme to assist landlords to convert space above retail premises into residential accommodation.”

On the face of it, that seems to be a good proposal. The motion also states that such space can play an important role in promoting the success of our town centres, and notes that:

“making high streets high-quality locations to live as well as work can aid the economic recovery from COVID-19”.

Again, on the face of it, that proposal seems fine and, of course, we should consider all proposals that come to the table for discussion. However, I wonder if that is the right way to pursue this allocation of housing. We have always believed that any proposal that helps in dealing with the dereliction of the many business premises with empty spaces above those premises needs to be looked at, but it cannot be looked at in isolation. It must be looked at alongside the other serious difficulties faced in the housing sector.

The proposers of the motion do not speak of the problems which that area might bring, especially those we saw previously when we pursued the policy of living above the shop. It is about not only the cost, but which areas will benefit from the proposal. Several other thoughts come to mind. How will areas for development be chosen? How much will the development cost? Who will control the new build? How will the spaces be allocated when completed? Will they be allocated on need?

The motion does not lay out the many difficulties that there will be in overcoming the serious problems of access to the proposed homes. Moreover, regional planning policies state that they would need to comply with normal planning and environmental considerations. Facilities for the storage of fuel and refuge, and space for drying clothes, for instance, will be required. What about parking? Planning talks of level access which would be considered in the circumstances of each case. How will rent be set in the new refurbished properties?

Will rents remain in the ownership of the property owner, will they be handed to the social housing provider to allocate from increasing waiting lists, or will they be purely a private development? One of the papers that we received listed rent charges in the private rented sector throughout the North, but they were old figures. Who will set rents to ensure that they are affordable? Those are just a few thoughts that come to mind.

1.00 pm

I have looked through the research papers, many of which are based on English schemes that were heavily funded. However, the paper provided by Public and Corporate Economic Consultants, who, working back then for the Department for Communities, issued a report in September 2016, stated that Belfast was identified as an area with significant challenges regarding its non-dependent domestic vacancies and that the scheme was

likely to work only in areas outside Belfast city centre. In fact, it seems to remove Belfast city centre from any possibility of developing a LOTS housing scheme, especially at a time, only a number of years ago, when there was a campaign in inner-city communities to have housing in all its aspects built in the centre of Belfast.

I was a member of the old Social Development Committee back then, and, when we looked at the town centre regeneration strategy, we realised early on that housing was crucial to the future of towns and villages. The strategies offered hope, and people were disappointed that they never materialised. Strategies for the future of towns and villages can work only with other sectors, especially local government. In fact, today many councils are actively working on the development of major proposals, major shape-changing schemes that will change our communities for the better and include business, sport, environment, housing and much more. City deals take in council areas surrounding and including Belfast. Derry and councils in the north-west have their own city deals, as do other councils that are working on growth deals. All those will have, as part of their proposition, housing growth over the next 10 to 20 years. Councils need to be convinced that the LOTS scheme will provide the type of housing that will make a difference to their area.

Those who table the motion need to work with local government to ensure that all aspects of dereliction are dealt with, including how to deal with the dereliction of town centres, especially shops and wasteland that have lain vacant for many years. I again emphasise that that should be part of a strategy, not just a scheme chosen in isolation from a housing strategy. Those who tabled the motion know that housing in all its aspects is right up there for the Minister. She has made a commitment to come in front of the Committee and to cover any issues that we want to raise. She has spoken of her commitment to start to deal with the tangled web that makes up housing and to put a strategy in place that deals with the many problems that we face. I have no doubt that she will look at the motion and do her best to deal with the matter.

Again, I emphasise that this cannot be done in isolation from all other aspects of housing. I argue that our amendment offers the best way forward and ask those who tabled the motion to reconsider it and allow the amendment to have the unanimous support of the Chamber. Let this be part of an overall strategy that will ensure that all future decisions on housing developments and allocations are based on objective need.

A chairde, we are in difficult times, but I have no doubt that we will work our way through this. When we do, we will need to work together to provide decent housing. We have a Minister for Communities who is deeply committed to tackling the housing issue, especially the provision of modern housing for all people in need. I ask that you support the amendment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. May I ask you to move the amendment formally?

Mr McCann: I beg to move the following amendment:

Leave out all after "repurposed" and insert:

"and accessible space above commercial properties could potentially play in revitalising town and city centres by providing additional affordable, accessible

and high-quality accommodation; further recognises this potential to increase the supply of homes to meet demand; acknowledges that increasing this type of housing in high streets can help assist in the social and economic recovery from COVID-19; and calls on the Minister for Communities and her Executive colleagues to explore this option to reduce housing demand based on objective need."

Mr Durkan: Every Member will be all too familiar with the long housing waiting lists across our constituencies: 38,000 applicants in total but with fewer than 2,000 new social housing units being built every year. With the greatest need being in my constituency, Foyle, where we have nearly 3,000 households on the housing waiting list, I welcome any innovative measure that will help to ensure that everyone across the North has a roof above their head. I commend the Members for Upper Bann and North Belfast for tabling the motion.

I will also support the amendment, which I believe to be complementary, as a Living over the Shop scheme that begins and ends with grants to landlords has more potential pitfalls than benefits.

A 2016 report by the Department, to which Fra McCann referred, looked into the need and demand for such a scheme. I am sure that the Minister is familiar with that report, and updated information on the data provided would be useful for a fresh look. I hope, however, that the Minister will go beyond it and undertake a comprehensive assessment of the viability of such a scheme, taking into account how many homes such a scheme could create in each constituency, affordability and town planning issues in terms of convenient access to public services and facilities. An updated assessment would also have to reckon with the brutal reality that many shops in towns and city centres will struggle to stay open in the coming months and years.

There are few areas of public policy that housing does not touch. The labour market, education and health are chief among them. That is why we in the SDLP have called for a 20-year housing strategy that would incorporate supply, affordability, regulation of the growing private rental sector and tackling homelessness. The solution to our housing crisis is not simply increasing supply; it is about increasing the supply of affordable high-quality housing for sustainable communities.

Encouraging private landlords to develop the empty spaces above commercial properties requires careful consideration and strategic planning. There are clear benefits from repopulating our town centres and generating much more economic activity. Living over the Shop schemes make use of existing infrastructure and provide housing much more quickly than the time it takes to build entirely new houses. While we all want to see new homes built or provided, there is a risk of rushing in with grants and ending up with housing that is unaffordable and unsuitable for those in greatest housing need. The departmental report that I mentioned cited research that showed that city centre living was most likely to appeal to young, single professionals. They certainly need housing and are part of what makes city centre living so vibrant, but the majority of people I meet who are in housing need are families with children.

It is not just a case of making space above commercial properties habitable; we should identify the potential pitfalls and learn the lessons of such a scheme in England in the late 1990s. The weakness of that scheme stemmed from its failure to consider access to public services. Families, in particular, need convenient to doctors' surgeries, schools and play parks, as well as needing parking. Without consideration of those issues, accommodation above shops will, I fear, promote only transience rather than the long-term sustainable communities that we want and need to build.

I support the amendment.

Mr Beggs: I, too, support the motion. I thank Mr Buckley for having moved the motion, indicating the importance of a new Living over the Shop scheme or something like it to promote and encourage our town centres and to address the change in retailing and the high level of vacancies there. There is a problem, and we need to address it.

Once, the pressure on town centres was from out-of-town shopping centres. As others have indicated, it has moved on from that. During this recent period, the effects of COVID and having to live with the virus have exacerbated that situation, accelerating the move to online retailing and reducing footfall and turnover in our town centre shops. That additional pressure has, in turn, created further vacancies, and it is important that we arrest that decline and get footfall into town centres. If there are vacancies, it makes our town centres less attractive, so it is important that we address those vacancies and encourage schemes such as the Living over the Shop scheme that can reuse that vacant property. As Mr Buckley said, we may need to look at the overall planning policies in our town centres. There is no point in having planning policies that assume the shopping patterns of yesterday still; we need to be more flexible.

I recall, when coming to the Assembly, getting temporary accommodation for an office in a town centre. It was the only location that I could get with disability-friendly access. I literally had frontage access and no shop window, but I had to apply for temporary accommodation for a number of years. Eventually, that moved on.

It is important that we look at reusing our town centres and getting sustainable use from them, and I have no doubt that living in our town centres is an important element of that. It is important that we refresh our planning policies and the grants that are available to support them.

As has been indicated, there was a previous Living over the Shop scheme that supported 11 areas throughout Northern Ireland. My constituency, particularly the town centres of Larne and Carrickfergus, was not supported. Many other town centres were not supported by the previous scheme, and, therefore, the potential for the scheme to help those town centres and help address the level of homelessness in those areas is perhaps greater than in other areas.

In moving forward, it is important that we come up with a scheme that will work, not one that will tick all our own personal boxes. Other schemes have tried to improve the town centres in my constituency. The Heritage Lottery Fund has been useful for some properties, but it involves specifications that mean that other property owners leave properties vacant and do not think it is worthwhile, perhaps because the property is in a conservation area where there

is a high cost to follow what is required by the fund. It is important that we adapt our planning policies to make sure that something happens and to make sure that the high level of vacancies is addressed to bring life back into those town centres and provide the homes that we all want.

Mr Durkan talked about how there was potential to bring about quick change. The buildings are already there; we are talking about modifying buildings. I suspect that, in terms of the overall cost, it is probably more efficient to use those buildings than to build new homes from scratch. We have a homelessness issue throughout Northern Ireland, not just in some areas. There are huge pressures in finding homes for families and individuals in our towns and cities in Northern Ireland, and it is important that we come up with a scheme that will apply widely and not just concentrate on some areas.

I would like to highlight the report that was published in 2016. That was a useful review of the Living over the Shop scheme and is very detailed. For instance, it identifies 30 properties in Larne with the potential to be used if such a scheme is rolled out. There are 10 in Ballymena and 20 in Carrickfergus, which is the other town centre in my constituency.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. In reference to the report, does he agree that it is clear that the evidence and the analysis of a Living over the Shop scheme is there and in place and that it is now about getting on with the job and delivering practical schemes that support our town centres?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Beggs: I agree entirely with the Member.

The report was published in, I think, September 2016, and it has sat on the shelf for virtually four years when the Assembly did not meet. Homelessness got worse during that period, yet the ideas in the report have sat there and have not been addressed. It is important that we deal with it now, and it is important that we come up pragmatic schemes that will work. If they do not work with those who own the property, do not work with potential tenants and do not work with other potential partners, perhaps housing associations, they will not happen. It is important, in designing a scheme, that we get one that will work so that we can provide the homes that are badly needed, revitalise our town centres and improve the footfall and the feeling of safety among the people who live there.

1.15 pm

Ms Armstrong: I have listened to the debate today. I can see the merits in the motion and amendment, but I have to say, on behalf of the Alliance Party, that we will support the motion, not the amendment. The reason is this: had the grant scheme been included in the amendment, we could have supported both. Both are well intentioned, and both are needed, but the grant scheme is necessary.

The 2016 report that Mr Beggs talked about has already identified that businesses, landlords and Departments recognise the need for a grant income to convert the spaces above commercial properties to make them habitable. Therefore, the Department for Communities is already aware of the need to grant support for the establishment of the Living over the Shop scheme. In New

Decade, New Approach, all Executive parties agreed to a housing outcome — I am looking at Mr Durkan because it was an SDLP approach that was brought forward. I look forward to seeing that outcome being developed with clear indicators to achieve better housing. I think, to be honest, that the Living over the Shop scheme is one of the aspects that needs to be concluded if we are to achieve the amount of housing that we need for all of our people across Northern Ireland.

It is time to move forward the option to develop more living spaces, given that the demand for housing is growing. That is why I cannot go with an amendment that talks about a Minister who is very committed to housing going to Executive colleagues to talk about it. In the current situation, there is so much on the Executive's plate that I want to see action as opposed to just considering what might happen. I believe that the Minister is a person who will take this forward.

The reason why we need a grant for the Living over the Shop scheme is that shop owners might not be able to provide the money to develop the units. Think of how many towns, outside Belfast, have charity shops. They cannot afford to develop residential places above. Through this grant, there is an opportunity for us to do something different, and a grant that comes with a caveat — it is not a contract — can provide this. So, we can consider things like that which Mr McCann brought forward. For instance, we can ensure that bins are not stored on the street by providing somewhere to store them on the residential property. We can ensure that the living space is sustainable by saying that it must include alternative fuel sources to reduce carbon emissions so that we meet our targets. Innovative alternatives to oil tanks are desperately needed if we are to move away from fossil fuels.

The space needs to be inclusive and not exclude people with limited mobility. An awful lot of those in our older generation are looking for town-centre living because they no longer drive; they use public transport. Living together in towns, and being together safely in towns, is more important than sitting in a three-bedroom house in the middle of nowhere. We have to consider lifts and accessibility options for residential properties that are on the first floor. There needs to be consideration of rates and water charges because, as we know, commercial premises would have to split those from the residential premises.

We need to think about some other way of making houses and house space available, given that so little land is available. We know that work has been done. The mapping out of land has been done, for instance, in Belfast, and the amount of land available for new housing is very low. Meanwhile, a number of single men are still denied access to the housing market, and a number of older people face the bedroom tax. We pay that for them at the moment, but the time will come when more and more people move on to the benefits system and face the bedroom tax. We could consider the town centre housing fund in Scotland, which is a 50:50 mix of grant and loan funding that could reduce the cost to government.

For years, architects and town planners have said to us that we need to develop town- and city-centre living through services that make these spaces welcoming and inclusive rather than frightening and isolating. The last thing that we want to do is to put people into places in which they feel uncomfortable. We have the opportunity

to say to the owners of commercial premises that we have social housing options and social landlords who could come in and take over the space for them. They could buy that space and develop it in a way that would be good for people and meet the objective need. There is no point in putting someone into a house if they are not able to climb the stairs, or they are unable to afford to heat it, or it is not the right space for them.

I welcome the motion today. Living over the Shop is one way in which we can revitalise the centres of our towns and cities. However, it needs to be done. It does not need to be talked about any more. We need the grants to become a reality. I appreciate, absolutely, that money will be extraordinarily tight over the next wee while, but can —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you.

Ms Ennis: At the crux of Sinn Féin's proposed amendment is the need to bring the necessary focus on the fact that many people and families live in housing stress — as a number of Members have already outlined — and that we simply do not have the housing stock to meet that need. We need to immediately begin to address that. I am sure that Members would agree that that would be a far more effective use of public finances. We need our towns and city centres to be vibrant and thriving places to live and work, but that cannot be at the expense of those who are in the greatest need of a home.

New Decade, New Approach brings focus to build housing in locations of objective need. Sinn Féin believe that adequate housing is a human right and we will continue to promote that across the island. The level of homelessness in the North/South needs to be addressed and Sinn Féin has an ambitious and viable target of building social and affordable housing, as is in line with objective need.

While this motion and the amendment talk specifically about our town and city centres, as a rural MLA for South Down it would be remiss of me not to mention that rural housing needs have been neglected for far too long. The Housing Executive retains oversight of new builds, but it has a poor record of coordinating new builds in line with objective needs and the Rural Needs Act.

Housing development in rural locations has missed its target over each of the last five years, and the Housing Executive's rural and place shaping teams need to work with rural communities and their representatives to examine housing needs and to support housing associations in the delivery of new build schemes to address those needs.

Approximately 60 housing association houses are sold each year, along with 300 Housing Executive homes. As we know, that stock has never been replaced. New build is not adequately located in the areas of highest need. The latest housing figures show that there are over 37,000 applicants on the social housing waiting list, and of those applicants more than 26,000 are in housing stress.

The private rented sector plays a big role in meeting housing need, as does the social housing sector. Therefore, there has been a significant increase in the proportion of households with children which are living in private rented accommodation. As the Member for Foyle has already outlined, research that was undertaken by the Centre for Cities in 2015 has shown that city centre

residents are more likely to be young, and single students or professionals. However, almost a third of those who are experiencing housing stress are families. Indeed, many families are already struggling to obtain their own home in unfair conditions of overcrowding, and young families are still being penalised for the housing crash from over a decade ago. This amendment brings a further emphasis to support them.

The DUP's motion does, on the surface, look to have merit, but it excludes public money from being used to help support those who need it most into accommodation, on the basis of objective need. Sinn Féin supports efforts to revitalise our towns and city centres, and we are very much open to exploring the best options to enhance a social and economic recovery. However, the social aspect is completely omitted from the DUP's motion, which is why we find it difficult to support it as it stands.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ennis: Go ahead.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member accept that 11 areas had the scheme and that it had not been afforded to many other parts of Northern Ireland, so that should be a major consideration?

Ms Ennis: I did not quite hear your comments.

Mr McCann: Will the Member give way?

Ms Ennis: Yes, go ahead.

Mr McCann: I remember the scheme back then, and I believe that it was brought in under housing-led regeneration, which had a particular focus. If you look at Belfast then the five areas that were chosen for it were five unionist areas, and there were very few resources pointed towards nationalist areas. Those were the facts of life for the scheme back then.

Ms Ennis: Thank you.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Ms Ennis: Thank you, but I am going to conclude.

Sinn Féin's amendment is about maintaining the support and supply of accommodation necessary to help struggling families, along with our most vulnerable, to access housing, and to have security and dignity. Therefore, I ask Members to support the amendment.

Mr Catney: Although COVID-19 has added focus to the need to aid the prosperity of our city centres, the issues impacting on them have long predated COVID-19, and they will exist even after we recover from the pandemic. The benefits of the Living over the Shop scheme are not just economic. We have a massive housing shortage and affordability issues, so anything that can be done to tackle that must be welcome.

Living over the Shop properties are also more affordable. They are more affordable to create than new residential builds, and, more importantly, they are cheaper to buyers and renters. Changes in demographics and household types are also apparent. Living over the Shop schemes provide vital accommodation to young and single-person households. We have a severe lack of one-bedroom and two-bedroom properties, which is putting stress on the

private and social housing market. This is a simple and effective way of dealing with this.

Living over the Shop schemes are also tied into urban regeneration work. They revitalise town centres without the need for destruction and the eroding of character of our town centres. They enhance the areas, breathing life and vibrancy back into them. In fact, my mother and father lived above a shop in the city centre, and the only other two people who lived in behind that ring of steel that was then the commercial heart of Belfast were the caretaker and his wife, who lived above the Masonic lodge in Cornmarket. The point that I am trying to make by bringing this to your mind is that this has to be done with planning, and we cannot use a blunt instrument such as compulsory purchase to move out those people who find themselves living in city centres.

The benefit to our town and city centre economies cannot be more clear. As I said, my parents lived above the bar for most of their lives. They bought groceries from a family-owned store across the road, bought food from the family-owned butchers on the next street and they bought their clothes from the family-owned stores next to them. In turn, these family businesses and their owners and their customers came into the bar and helped my parents to sustain their businesses. In the days of online shopping, these micro-economies are the only way to keep our towns and city centre businesses going.

Statistics show that our own town centres have an average of 20% non-domestic vacancy levels. A mix of grant and loan schemes for over the shop properties in Scotland have proven to be popular. This can bring populations into our city centres and, therefore, bring revenue into our city centre businesses. In closing, these schemes will help our small business owners, help to regenerate our cities and town centres and provide people with affordable and practical housing that allows them to live, prosper and enjoy the places where they live. It is a simple solution with a massive impact. I urge you all to support the amendment and the motion.

Mr Blair: I support the motion and thank those who tabled it, but I cannot support the amendment for reasons, highlighted by my colleague Kellie Armstrong and which I do not need to repeat, around grants and other issues and, more importantly, the need to move from exploration to action. The motion provides a new opportunity, I believe, to —

Mr Durkan: I thank the Member for giving way. I was going to interject during Ms Armstrong's speech. I certainly concur that it is the time for action rather than exploration, but will the Member accept that the motion that he is going to support merely calls on the Minister to "consider" such a scheme? That is the action that is about the same as asking the Minister to "explore" such a scheme, which the amendment calls for.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Blair: I am content with the wording of the motion. I am sure that the Member will agree that some of the reports that we have talked about have been around for years.

The motion provides a new opportunity to kick-start initiatives aimed at refreshing town centres. It also offers the potential to revitalise town centres by repurposing

empty premises above shops, accommodation that, in many cases, has been vacant for some time or has been neglected or has fallen into disrepair. Such initiatives could provide additional housing at competitive prices also, simply by, you could suggest, looking upwards and provide opportunity to tackle the acute shortage of housing, particularly social and genuinely affordable housing, which, as we know, has led to spiralling rent and house prices in many parts of the country.

There is, I suggest, also potential economic benefit. The return of residents can benefit the business below commercially, provide potential staff perhaps and repopulate urban twilight zones. People will be interested in the local area, its upkeep and its amenities. There could also, in some instances, of course, be a greater contribution to local rates revenue. We should also try to harness the environmental benefit around us on this issue. Not driving to the shops or to work, but, rather, walking or cycling reduces congestion and, consequently, air pollution, which is good for the environment, of course.

1.30 pm

There are, however, some matters on which I sound a note of caution. Living above the shop can have potential downsides. A previously desirable home may lose its allure if a retail outlet such as a bookshop downstairs were to close suddenly and a fried food outlet were to open in its place. There can be issues with social isolation arising from having no immediate neighbours, particularly for those who are vulnerable or in need of support or a social network, a neighbourhood feeling or, for some people, the feeling of belonging to a community. Other issues that need to be looked at include security —.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Blair: Sure.

Mr Beggs: Would the Member accept that living in a town centre can bring opportunities as well? There are libraries in town centres, and numerous groups meet in towns. Yes, I appreciate that there are risks and potential isolation, but there is also much potential for networking and benefit to those who chose to live there.

Mr Blair: I thank the Member for the intervention. I hope that you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, and Members will agree that I had just highlighted a number of positives to living in a town centre, and I will come to some potential solutions to the issues on which I note caution.

There must be fire precautions, separate from those for the shop. There is the probability of high traffic noise and access issues. There needs to be a separate entrance, ideally one in a well-lit and clearly visible place.

There are ways to ensure that the areas of concern do not outweigh the benefits that I highlighted, for example, through the coordination of planning and implementation by ensuring interdepartmental and inter-agency working on the issues that I have highlighted and through area planning and joined-up working between different levels of government to highlight the pitfalls and provide solutions.

With that in mind, together with the fact that potential problems do not outweigh the benefits, I am happy to support the motion.

Ms Bailey: The Green Party supports the amendment to the motion. We do so because we believe that housing is a right, not a luxury; nor is it a commodity to be bought and sold or traded for financial gain. Unfortunately, that is what it has become, leading to inflated prices, inflated land values and inflated profits in the private housing sector.

We are not in the same situation as our neighbours in Dublin or London just yet, but we are heading there, make no mistake about it. For example, as of March 2019, there were just under 40,000 people on our housing waiting lists, yet, in the 2018-19 financial year, we built fewer than 1,000 new social homes while 7,000 homes were built in the private sector. The Assembly cannot stand over a situation where restrictions are placed on our largest social housing provider creating new homes while grant incentives are provided to the private sector. The Department for Communities' review of a previous, similar scheme remarked on:

“the relatively low risk and high reward available to the prospective recipients of grant funding.”

It seems that some have not learned lessons from previous mistakes with this type of proposal. The overprovision of houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) in areas such as my constituency of South Belfast has decimated some neighbourhoods and communities and has created social and environmental problems that cost statutory agencies millions each year in trying to manage.

HMOs and LOTS serve a purpose but only when used properly and only with proper controls and planning. That is why the amendment provides a much more proportionate and balanced response to the issue. We need more high-quality, affordable and long-term homes. We know that single men between the ages of 26 and 59 make up the biggest proportion of people on the housing waiting list. We know that we need more one- and two-bedroom housing units, which LOTS-type accommodation could help with, but driving more people into the private sector, with its rising rents, is not the answer. The Nevin Economic Research Institute's research on housing in Northern Ireland makes it clear that affordability is a major issue in the private rented sector, because costs are simply too high. Sadly, some of our housing association rents are pushing up the boundary of what we consider affordable.

We knew that we needed to reimagine our towns and city centres long before COVID hit, but it has provided us with another reason and opportunity to build back better. Housing-led regeneration is a way forward. Our towns and city centres should be places where people want to live. There is no quick fix. We cannot just throw public money at private property owners to create some new flats and bedsits and expect regeneration to somehow happen on its own.

Mr Catney: I thank the Member for giving way. Sometimes, some of the old buildings are historic buildings, like Victorian buildings. We have lost an awful lot of our built heritage. It is just a case of trying to give another lifeline to the businesses trying to operate in them. I am sure that the Member sees that as a risk as well.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Member for his contribution. It is something that I will be —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Ms Bailey, you have an additional minute.

Ms Bailey: Thank you.

I will address exactly that point in a second.

We need to create liveable, breathable urban spaces with good housing; green spaces; no congestion; access to health centres, schools and parks; and a butcher, baker and candlestick maker all within your living space. We do not need to give away grants to create more private rental accommodation to make any of that happen.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bailey: Yes, go ahead.

Mr Beggs: I share the idealistic vision that you create, but I just wonder how it will be delivered. Government borrowing restrictions limit the public funds available. If there is not a partnership of some sort between housing associations and the private sector, are you not just going to be looking for a vision and not delivering it?

Ms Bailey: I thank the Member for his contribution. I assure you that it is not idealistic; it is experience that I speak from. I speak from experience as a mother who was forced out of private rental due to high rents and who lived in a hostel for many months before being offered social housing. That is where my ideals come from.

It is not enough for landlords to make lots available. Perhaps, we should look a bit more closely at why that might be happening. What public policy could be contributing to that? Landlords are already being incentivised to sit with vacant commercial property by our rating system. Developers are also being incentivised to knock down and rebuild rather than repurpose and reuse under our VAT system. In the context of our climate emergency, the impact that it has on our carbon emissions is unforgivable, never mind what it has meant — this is exactly the point that the Member made — for our built heritage across our Province. We can do things better. We can encourage landlords to use their properties better. We should also use public money better. Let us work on that. Let us put our focus on meeting the needs of our constituents in a sustainable way. Let us use public resource to create public housing at a scale that is actually needed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry —.

Ms Bailey: Let us redesign our planning system and make it fit for purpose today, and let us focus on creating a happier and healthier Northern Ireland for all.

Mr Carroll: It is undoubtedly the case that city- and town-centre living would go some way towards alleviating local housing crises across the North, particularly in inner-city communities. We must ensure that, when we talk about increased housing across the North, it is, first and foremost, about getting people the homes that they need and, secondly, about doing it in a sustainable and affordable manner. Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the intention behind the DUP motion today. It seems to be in line with the recent approach to COVID: the motive is, blatantly and simply, to get businesses in city centres generating profit again. Indeed, the motion comes hot on the heels — you will be well aware of this, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker — of the sign-off on the Tribeca development in Belfast city centre, which was opposed

by campaign groups and thousands of submissions because it presented a threat to social housing, open space, arts and culture and built heritage, as we have heard, and included thousands of square feet of office space. Unfortunately, it was pushed ahead by the DUP and Sinn Féin. We can and must do better when planning the future for our town centres to put people's needs first and guarantee sustainability over making a quick buck for landlords or big business owners. How many —?

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. While I welcome his initial comments about the need for housing space, particularly in our town centres, does he not note the intention and genuine spirit of the motion, which is to look at the thousands of vacant properties in our town centres and note that, without a scheme in place to support landlords who are already struggling, we will not be able to provide additional space in town centres to allow people to live and make our cities and towns vibrant once again?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call Mr Carroll, I remind Members that interventions should be brief. Mr Carroll, you have an additional minute.

Mr Carroll: I remind the Member that there is no great practice of grants being handed out in this Building through various Departments and of them being fair and accessible and of public money being well spent. I remind him of RHI. There have to be concerns raised over the kind of grant scheme that he and his party suggest.

How many high-quality, premium apartments did we see flood the market in Belfast alone when COVID hit and tourists could not travel here? There were enough to prove that such apartments are not always built with the people who live here in mind. To go further, we would like to see the Executive enable the Housing Executive to buy and develop many of those spaces to throw open town and city centres to people stuck on waiting lists. We think that that is the best approach to dealing with the housing crisis in our communities.

We are not in favour of ploughing ahead with the profit-driven development of our city centres, which has seen hoteliers and businesses given primacy over the objective need of our communities too many times. We are not alone: academic research says that we must move towards more sustainable planning. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed more than ever the problematic fragility of the direction taken by the Executive over the past 10 years in the matter. We are for the development of homes in the city centre, but they must be built or developed so that they are affordable and up to environmental standards. Therefore, I cannot support the DUP motion, but I will support the amendment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Members have indicated that they wish to participate in the debate, so I call the Minister for Communities, Ms Caral Ní Chuilín, to respond to the debate. The Minister will have 15 minutes.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): I thank the contributors to the debate and welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion.

First, in relation to addressing the question about the Living over the Shop scheme — the debate brought this out in a much broader sense — I fully recognise the role that a repurposed and attractive space can play in the

success of town centres and making high streets desirable places to live. However, my priority is providing accessible, quality, public housing for those in most need, housing in quality neighbourhoods with access to suitable amenities. Repurposing vacant or underused commercial premises as homes can have a role to play. However, the basis for my Department to intervene with a subsidy to the private housing market will always be around the provision of public housing allocated on the basis of objective need, given the scale of the housing stress that was mentioned here today in the debate.

You all have the background notes on the Living over the Shop scheme. The Department funded the scheme for conversion projects from commercial to private residential properties. The scheme was aimed at encouraging the development of homes and empty spaces above high street shops and was targeted primarily at creating private homes for sale or rent. The LOTS scheme was then an attempt to help urban centres by providing housing and reusing buildings. However, the scheme closed to new applicants in 2009, due not only to budgetary constraints but to its absolute failure to deliver on anticipated outcomes. An independent review of the scheme supported that analysis. It was a grant scheme; it did not make any significant difference to housing supply or regeneration; and focus then moved on to other work that held more promise.

The report was clear that there were numerous issues causing the underutilisation of former commercial space in towns and city centres, and some of those issues have been raised today, issues such as planning, building control, health and safety, financing, insurance, rates, the layout of the buildings and disability access.

The provision of a small grant scheme, or any grant scheme, did not significantly overcome these issues and, as a result, the scheme hardly managed to deliver any homes. Moreover, as private and public funding was directed towards the provision of private dwellings, there was no increase in the delivery of public housing.

1.45 pm

Personally, I see no evidence that any of this has changed. To be clear, I have no plans to reinstate, under any circumstances, the Living over the Shop scheme. Indeed, the provision of a public subsidy to support the creation of new homes by private developers, potentially at the expense of additional public housing, is something that I will not support.

A Member: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No.

Given the high level of housing stress here, my primary focus will be on increasing the supply of public housing in future. A grant scheme for developers that does not aim to specifically increase the provision of public housing is not part of my plans. As I said at the start, that does not mean that I am not going to look at options or a range of other measures to help reimagine or regenerate our towns and cities. However, putting public money into vacant shop spaces while there is such a growing need for social housing cannot be reconciled. My Department is therefore committed to finding new and innovative ways of increasing the supply and, indeed, affordability of housing. I welcome the fact that councils are supporting this through

their local development plans to increase the provision of housing in their towns and cities.

My Department has undertaken a wide range of work to assist councils in developing and implementing affordable housing policies through the local development plan process, and my officials are keen to continue to collaborate with councils on this very important work. Some of the work includes an advice note on delivering affordable housing, with planning conditions for any new housing development; a new definition of affordable housing; scoping new types of intermediate housing, including new initiatives within the private rented sector, such as below-market intermediate rents; and partnering with Belfast City Council, in part to fund a study to understand the viability of housing development, including affordable housing provision. The Housing Executive has engaged with councils on a strategic and scheme basis to ensure that housing need is addressed locally.

My officials are also working with local authorities on urban regeneration projects and programmes that have a strong housing element, and I would like to highlight some of the work that we are doing. For example, in Belfast, a key policy objective that we share with Belfast City Council is to increase the residential population living in the city centre and around the city core, in line with the local development plan. This will include the provision of 20% social and affordable housing in proposed schemes. One example of this process in action is my Department's input into the strategic site assessments conducted by the council, which identified a number of key sites that it currently owns. However, it is not just Belfast. My Department has taken practical steps to help regenerate urban centres and provide housing right across the North. We are involved in mixed-use regeneration schemes that will deliver affordable and more social homes. These efforts will undoubtedly improve the economic and social fabric of our town centres.

It is clear that there are currently problems faced by town and city centres, and this needs to be addressed as part of the TEO high street task force. There was a clear lesson in the Living over the Shop pilot. There are fundamental issues that went beyond the influence of the scheme. The focus of any future intervention by my Department will always remain on targeting those in most need. I firmly believe that this focus should increase supply to reduce demand. In the meantime, the Department for Communities will continue to work actively to engage with councils and, indeed, other bodies, particularly in rural communities, to work with their local plans.

I will now turn to some of the contributions. Jonathan Buckley moved the motion and spoke of the need to revitalise our town and city centres. Given the economic conditions that we are living in, hardly anyone could dispute that. However, wedging public money for housing to landlords is not going to happen.

Fra McCann moved the amendment, spoke about the previous policy and spend, highlighted the role that councils play in other plans and developments, and, in particular, spoke about the challenge of delivering effective outcomes that was faced in the past. One of those outcomes was inclusion.

Mark, you can check these figures out, but I think that West Belfast has the highest number on the housing

waiting list; North Belfast is next; and Foyle is after that. To be frank, those figures are not good. Those constituencies are in the top three. They have persistently been in the top three because there has been systematic inequality in housing for decades. That needs to change. Mark Durkan mentioned the need to look at opportunities, not just to have greater supply but to ensure that as much good-quality housing as possible is delivered without rushing to give out grants. That is quite appropriate.

Roy Beggs spoke next to support the motion and not the amendment. He mentioned planning and conservation concerns and planning policies. While all those issues are correct, it goes back to the point that Pat made. I grew up in Carrick Hill, an area with great Victorian character, but plumbing that was not great, outside toilets and overcrowding, with four generations living under one roof. As twee — not as twee, but as good as our upbringing was, our happy memories — there are good memories — and the fact that it grounded us all, I know that, given the housing figures in some of the areas of highest demand, families are being brought up in homes that are meant for one or two people on their own with no children.

Kellie and I were on the Committee with Fra and Mark. I, honestly, think that there is a nervousness in the Alliance Party about objective need, because I found both your contribution and John's convoluted and confused. While you support the motion and not the amendment, and spoke about NDNA and the need for inclusive space, you went on to talk about concerns about access —.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Minister, I am loathe to interrupt, but you really should not refer to other Members with "you" or "your" in the debate. Try to keep your remarks through the Chair.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Apologies.

I believe that it is generally accepted that there is a housing crisis and that we need to look at ways in which to deal with it. However, I do not agree with some of the —.

Mr Blair: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, thanks. I do not agree with some of the ways that the Members suggested.

Sinéad Ennis also mentioned the NDNA commitment on objective need, particularly in relation to some of Sinn Féin's proposals as part of those negotiations; on removing corporation tax and the historic debt in order to allow the Housing Executive to build more homes, despite the fact, as she pointed out, rightly, that it has missed targets each year. While, some years, there is an explanation, the Housing Executive needs to be a bigger champion and better advocate for people who are homeless and on the housing waiting list than it is currently.

I want to thank Clare for talking about her experience, because, sometimes, I think that that is missing. I commend the Member for South Belfast for her dignity in not responding to Mr Beggs's attempt to mansplain. If anyone has to go into a hostel with two small children after they have lost their home in the private rented sector, that is exactly the reason why the amendment needs to be supported, not the motion.

Gerry Carroll mentioned that sustainability and affordability are an issue, as did many other Members, and that is the case. Housing Executive and housing associations' rents

need to be better reconciled. As has been mentioned previously, some people refuse housing association homes because they cannot afford the rent. Rent in the private rented sector, even with a public subsidy, is higher than it needs to be. I believe that there is mission creep going on here. It is not a renters' market. Some people who really need social housing not only deserve it but are being held in a situation where they feel as though they are almost locked into private rented accommodation and have nowhere else to go. That is absolutely horrendous. I, too, have been in that situation with small children.

There is a lot to be said, particularly when we talk about city centre living, and I would like to end on this: Carrick Hill, the Market, the Strand and all around York Road, those communities are still there generations later and have been part of the city since well before a lot of those other places in Belfast emerged. I do believe that each of us will have examples of that in our own towns and villages. It is important to try to sustain communities and to sustain families, but we also have to be honest. By and large, the private rented sector has played an important role. I am not saying that it does not have a role to play. However, it is not acceptable that the private rented sector is now being used to deliver a public and statutory duty and obligation. That is not acceptable. Public money should not be put into the private rented sector at the detriment of people who need a social home.

I thank the Members who spoke for their contributions. I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the debate.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. As Question Time begins at 2pm, and will be followed by two questions for urgent oral answer, I suggest that the House take its ease. This debate will continue after Question Time and the two questions for urgent oral answer. The next Member to speak will be Mr Cathal Boylan to wind on the amendment.

The House can take its ease while we change the personnel at the Table.

The debate stood suspended.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition: Report

1. **Mr Catney** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the report by the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition will be published. (AQO 622/17-22)

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): We are currently considering the final report of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition. We will then decide on appropriate next steps, including a decision on the publication of the commission's report.

Mr Catney: Minister, I thank you for your answer. At the start of the summer, I was contacted by a young mother with two children under the age of seven. She had moved into a lovely new home in my constituency. Some people in the area made assumptions about her background and put a Union flag and a UVF flag outside her house. In her own words, she said:

"I don't want this to happen, but I fear for my children if I complain. I was told that if I tried to move the flags, there would be other consequences."

Mr Speaker: Will the Member come to his question?

Mr Catney: First Minister, does that sound like the Northern Ireland that you and I want to live in? I know that both you and I want to live in a better Northern Ireland than that.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question, and I am very sorry that one of his constituents has had difficulties in that area.

The commission had a very extensive stakeholder engagement. It met a number of people face to face. It received a wide range of written consultation responses as well. The deputy First Minister and I received the report on, I think, 17 July. We are currently going through the report with officials, and we very much hope that we will be able to come back to the Committee and the Assembly in the near future with our response to it.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member to ask a question, I remind Members who wish to ask a supplementary question to remember to rise from their seat.

Brexit/Protocol: Legislative Programme

2. **Mr O'Toole** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the deadline of the end of 2020, when they plan to bring details of the legislative programme relating to Brexit and the implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland to the Assembly. (AQO 623/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. In response to the Speaker about preparing for Assembly business in the autumn, the deputy First Minister and I provided an early indication of the volume of legislation required for the end of the transition period. The legislative requirements include devolved, reserved and excepted matters, which means that legislation will be brought forward both in the Assembly and at Westminster.

The identified requirement is focused mainly on secondary legislation. It is therefore anticipated that most of the pressure will, in the first instance, be on the relevant Committees. Departmental officials are briefing their respective Committees on the volume of EU exit legislation expected to be brought forward.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the First Minister for her answer. We are in a very dangerous situation in Northern Ireland. In a few months' time, we will crash out of the EU at the end of the transition period. We may or may not have a deal with the EU.

I ask both First Ministers that they urgently step up together and make a joint, united plea to the UK Government for serious engagement on delivery of the protocol and on protection of all citizens of Northern Ireland and for them to stop messing around with our fragile society and the protections that exist for everyone here.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. Across the Executive, we want to see that our businesses are protected at the end of the transition period; that we have unfettered access for them into the GB market; and, indeed, that the Joint Committee, which is currently tasked with using its best endeavours to deal with a number of issues identified in the protocol, deals with those issues that are in the protocol, particularly issues around state aid and goods at risk of entering the single market, which comes through Northern Ireland.

I am amazed that that issue has not yet been solved, because it is very straightforward. I know that a number of our businesses want to see certainty around that, and I again call on the Joint Committee to find solutions to the issues that the Member has identified.

Mr McAleer: Can the Minister indicate what Brexit-related areas will require Assembly primary legislation?

Mrs Foster: Sorry, Mr Speaker. I did not quite catch the question, because there seemed to be interference. Sorry about that.

Mr McAleer: Sorry. Can the Minister indicate —?

Mr Speaker: Use your microphone.

Mr McAleer: Can the Minister indicate what Brexit-related areas will require Assembly primary legislation?

Mrs Foster: Yes. Sorry, I did not hear that initially. The most recent 10 September returns indicate that consideration has been given to the potential need for three Assembly Bills and eight Westminster Bills. However, the numbers do remain fluid and may change. It is important that we continue to work with the UK Government on all of these issues.

The three Assembly primary legislation pieces are an education Bill, a health and social care cross-border healthcare Bill and an infrastructure omnibus Bill. Those

are the three Bills that are currently identified. I hope that is helpful to the Member.

Mr Stalford: Can my Rt Hon friend tell me what her opinion is of the recent assessment that was given by Lord Frost that Monsieur Barnier, and other EU officials, have deliberately threatened the food supply of the people of Northern Ireland? Does the First Minister agree with me that such antics are despicable and reflective of an EU bureaucracy that has overplayed its hand?

Mrs Foster: As I have already indicated to the Member for South Belfast, the Joint Committee could have dealt with these issues in a quicker fashion. I hear the Member for South Belfast saying that what Lord Frost said yesterday was a lie. I have to say, he will have to take that up with Lord Frost. However, I find it wrong. When the deputy First Minister and I joined the extraordinary Joint Committee last week, I did say that the EU needs to stop using Northern Ireland to get its own way. We are not the plaything of the European Union. It causes great difficulties when people use Northern Ireland in that fashion. I recall when the then Taoiseach, now the Tánaiste, used a photograph of a blown-up border post to make his point to European leaders in October 2018, and that was wrong as well.

We need to focus on getting answers for our consumers, our businesses and the citizens of Northern Ireland. It is quite wrong for the EU to use hyperbole to get its way. We need to see the actual protection of peace in Northern Ireland.

Dr Aiken: I thank the First Minister for her answers. I note that she very clearly used the words “best endeavours”. Will the First Minister discuss with the Executive how to make sure that both the EU and the British Government, through the Joint Committee, make a very clear statement, very soon, about the implications for our food, state aid rules and, above all, the very onerous position the Assembly may be placed in at the beginning of next year under the jurisdiction of the ECJ?

Mrs Foster: When I refer to “best endeavours”, I am specifically referencing article 6 of the protocol which says very clearly that:

“the Union and the United Kingdom shall use their best endeavours to facilitate the trade between Northern Ireland and other parts of the United Kingdom”.

We need to see more “best endeavours” actually being put into action so that we can get a solution to some of the issues that are still outstanding on the protocol. Neither the deputy First Minister nor I — indeed, the entire Executive — will be found wanting in our engagement with the UK Government and the European Union. We both attended the extraordinary Joint Committee meeting last Thursday. The junior Ministers attend ongoing meetings with the Paymaster General about the negotiations. We will continue to engage at the highest level that we can to get across the fact that we need solutions for the people of Northern Ireland, and that is what is important.

Mr Muir: The House of Commons will consider the Internal Market Bill today. Does the First Minister agree that it is entirely inappropriate for any Government to announce its intention to break international law and it is precisely not the way to successfully conclude negotiations?

Mrs Foster: As I understand the Internal Market Bill, they are notwithstanding clauses and, therefore, the hope is that there will still be a negotiated settlement through the Joint Committee and, in particular, a free trade agreement in totality. We want an agreement that will give clarity for our businesses, our consumers and, indeed, our citizens in Northern Ireland. We want to see that agreement put in place. We recognise that time is very short in relation to all of that. We will not be found wanting in our continued engagement, despite all of the other pressures, because we recognise how important it is to find solutions to these matters.

Attorney General: Appointment Update

3. **Ms Dillon** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the appointment of the new Attorney General. (AQO 624/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. She will be aware that we have indicated our intention to appoint an Attorney General by means of an open competition based on the principles that apply to public appointments. While the post of the Attorney General is not regulated by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland, it is our intention to adhere to the spirit of the commissioner’s code of practice relating to public appointments.

We have also decided that it would be timely to review the various aspects of the role of the Attorney General, since the post has now been in existence for over 10 years. The outcome of that review will feed into the appointment process and we will be considering proposals on the review process in the near future.

Ms Dillon: Does the Minister agree that given the very significant challenges that we face at the moment, particularly around COVID and Brexit, it is important that the process is completed? I accept what she has said about the process; that is important and it is good that it is being followed, but it is important that we have some time frame for the appointment.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. I am advised by the office that an open competition can take in the region of six months from start to completion. That is why the deputy First Minister and I have appointed the interim Attorney General for a period of one year so that we can have continuity of advice.

This is the first opportunity that I have had to pay tribute to the outgoing Attorney General. Mr Larkin QC has been in place for over 10 years during some very turbulent times and I believe that he discharged his functions in a very good way towards all of the Ministers of the Executive. Of course, he was the Executive’s principal legal adviser, which is an onerous task. I wish him well in his future career.

COVID-19: Public Messaging

4. **Mr Harvey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to COVID-19, what discussions have taken place to seek to address potentially confused messaging across the four nations of the United Kingdom and to offer a more consistent and effective public message. (AQO 625/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. Discussions take place on a regular basis between the four nations of the United Kingdom on a range of matters, including the communication of public health information. Our overall messages are aligned and consistent; those are regular handwashing, social distancing and the wearing of face coverings. The Executive have set out their own road map to recovery and renewal and decisions on the unfolding local context are based on medical and scientific evidence. We have deployed a high-impact public information campaign using television, radio and print and digital platforms to ensure that people in Northern Ireland understand how to stay safe and save lives.

Mr Harvey: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Has the idea of an agreed joint position on the fight against COVID been discussed in the four-nation meetings as we head into the winter?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. Indeed, a proposal for a UK-wide public information campaign entitled 'Hands. Face. Space.' is currently being tested in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It will be a heavyweight UK-wide campaign. It will be consistent with our messages and it will amplify the call to adhere to the public health advice. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, who chairs our quadrilateral meetings, is very keen to have an agreed platform for the UK nations signed off as soon as we can.

Mr Carroll: In light of the recent changes to the restrictions, can the Minister provide us with the evidence that says that the virus can spread in homes where there are more than six people but not in workplaces or schools where there are more than six people?

Mrs Foster: Yes, absolutely. As the Member knows, the Executive acts on the advice that is given by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser. Based on our very good track, trace and protect system, we have been able to identify that most of the spread of COVID in the community is caused by household activities, whether that is people going around for coffee or mixing socially in people's homes or, indeed, by the dreaded house parties which, unfortunately, are still taking place.

The reason why we have acted in the way that we have, which is in this graduated way, is because the evidence is pointing to the source of the spread of COVID being in our home. I wish that it was otherwise, but that is, unfortunately, where the evidence is pointing.

2.15 pm

Mr Allister: Whatever confusion might arise in the four nations, I suspect that the First Minister will agree that the greater challenge lies at home in the undermining of the Executive's message by the episode of the deputy First Minister's attendance at the Storey funeral. Has the deputy First Minister apologised to her — she has not apologised to the public — for attending the funeral and for breaching your own joint regulations?

Mrs Foster: I think that the deputy First Minister has acknowledged that the events at the end of June fundamentally undermined the messaging from the Northern Ireland Executive and that there was a confused message coming out. It is right that we have had an acknowledgement of that undermining of public health

messaging, and now investigations will continue, as you know, through police and Assembly investigations.

Let me say this to the Assembly and, indeed, to anyone else who is listening: we are at a tipping point with COVID-19. I know that there are those who think that we are scaremongering about it. I just want to address that. We are not. We are in constant contact with our Chief Medical Officer, and again today, I am advised that for the postcodes that we have particular concern about, that concern is very much still there. I do not want to see that spreading across Northern Ireland. We have to act to stop it spreading across Northern Ireland and stop people who are in those postcode areas from spreading COVID-19. Whilst hospitalisation numbers are not yet growing, we all know that there is a lag in hospitalisations and ICU admissions. I do not want to be standing here in four weeks' time talking about the huge rise in hospital numbers. I want us to act on it now so that we can get on top of COVID-19.

When you look at what the BMA is saying today about the fact that over 80% of doctors fear a second wave, you see that it would be very remiss of us if we did not act and take action.

Mr Allister: That is a no, then.

Ms Anderson: Minister, given, as you know, that Ireland is a single epidemiological unit and that the virus does not recognise any borders, do you agree that there needs to be a consistency in message in the public health approach across this island as well as across the islands?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. As she knows, we have said in our own plan for dealing with COVID-19 that it is important that we continue with our four-nations approach, particularly in how we fight the virus through the joint biosecurity centre, where the Health Minister receives a lot of his high-level engagement on other jurisdictions across the world.

Of course it is important that we continue to work with our colleagues in the Republic of Ireland so that we can understand what is happening in that jurisdiction and that, if we have to take a different route in any one case, we understand why we are doing that and can then talk to each other about the messaging. That conversation with colleagues in the Republic of Ireland, as well, of course, with those in the other three nations, will continue, and, indeed, we will have another conversation this afternoon on these issues with colleagues from Scotland and Wales and with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Mr Butler: I thank the First Minister for her answer to Mr Allister's supplementary question. On the topic of confused messaging, why would the increasingly erratic MP for East Antrim have formed the opinion that the First Minister was not on the same page as the Health Minister about local restrictions in Ballymena and Belfast?

Mrs Foster: I think that it is important to acknowledge that those of us who have the privilege of sitting on the Executive have the onerous task of taking decisions that impact right across Northern Ireland. That is a big, onerous task to have on our shoulders, and I totally understand that other colleagues and, indeed, those from other parties may want to challenge us on the decisions that we take. I stand full square with the decisions that we took in the Executive last Thursday. They were the right decisions, and they

were the appropriate, proportionate decisions to take at that time. There are concerns about those decisions, but I ask the community in Northern Ireland to work with us to defeat coronavirus and minimise the number of deaths from this dreadful pandemic, because it is so important that we continue to give leadership in that way.

Historical Institutional Abuse: Payments

5. **Ms Bunting** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what progress has been made with the Catholic Church in relation to its contribution towards payments to victims of historical institutional abuse. (AQO 626/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. Officials have held meetings with representatives of the main institutions that the Hart report found to be responsible for systematic failings. These have focused on providing relevant information to the redress board and on the moral obligation to contribute to the redress costs. Now that the redress scheme has launched, we are keen to begin negotiations, with a view to ensuring a fair and proportionate outcome. The next steps will include a round-table meeting with all the institutions to set out the principles for negotiations. Ministers are considering how best they can give visible leadership to this very important process.

Ms Bunting: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Given that the Roman Catholic Church is as wealthy as some countries, have the bishops given any indication of a notional figure that they will contribute and a timescale for payment? Also, are Ministers willing to be directly involved in ensuring that the Church and other smaller orders make appropriate reparation?

Mrs Foster: In answer to the latter question, we will be involved in that discussion and negotiation. The cost estimates for financial redress range from about £149 million at the lower end, to £402 million as a central estimate, and then up to £668 million at the upper end. Contributions from institutions could help to defray some of those costs. A meeting with the two archbishops, Roman Catholic and Church of Ireland, has been discussed, and we will shortly write to both and to the institutions. We need to understand the fact that the institutions are separate, which sometimes makes it complicated to gain contributions and have those conversations.

We will absolutely continue with the negotiations and have those conversations because there is a moral imperative in relation to this issue to put an end to this dark stain on our history.

Mr McCann: Will the Minister advise whether any progress has been made on the apology, as recommended by Judge Hart?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. As the Member knows, an interim advocate has been in place. He was working with the groups in relation to the apology. It is fair to say that there has been a bit of a breakdown between some survivors and the interim advocate. Therefore, the Executive Office was separately engaging with one of those groups in a parallel process. We are waiting to hear from the interim advocate. We are also very close to the end of a process for the appointment of a full-time commissioner, and we look forward to making an announcement in relation to that issue. It is something that

the House has taken a keen interest in and something that we want to pursue. When the commissioner is appointed, he or she will certainly take up the issues of an apology and the memorial, as well as dealing with victims' needs and the redress scheme.

Ms Hunter: I thank the First Minister for her answers so far. We welcome all and any progress in victims receiving payments. The First Minister said previously that the Executive are in conversations with other aspects of the Christian belief. Has any money been secured in addition to that from the Catholic Church, or is that still at the conversational stage?

Mrs Foster: When the Government set up the process, we said that we felt strongly that we had a responsibility to give redress to people who had been through such a horrific time as a result of being in an institution. We fundamentally believe that there is a moral imperative on some of those institutions to come forward and talk to us about reparations for what happened in them. Therefore, we will pursue those conversations, because we believe they are something that the House, and the public in general, want us to pursue.

Mr Speaker: I call Claire Bailey.

Ms Bailey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Question 8.

Mr Speaker: Sorry, First Minister. Ms Bailey, I thought that you were asking a supplementary; you are ahead of yourself. I will move on to Michelle McIlveen.

Victims' Payment Scheme

6. **Miss McIlveen** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the steps required to deliver the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQO 627/17-22)

Mrs Foster: Thanks to the Member for her question. The Executive Office has designated the Department of Justice to exercise the administrative functions of the victims' payment board and has agreed to provide grants to the Department to establish the scheme's administrative arrangements. That will allow the recruitment of board members, IT developments and the other steps that are needed to establish the board to proceed. A substantial programme of work is under way with the Department. However, more work remains to be implemented before a scheme of this complexity and magnitude can become operational. The deputy First Minister and I will be meeting the Justice Minister shortly to discuss the next steps.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the First Minister for her response. Further to that, are all Ministers in the Executive now committed to ensuring that victims who have already been waiting far too long receive their payments at the earliest possible point, regardless of any dissatisfaction that they might have about issues such as eligibility or, indeed, any other matters?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. I very much hope that it is the case that all Ministers are on board with this. We have had quite a divisive court case. It is important that we now move on and get the scheme implemented as quickly as possible. As I have indicated, a substantial programme of work has to be carried out by the Department of Justice. We will support the Department of Justice where we can in that.

For example, to give an indication of what needs to be achieved, we need the appointment of the president of the victims' board by the Lord Chief Justice and then the appointment and induction of board members by the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Committee. We need to secure additional funding from Westminster in recognition of the fact that this is a scheme that operates not just in Northern Ireland but across the United Kingdom. We need the finalisation of an IT system, the appointment of an assessment-services provider, the development of an assessment process and then agreement by the victims' payment board of its governance and decision-making policy, so there is a big job of work to be done. We are up for that job of work, but we need to do it in quick time so that we can get funding out to the many victims who need to have their needs acknowledged, first of all, by the payment. Hopefully, the payment will ease some of the suffering that they are currently enduring.

Mr McGrath: Does the First Minister agree with me that it is important that she and the deputy First Minister offer an apology to those victims whom they forced to go to court to secure their right to that pension?

Mrs Foster: I have to say to the Member that it is a matter of deep regret that not just one member but, indeed, many members of the victims and survivors community felt that they had to go to court to have this matter dealt with. I hope now that we can move on in fast time and that we can support the Department of Justice in dealing with the issue as quickly as possible. Of course, we need to deal with the funding issue, and we will deal with that. It is important that we have all the processes in place as well. As I have indicated, quite a number of processes need to be dealt with. I very much want to see this dealt with as quickly as possible. It would, of course, have been wish that it was dealt with in the appropriate manner.

Ms Flynn: Does the Minister agree that there is a compelling responsibility on the Westminster Government to help fund the scheme?

Mrs Foster: I think that that is right, because, if you look at the Treasury's guidance on funding, you see that it clearly says that the funding follows the person who has made the policy decision, and the policy decision was made at Westminster by the then Secretary of State. It is important that the deputy First Minister and I continue to work with the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Finance so that we can get the appropriate funding in place. We have to do that; it is not a case of, "We would like to do that". We have to do it to make sure that the funding is in place.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions. Before I call Ms Martina Anderson, I notify Members that questions 2 and 4 have been withdrawn.

Internal Market Bill

T1. **Ms Anderson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister agrees with Nicola Sturgeon's assessment that the Internal Market Bill is a full-frontal attack on the Assembly. (AQT 341/17-22)

2.30 pm

Mrs Foster: As the Member knows, there are differing views on Brexit in the Executive. Each of us took a

different view at the time of the referendum. The Internal Market Bill tries to deal with non-discrimination and mutual recognition for goods going from the Northern Ireland market into the GB market. As the Member will know, GB is our largest market, so it is important that we have unfettered access to it. That is what I hope this Bill will achieve.

Ms Anderson: Minister, as you know, Part 6 of the Bill empowers British Ministers to override the budgetary role of the Assembly and to make spending decisions without consulting you, other Ministers or the Finance Minister. Are you saying, Minister, that that unacceptable level of interference, and the undermining of the Good Friday Agreement, is justified?

Mrs Foster: I think that what I was saying to the Member was that it is important that the UK market succeeds in the future, because, as I have just indicated, it is our most important market. All the other markets added together are not as big as the GB market. Therefore it is important that we have a free flow, and the Internal Market Bill goes some way to dealing with that. It does not deal with all the issues, but it deals with some of them. It deals with issues surrounding unfettered access and export declarations. I am sure that no one in the House would want to see a fettering of access to the GB market for all our businesses and consumers.

One of the things that concerns me is that the Joint Committee has still not come to a determination on goods at risk, and that remains a huge issue for us. As I have already indicated, that should not be used as a bargaining chip. Instead, it should be dealt with as quickly as possible.

Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland: Lord Chief Justice's Comments

T3. **Mr Dickson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the First Minister agrees with the Lord Chief Justice, Sir Declan Morgan's, comments that breaking international law could undermine trust in the Government and the administration of justice. (AQT 343/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I think that is important that all of us look to the law on these issues and that we look again at the protocol, which, of course, my party argued against and voted against, as we did not believe that it was good for Northern Ireland. We still do not believe that it is good for Northern Ireland. The Internal Market Bill deals with some of the issues in the protocol.

It is important to look at the protocol, which says, in its preamble:

"that the application of this Protocol should impact as little as possible on the everyday life of communities in both Ireland and Northern Ireland ... Having regard to the importance of maintaining the integral place of Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom's internal market".

That is what I want to see happening. I do not like all of the protocol. In fact, I vehemently do not like it. What we have to do now, however, is clarify those issues that should be dealt with in the Joint Committee but which, thus far, have not been dealt with. Again, I make the plea that they be dealt with so that we can move on.

Mr Dickson: I thank the First Minister for her answers so far. Minister, would you not agree with me that any change to an international agreement undermines trust and confidence in the nation that entered into such an agreement and that it has the potential to make the United Kingdom look like a rogue state in the international community?

Mrs Foster: I am sure that the United Kingdom Government will take all the legal advice available to them on all those issues. However, I say again to the Member that the EU and the UK have a job of work to do. Article 1 of the protocol states very clearly that:

“This Protocol respects the ... territorial integrity of the United Kingdom.”

I have yet to see much evidence of that, Mr Speaker. We need to see evidence of that, for myself, as a constitutional unionist, of course, but also for our businesses, our consumers, and our citizens, as they all need clarity. We should have had that clarity by now. Unfortunately, however, negotiations are still ongoing.

Brexit Negotiations: FM's Key Objectives

T5. **Mr Clarke** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what key objectives and outcomes the First Minister would like to see from the ongoing Brexit negotiations. (AQT 345/17-22)

Mrs Foster: My top line is that I would like to see a tariff-free EU/UK free-trade agreement. As I understand it, what has been put forward by Lord Frost, the UK negotiator, is in line with trade agreements made by the European Union with other nations. He cannot understand why the EU is putting up such a defence to some of the issues. I understand, from the chief negotiator, that the key issues outstanding at the moment are around state aid, fisheries and, of course, the protocol operation which is dealt with in the Joint Committee. There is much to do and I hope that we can achieve it so that we can have free trade between ourselves and the European Union, but, importantly, that we continue to have unfettered access to our main market.

Mr Clarke: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Further to previous questions, do you believe that all the parties recognise the potential impact to the Northern Ireland economy if there is an unsatisfactory conclusion to the talks?

Mrs Foster: Sometimes, when I listen to the EU negotiators and they talk about peace in Northern Ireland, it is apparently only if we have free access North/South. There is very little conversation about access east-west and, of course, we need that in a more fundamental way. I understand why North/South was such a big issue and I recognise that, but there were other ways to deal with that. Those other ways were pooh-poohed and not listened to and, unfortunately, we now find ourselves in this situation. There needs to be an acknowledgement that east-west and the integrity of the United Kingdom needs to be protected as much as North/South trade.

Mental Well-being, Resilience and Suicide Prevention Working Group

T6. **Ms Rogan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Executive's working group on mental well-being, resilience and suicide prevention. (AQT 346/17-22)

Mrs Foster: This is indeed a very important issue that we resolved to deal with at one of our very first Executive meetings. The Minister of Health, if I am correct in quoting him, said that it was one of the most apolitical meetings that he had ever seen because everybody just wanted to try to find solutions which, at the time, was pre-COVID. Now, we are having to deal with COVID as well as all the other pressures facing people right across Northern Ireland. We have had a number of meetings of the working group. It is something that we are all very much committed to working through. After that, of course, we have to find the funding to deal with many of the issues that will be identified.

Ms Rogan: Will the Minister reaffirm her commitment to tackling the issue of poor mental health and suicide in the areas of greatest social need?

Mrs Foster: One of the things that we are doing is having some scoping work carried out so that we can try to identify where the need is and whether different interventions are needed in different areas. That is important to acknowledge.

I should have also said that one of our NDNA commitments was to appoint a mental health champion and I am very pleased that Professor Siobhan O'Neill has taken up that role. She is already providing leadership in this area and we are very pleased to see that.

COVID-19: British-Irish Council Meeting

T7. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to coronavirus, whether a date has been set for a meeting of the British-Irish Council to discuss common messaging, common themes and a common travel policy within the common travel area. (AQT 347/17-22)

Mrs Foster: As you know, the deputy First Minister and I had requested a British-Irish Council (BIC) meeting. Unfortunately, we do not have a date as yet. I understand that the standing date for a British-Irish Council meeting is coming up very soon. If we do not get the free-standing meeting before that meeting, you can bet your bottom dollar that we will definitely bring up this issue at the BIC.

Mr O'Dowd: It is important that the institutions of the Good Friday Agreement are used in their totality — they can come into their own with regard to North/South and east-west relationships. I welcome the Minister pushing for that date. Does she agree that it is vitally important that we have a common messaging and understanding of the issues facing us as a result of COVID-19 across these islands?

Mrs Foster: Absolutely. It is important that we understand where every jurisdiction is on the battle against COVID. We raised this issue with the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster — just last week, the deputy First Minister raised this issue again, and he said that he was in favour of holding a British-Irish Council meeting to discuss these

matters. We hope that that will happen in the near future so that we can discuss the totality of issues that we want to discuss.

NDNA Commitments: Time Frame

T8. **Mr Butler** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether there is a time frame for the establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression and the appointment of Irish language and Ulster-Scots commissioners. (AQT 348/17-22)

Mrs Foster: As the Member knows, we entered government again back on 11 January with a whole raft of issues under New Decade, New Approach. Unfortunately, with the interruption which has been caused by COVID, we have not been able to proceed in as fast a manner as we would have liked. Having said that, we have been able to proceed with a number of NDNA commitments. We will certainly look to proceed in 2020-21 with those that we have still not been able to proceed.

As regards what we have achieved, the Northern Ireland Office has appointed a Veterans Commissioner. We have established an expert panel on tackling educational underachievement, and work is under way there. Just today, we have had the Flags Regulations laid in the Assembly. We have the interim mental health champion, who I have just referred to, appointed and in place. We have also had confirmation that contaminated blood victims in Northern Ireland will have increased payments in line with Great Britain. Those are just some examples of the things in NDNA that we have been able to proceed with. Of course, there is much more that we need to do as well.

Mr Butler: I thank the First Minister for her answer. Some good work has indeed already happened out of NDNA. Is the First Minister confident that nothing has happened during the COVID pandemic to shake the relationship within the Executive and affect delivery on all the NDNA promises?

Mrs Foster: We have a very clear understanding, right across the five parties in the Executive, that we came back into this place on the basis of the NDNA agreement. Do not forget that there are things in NDNA that we need to discuss around prioritisation and funding. Those are not the matters that he has discussed; there are other issues that are just mentioned as “possible” or “could”. However, there are things that we have all committed to and, therefore, we need to proceed.

COVID-19 Messaging: East Antrim MP

T9. **Dr Aiken** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, albeit that he directed his question solely to the deputy First Minister, whether the remarks today by the MP for East Antrim have undermined the Northern Ireland Executive’s common message on COVID-19. (AQT 349/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I think that he meant the First Minister, not the deputy First Minister.

Dr Aiken: The Executive Office.

Mrs Foster: *[Laughter.]* Ah, Steve, Steve. It is good to have a bit of fun in the Assembly. What is important is that the Executive continue to give a very clear message on

COVID and the fact that we are in a dangerous position. I think that I have underlined that through what I have said today. Others will challenge and maybe even criticise at times but, when we are in the Executive Office, we have to show leadership in the functions and advice that are given to us. That is what I — I — will continue to do.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Aiken for a supplementary, I thank and commend the First Minister for her handling of that intervention.

Dr Aiken: I thank the First Minister for handling the intervention as well but my supplementary is this: bearing in mind the remarks of the East Antrim MP, would she care to comment on the remarks of her deputy First Minister in not giving an apology to the people of Northern Ireland for the events of 30 June, which considerably undermined the health message for everybody who is trying to deal with COVID?

Mrs Foster: I seem to be answering questions for a whole range of people today. I am sure that the deputy First Minister will want to address the issues that the Member has raised. I have already answered Mr Allister in relation to that. It was important to reflect on what was said and done back at the end of June. We are now very much focused on delivering very strong messaging on COVID-19. It is important that we continue to do that.

NDNA: Ulster-Scots Commitment

T10. **Mr Easton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation of the Ulster-Scots element of New Decade, New Approach. (AQT 350/17-22)

Mrs Foster: I have indicated elements in New Decade, New Approach that we have not yet been able to implement. That does not mean that work by officials has not been ongoing on those. There have been a number of meetings in relation to the Office of Identity, the Irish Language commissioner, the Ulster-British commissioner. It is important that we continue along the road and get moving on all of our NDNA commitments. It is important that we deliver on the reason why we came back into the Assembly.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for her answer. What are your hopes for the new Veterans Commissioner?

Mrs Foster: I very much welcome the appointment of the Veterans Commissioner by the Northern Ireland Office. I think that all of us in the House know Danny well and know that he will be very committed to working on behalf of veterans across Northern Ireland. He has a big job of work — we all acknowledge that — because there are some difficulties for veterans in accessing what they need. I very much look forward to meeting him in the near future so that we can discuss what he has identified as the needs of that community.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: The time is up. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment while we switch seats.

Economy

Mr Speaker: Question 1 from Daniel McCrossan has been withdrawn.

University Places

2. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for the Economy what action she is taking to ensure that universities have the capacity to honour pre-existing offers, now that A-level students have received their final results. (AQO 637/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I thank the Member — I lost you there — for his question, which is, indeed, one that is very important and close to my heart. I have argued many times that young people should not be the casualty of economic downturn and that providing them with a place at university is of the utmost importance.

We have a responsibility to our young people. As I argued in August, if additional places and the associated funding are required in the higher education sector to honour pre-existing offers, it is incumbent on us, as an Executive, to ensure that they are provided. I have secured agreement from the Executive to do so, with £3.2 million being allocated for additional places. That is a significant investment in young people's lives.

Anticipating some of the difficulties that would happen this year, my Department had already looked at the potential impact of COVID for the year 2020-21 in creating additional demand for local places. Through the June monitoring round, an additional allocation of £1.5 million was secured, which would deliver an increase of 5% in funded places over three years. At the end of three years, the recurring commitment to maintain that 5% uplift will be £7.1 million. That will see an additional 1,232 places available in the local higher education sector, 410 of which are available for this academic year.

We are still working with the universities to complete the process. Ulster University has already stated that it will not require further additional places. While Queen's is not yet in a position to formally confirm its additional numbers, current indications are that they are not as substantial as previously indicated.

As a final point, I note the wealth of higher education opportunities available at our further education colleges, where courses offer outstanding education and opportunity for young people.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for the answer and the information given. Further to that reply, has the Minister identified any support that can be given to further education colleges whose numbers and courses may be affected due to the increase in university places, where that is the case?

Mrs Dodds: I understand exactly the question and the problem identified by the Member. A few days ago, I was at the Northern Regional College's Newtownabbey campus, looking at how young people are finishing their vocational courses and getting on with their career paths, and I was really impressed by the standard of teaching and the interaction with those young people. There is no doubt that the additional places that will be created for universities and, on the other side of the coin, the additional places that will be created in sixth-form colleges as the result of GCSE grade uplifts will pose a challenge to our further

education sector. I will work with the sector to deal with that. We are still a couple of weeks away from knowing the full extent of that challenge, but I will be happy to report to the House when we have the full figures. I am immensely proud of our further education sector and look forward to working with it to ensure that no child is left behind.

Dr Archibald: This will be a difficult and uncertain year for many students, and part-time jobs will be hard to come by. At the end of the last academic year, the Minister and the Executive allocated additional funding to the student hardship fund. Will the Minister consider doing so again this year to support students facing financial difficulties?

Mrs Dodds: As the Member is aware, I took some fairly extensive steps to ensure that students were supported in their route through university, particularly because many young students will not have the opportunity to have additional part-time work etc. That is why we have an additional £5.6 million in the system to deal with student hardship. Of course, we will look at that throughout the year and monitor it to ensure that young people are able to stay on at our colleges and universities, because some of the money also went in that direction, and to ensure that they find career pathways and profitable, genuine employment.

Mr Allister: Last week, the Health Minister announced that Queen's University was making available 80 extra medical school places. Will the Minister tell the House if that meets entirely the demand from those disappointed until their grades were upgraded, or is there any knock-on effect on next year, which would be most unfortunate for that upcoming cohort?

Mrs Dodds: Medical places are a matter for the Department of Health, which has the policy remit on that and sets the numbers that are applicable for each course. I advise the Member to speak to the Health Minister and get an indication from him of how those numbers are progressing. In general, for courses in very high demand such as medicine, nursing and midwifery, there will potentially be a difficulty. I understand that the Health Minister has made a bid to the Finance Minister to satisfy those place numbers, and I am sure that he will update the Member on the outcome of that bid.

Mr Durkan: As the Minister with responsibility for further and higher education, will she explain why it has taken years, an extremely detailed business case and unprecedented lobbying to get the medical school at Magee eventually approved, yet the extra medical places at Queen's in Belfast can be agreed without such a business case and apparently at the drop of a hat?

Mrs Dodds: The Member will know that we are in extraordinary and unprecedented times. I apologise if those words are somewhat overworked in the current context, but we are in those extraordinary times. This year, young people did not have the opportunity to sit their exams and faced a period of great uncertainty. I am glad that my colleague moved to take away that uncertainty, that the grades issue was sorted out and that many of those young people will find placements in medical school in Northern Ireland. I look forward to those young people completing their courses and contributing to society here. The Member will also be aware that we have been supportive of the graduate-entry medical school at Magee. That work is ongoing and will be ongoing. I understand that

we will be on course for an intake of students in September 2021.

COVID-19: Support for Businesses

3. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister for the Economy what steps she will take to support those businesses excluded from COVID-19 support since the start of the pandemic. (AQO 638/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Executive have provided an unprecedented level of support to businesses since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. The business support schemes introduced by my Department on behalf of the Executive have provided around £340 million of support to over 32,000 businesses in Northern Ireland. That is in addition to the business rates relief from the Department of Finance, which is valued at over £300 million, and a suite of other local support measures, including those introduced by local councils. Just the other week, I was delighted to be in mid Ulster — I know that it is not the Member's constituency — for the launch of its £1 million business support intervention scheme. There are many levels of support working together for businesses. In West Tyrone, claims to the UK Government's job retention scheme and the self-employed income support scheme totalled over £50 million. More widely, businesses throughout Northern Ireland have also received substantial support from the UK Government schemes, with almost 250,000 workers furloughed and around 78,000 claims made to the self-employed income support scheme.

I acknowledge that not all businesses have received support, because they were ineligible for either the business support schemes or the UK-wide schemes. Over the past six months, I have met a wide range of business owners to hear their concerns for their business. I provided a paper to the Executive on the options to utilise available funds for our economic response and recovery. That included options for those who have not been able to avail themselves of support thus far. It will, therefore, be up to the Executive as a whole, guided by the Finance Minister, to determine on the further distribution of any available resource.

Mr Speaker: I call —

Mrs Dodds: Sorry, just one second.

However, I assure Members that my Executive colleagues and I remain committed to collectively agreeing further support measures as soon as possible, recognising that this is a very difficult time for many individuals and businesses but also recognising that some of those interventions would be best placed at a national level to be truly effective.

Mr Speaker: I remind the Minister that answers should take no more than two minutes.

Ms C Kelly: With many businesses and their workers struggling to cope with the economic fallout of COVID-19, the delay in reopening wet pubs has further increased the risk to jobs and businesses in that sector. Can the Minister confirm whether she will actively look at and introduce a new support scheme for those businesses and their employees?

3.00 pm

Mrs Dodds: The House will know that I have been extremely supportive of the opening of our tourism and hospitality sectors throughout Northern Ireland, driving much of that process, indeed, at Executive level.

I am on record as saying that it is regrettable that traditional pubs have not yet been able to open. However, I note that we now have an indicative date of 21 September for the opening of those businesses. We will work with Hospitality Ulster and the wider industry to ensure that the conditions are in place for those businesses to reopen. Again, I am on record as saying that it is particularly unfair that one small section of a sector is held back. We now need to get on with opening up our economy. The best way to help business is to have business open and ready for business.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her efforts to date. We all appreciate the significant financial support of £340 million that has gone out to businesses, which has been a real lifeline to so many. Will the Minister outline what further measures will be available to support and sustain existing businesses during this tough time of the COVID crisis?

Mrs Dodds: That is a very good question. We are undoubtedly seeing one of the toughest times for the economy in a significant period. That downturn will be significant, and many of us fear, as we look towards October and the end of the furlough scheme, that there could be ramifications for the employment of many people throughout our constituencies. It is really important that we get to a stage at which we are continuing to announce and support schemes that will strategically support the economy and individual businesses to survive.

I have made around 32 bids to the Minister of Finance, each of them in line with my published document, 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy', to help recovery. Many of those bids are structural, looking at demand in the tourism and hospitality sector and trying to ensure that we help businesses to survive over what, I think, will be a difficult period in the autumn.

We have also made significant interventions in the economy in terms of skills. It is important that, when we get to the stage at which we are ripe for economy recovery, we have the right skills to support the economy. That is why I announced the apprenticeship schemes, with about £22 million of support.

Mr Dickson: Minister, will you tell the House what engagement, if any, you have had with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) to assess whether your Department can address the tax data issue for sole traders and the businesses that consider themselves to be and, indeed, are excluded from any of the schemes that you have so far provided?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for facilitating the meeting of the group with Members last Thursday. It was a very important meeting. I always believe that it is much better to talk face to face than over social media.

I have written to HMRC requesting that we have access to the data that would help us to look at the necessary verifications for such a scheme. I understand that the Finance Minister has also written to HMRC to try to ensure

that this agreement is made between us so that we can look at how we progress the issue.

Mr McNulty: I welcome the news today, Minister, that Nichola Mallon will step outside her remit to provide support for the private coach and taxi industries. Six months into the pandemic, why did it take so long for you to admit that you were not willing or able to offer support to those industries?

Mrs Dodds: That is a really timely question, and I am delighted to be able to answer it. The Department for the Economy, as you will see from the Audit Office report that was published recently, is next to Health in its interventions and its work to support the economy, way beyond anything that any Department apart from Health, as you would expect in a pandemic, has done. The Department for the Economy has not been found wanting in reaching out to support the sectors that it can reach out to. However, Ministers have regulatory responsibility, and the Executive and the First Minister and deputy First Minister have made a decision that where that regulatory responsibility lies is where the responsibility should be for bringing forward such schemes. I welcome the fact that the schemes will now be brought forward.

It is a pity that the Minister for Infrastructure was a little late in coming to the decision that we would be able to have the schemes, unlike other Ministers, including Education, which stepped in with childcare, and Communities, which has been working with disadvantaged groups, the arts sector and other sectors within its remit. It is important that Ministers step up. I am glad that the First Minister and deputy First Minister made the decision that they did, and I look forward to supporting the Minister for Infrastructure as she brings forward the schemes, which are much needed.

Mr Speaker: Question 4 has been withdrawn, so I move on to question 5.

Civil Service: Remote Working

5. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether remote working within the Civil Service can contribute positively to the development of a regionally balanced economy. (AQO 640/17-22)

13. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for the Economy, given the impact home working is having on the local economy, to outline any discussions she has had with both her Executive colleagues and businesses in relation to getting people back into offices. (AQO 648/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will group questions 5 and 13, so that we can proceed with a range of the questions that are available today.

Clearly, for those able to, working from home and the use of videoconferencing have allowed many people to continue working throughout the pandemic and been an invaluable tool in keeping parts of the economy going when others were, effectively, shut down. For certain sectors, for example the digital economy, it has had little impact on productivity, with some reporting an increase in productivity, and has demonstrated the resilience of the sector, now a good selling point for Invest NI as it talks to companies interested in coming to Northern Ireland.

One of the impacts of remote working could include the wider regional redistribution of some office worker spend

by moving expenditure away from the area around the office to where workers live. However, sudden moves of large-scale economic activity from one place to another will bring benefits to some and hardships to others, which is why any such changes will usually be based on extensive planning and gradual implementation. COVID-19 has allowed us time for neither and has been quite a disruptor in that respect.

Some commentators believe that these changing work practices are here to stay, with greater levels of flexibility for many on when and where they work. One should be cautious about predicting these things, though. Many of the businesses that I speak to are already planning on returning to the office for a range of reasons, including the social side of work, the ability to enhance team working and the informal engagement in workplaces, which all contribute to the way a business operates. The trend has had a dramatic impact on Belfast city centre, where footfall has dropped, which, in turn, is having a severe impact on local cafes, coffee shops, restaurants and the wider retail sector as well as on the number of people using public transport to move around the city.

Whilst I am on record as saying that I would like to see people return to their offices as soon as it is safe to do so, that will, ultimately, be a decision for each business to make.

Mr Lynch: The Minister mentioned Belfast city centre and returning to work to boost the local economy, but, in my constituency, local small businesses have seen a reduction in footfall, trading and numbers. Will the Minister commission a report to identify how remote working can impact on local economies?

Mr Speaker: I remind the Minister that she has two minutes to respond to a question. If you think that you need more time, you can ask for an additional minute.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I recognise that, at the moment, we are seeing — my local town in Upper Bann is seeing it as well — somewhat of a move in that people who usually work in Belfast during the day are now working at home. Therefore, the local economies are seeing some progress in very difficult circumstances. We will publish an economic strategy, and, as part of the research for that, it would be welcome to do some research into the impact of working from home, from both sides of the argument.

Ms Bunting: I am glad that the Minister is well aware of the troubles in Belfast city centre as a result of the dramatic reduction in footfall. On that basis, I ask her — I appreciate that it is not necessarily her remit — to outline to the best of her knowledge what percentage of full-time civil servants is still working from home? Does she agree that we have to learn to cope with COVID and that it is time for the Civil Service to lead by example and return to offices?

Mrs Dodds: It is no secret — in fact, it was leaked to the papers — that I wrote to the then head of the Civil Service to indicate that I thought that we should be looking at a phased and safe return to on-site duties for Civil Service staff. That is important, and it is reasonable to do that where it is safe and possible to do so. It was the end of his period in office, and his response was not that helpful. However, when the new head of the Civil Service is appointed, I will take the matter up again.

On a general note, this is about the balance that we will bring to life and to the working environment. I do not think that things will ever be the same again in a post-COVID world, but we will have to find that new balance and support city centres, which, generally, throughout the region, are experiencing very difficult circumstances. That will also involve learning to live and work with COVID as a backdrop.

Student Accommodation

6. **Ms Hunter** asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the steps local universities are taking to provide accommodation for the higher number of first-year students being accepted this September. (AQO 641/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While my Department is responsible for higher education policy in relation to teaching and research, as autonomous institutions, the universities are responsible for their own policies on student accommodation. My Department has no remit to intervene. It is clear, however, that universities will need to consider steps to ensure that young people are helped to secure accommodation. Furthermore, universities need to ensure that clear information is developed with the Public Health Agency and communicated to students to ensure that accommodation is provided in a safe manner that is consistent with the current health guidelines. I am aware that universities offer a limited number of accommodation places to students in any given year and that off-campus accommodation is provided, albeit through private landlords.

In this respect, the Member may wish to address her question directly to the universities or, indeed, to the Department for Communities, which is responsible for private landlords and the legislation regarding houses of multiple occupation.

3.15 pm

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for her answer. On the topic of university admissions, I spoke at length with several Coleraine students recently. This year is a little different for them. Predominantly, this semester, they will use the internet to work from home, not in a lecture hall. In the Minister's opinion, because of the educational "new normal", should there be a reduction in university fees at this time?

Mrs Dodds: I have spoken to the universities on this issue. They assure me that, while lectures will be online because they are so large that it would be impossible to accommodate social distancing, tutorials, teaching and other elements of student life will be available to students within the campus set-up. It is not for me to comment on how universities organise this, except to say that my Department will monitor it to ensure that students get not only the best value for money but the best teaching available to them.

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

Taxi Drivers/Bus Operators: Lack of DFE Support

T1. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for the Economy what her excuse is for not doing her job in relation to taxi drivers and bus operators, thereby leaving them in the lurch for so long, given that the Infrastructure Minister, Nichola Mallon,

has confirmed that she will step up to help taxi drivers and bus operators when the Executive Office confers on her the powers to do so, which is necessary because of the Economy Minister's failure or reluctance to use her powers to help them. (AQT 351/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As I said in my previous answer, to which I will revert, the Department for the Economy has provided a huge range of support to businesses right across Northern Ireland. Indeed, over a third of a billion pounds has been allocated through my Department to help businesses in Northern Ireland, including some taxi firms that will have availed themselves of rate relief, the hardship fund or the 10k fund. Many of those firms have already been helped. However, it is also important that the Departments that have regulatory responsibility step up, take on that responsibility and look at the areas where they can provide help. In the case of, for example, haulage, the Department for the Economy does not hold any of the stats, figures or other information needed to have a scheme for the haulage industry. The Department for Infrastructure holds all those figures. Therefore, it would seem sensible for the Department for Infrastructure to step up and get going with a scheme that will help the industry, which, in the height and the depths of COVID, kept food supplies running to Northern Ireland.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answer. However, methinks the Minister doth protest too much. She has always had the power to intercede but did nothing. You cannot cherry-pick who you want to help. Can the Minister tell the House whether there are any other areas of work that she is having difficulty fulfilling and might be waiting for another Minister to come along and do for her?

Mrs Dodds: I appreciate that the Member is trying to spare his colleague's blushes, so we will move on from this. Many areas of the economy are suffering very, very deeply in this recession, and we will experience even more difficulties as we come to the end of the furlough scheme. That is why I published my economic recovery paper. That is why I have indicated that, while we need to support the core elements of the economy, we also need to go out and grab new opportunities for Northern Ireland in the digital economy and in the green economy, which are really important issues for Northern Ireland. It is time that we got on with doing those things, and, to that extent, over the last number of weeks, my Department has submitted to the Minister of Finance about 32 bids looking at interventions in the economy in a structured way that will allow it to grow, prosper and provide jobs for families in Northern Ireland.

Fracking Licences: Legal Challenges

T2. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister for the Economy, in the light of the fact that, in January, her Department wrote that if it did not give fracking licences to Tamboran Resources and EHA Exploration, it would leave it open to legal challenge, to explain why that was the case and to state whether the same rationale would follow that if he were refused planning permission for his house, he could sue also. (AQT 352/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. Currently, we are not exploring the issue of licensing. In fact, we are looking at and collating the responses to the applications that are with us. We are doing some research on the overall topic. Be assured: this is a controversial

and cross-cutting issue. It will be a matter on which every Executive party will give a view. Therefore, when the time comes, whatever the recommendations from the Department may be, they will go to the whole Executive for a decision.

Mr Carroll: I respectfully disagree, Minister. I do not think that fracking is controversial. It is crazy, and it is dangerous to the environment. That has been proven by multiple people.

I have already raised this issue with the Minister. My constituents, and many constituents across the North, still await a decision on an application that would give a private company the right to drill for petroleum across the North. Can she give a commitment to them that she will not proceed with granting that licence?

Mrs Dodds: I refer the Member to my previous answer.

Internal Market Bill

T3. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she is concerned by the obvious confusion in Brexit preparations that has been created by the UK Internal Market Bill that was introduced on 9 September, with the British Government conceding that it will breach international law. (AQT 353/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Since taking office, my absolute top priority in negotiations with our national Government and in conversations with my Executive colleagues is to make sure that Northern Ireland's firms and businesses have that unfettered access to the United Kingdom's internal market: our internal market. That is hugely important because jobs, families and prosperity depend on that access to that market. Therefore, I think that there are a number of things that we need to consider around the Internal Market Bill. That is not just on the idea of unfettered access but is around the idea of state aid. I do not want Northern Ireland's firms to be encumbered and lumbered with EU state aid regulations while the rest of the United Kingdom is able to move on in that direction. Therefore, there are many issues that concern me around the Internal Market Bill, but my absolute top priority for prosperity in Northern Ireland is to ensure that we can access that market in an unfettered way, and that our firms do not suffer a competitive disadvantage in that market.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Irish protocol was put in place to protect the Good Friday Agreement, the economy in the North and the economy across this island. The withdrawal agreement and the Irish protocol are the result of hard-fought and hard-won compromises. Is the Minister concerned that the British Secretary of State, Brandon Lewis, has stated that the Internal Market Bill breaks international law?

Mrs Dodds: It is no secret to the Member — indeed, to all Members in the House — that, as a member of the European Parliament, I did not vote for the withdrawal agreement or the Northern Ireland protocol. I see the Northern Ireland protocol as being absolutely disastrous for the Northern Ireland economy. I am concerned that they have the access to our internal market that will make sure that they are able to compete, both competitively and without disadvantage within that market. Again, I make no apology for repeating that that means that unfettered access to that market is of the utmost importance to me

and that the operation of the protocol could be detrimental to that access. I do not understand why this House wants so desperately at times to put up barriers between us and the biggest part of our marketplace. That would be disastrous for business and disastrous for families and incomes in Northern Ireland.

Fracking: Health Impact Assessment

T4. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for the Economy, on the very important issue of fracking, whether, in relation to the petroleum licence application PLA2/16 in Fermanagh, a health impact assessment of the cumulative impacts of the full development of the Fermanagh shale basin across the lifecycle of the project has been stipulated as part of her Department's research process. (AQT 354/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. We are, as you know, doing research into the wider impacts. Health will be part of that research, and I look forward to sharing the research and, indeed, to maybe sitting down with the Member and discussing these issues in further detail as we get towards a conclusion of the process.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answer. I will be very happy to meet the Minister. The Department claims that, although adverse effects on human health can be associated with shale gas production, there is evidence in scientific literature to demonstrate how effective measures can mitigate the risks to reduce them to an acceptable level. Can the Minister outline how fracking can be regulated for with limited impact on public health?

Mrs Dodds: We have no intentions for regulation in that direction at this time. As I said, I am happy to talk about the health implications of any and all of these processes with the Member.

Internal Market Bill: Trade Friction

T5. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister for the Economy, in the context of the Internal Market Bill, whether she agrees that anything that reduces trade friction with the rest of the UK is to be welcomed. (AQT 355/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As I have said in the House many times, our biggest market is in GB. For our agri-food industry, between 65% and 70% of everything that we produce goes to market in Great Britain. Therefore, any frictions in that marketplace have potentially a detrimental impact on business and bring a competitive disadvantage to our businesses in the marketplace. We also need to remember that about two thirds of everything that we need for manufacturing and that very important supply chain for manufacturing and from retail comes from the Great Britain market. It is, therefore, absolutely essential that we do not have frictions in that way either. I think that we should really focus on this as an issue and forget the politicking around it and ensure that our businesses have the ability to survive, compete and do well in what is our largest market.

Mr Speaker: We can have a very brief supplementary question from Pam Cameron.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister. Will the Minister also agree that not only should the NI Executive be working together to protect trade with our largest market in Great Britain but they should work to ensure that Northern Ireland fully benefits from post-Brexit international trade deals signed off by Her Majesty's Government?

Mrs Dodds: Absolutely. This is a hugely important area for Northern Ireland. I have been speaking to Greg Hands, a Minister in the Department for International Trade, to ensure that the Northern Ireland protocol will not hinder Northern Ireland firms from being able to be full parts of those trade Bills. To really prosper and grow our economy, we have to look out towards other economies. It is, therefore, absolutely vital that we are able to be part of those trade Bills. I look forward to further discussions with Minister Hands, and I would like to see legislative underpinning in the trade Bill of our part in it.

Mr Speaker: I call Mr Alan Chambers. You are unlikely to have time for a supplementary question.

3.30 pm

HMS Caroline

T6. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for the Economy what authority her Department had to temporarily close HMS Caroline as a visitor attraction, given that no written agreement exists with the National Museum of the Royal Navy. (AQT 356/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. Indeed, I signed off an answer to a priority written question from him on this issue just prior to coming to the Chamber.

The Member will be aware that the HMS Caroline issue arose because, while we wanted to take matters forward and settle the issues with the naval museum, we had to do so on a sustainable footing. However, the museum decided that it wanted to terminate the agreement, and that left us little time to actively pursue a new operator for HMS Caroline. However, be under no illusion on the matter, and let me be absolutely clear on this: I am committed to this very important piece of our heritage reopening and remaining in Northern Ireland and to making sure that we do everything that we can to ensure that it does so in a sustainable way. I ask the Member to join me in that commitment.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for topical questions. Time is up. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment, please.

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: Before we move on to the next item of business, I want to make a few remarks. Upon the resumption of business last week, I wrote to all Members to highlight that I had been in correspondence with the Executive about a range of issues in recent months. One of those has been the importance of the scrutiny and accountability role of the Assembly and to remind Ministers of the key courtesies and conventions that they are expected to observe towards the Assembly. That includes Ministers coming to the Assembly to make major announcements and take questions from Members.

In earlier months, we had many good examples of Ministers coming forward to update Members, particularly through the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response, which was set up to make that easier. However, I have written today to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to express some concern about the timeliness with which Ministers are coming forward to update the Assembly and take questions on changes to the COVID-19 regulations. Clearly, significant announcements were made last week in relation to changes to the current regulations and the developing and worsening situation.

Given the importance of public awareness to reducing the risk to public health, I fully appreciate and, indeed, often support why, in this situation, Ministers would undertake press conferences and interviews before they have the opportunity to come to make specific statements the Assembly. However, given the importance of these issues, it is regrettable that Ministers have not sought to come to the Assembly today or tomorrow to address the changes to the regulations, which were announced by the First Minister and deputy First Minister last week.

It is crucial that, on major issues such as this, the Assembly has the opportunity to question Ministers. For that reason, I have accepted a question for urgent oral answer so that Ministers can answer questions on the changes to the regulations today. However, Ministers should be proactively bringing these matters promptly to the Assembly themselves rather than requiring Members to table questions for urgent oral answer.

I know that these are the most challenging times possible, but it is difficult to defend the absence of Ministers coming to the Assembly when they are frequently discussing these matters on the agenda. That has been raised with me on a number of occasions in the Business Committee and in other contexts with Members generally. I have, therefore, again asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ensure that all Ministers make sure that plans are made to come to the Assembly promptly when key decisions are made.

The Member for Strangford Michelle McIlveen raised a related point of order with me earlier about the importance of Ministers respecting the role and views of the Assembly. It may have been inevitable that there would be teething problems on the return of Assembly sittings after a three-year absence. In addition, the First Minister and deputy First Minister have publicly acknowledged the role that the Assembly has played in being flexible and allowing Departments to focus on fighting the pandemic. However, I have raised many of these issues frequently since January, and Departments should now understand how

they are expected to work with the Assembly. Improvement is required in that general area. I hope that all Ministers take note of that and ensure that I do not have to return to these issues so frequently.

Questions for Urgent Oral Answer

The Executive Office

COVID-19: Local Restrictions

Mr Speaker: Mr Colin McGrath has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Executive Office. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following their announcement on Thursday 10 September, what support the Executive will provide to customers, workers and businesses in areas where local restrictions have been announced and there is a financial detriment as a result of these restrictions.

Mr Speaker: I call the deputy First Minister. Sorry; I was advised to call the deputy First Minister. I call the First Minister. Apologies.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): I think that there is a conspiracy going on here, Mr Speaker. One is quite concerned about it.

Mr Speaker: Just do not take it personally.

Mrs Foster: Thank you very much. The local restrictions that were put in place last week were a necessary and proportionate approach to address the increasing number of COVID cases that we have witnessed since early July and which have accelerated over the past week. If allowed to continue, that would, inevitably, lead to an increase in hospital admissions and deaths, which we cannot allow to happen.

Let us be clear: rapidly rising rates of infection are not good for businesses or employees. The Executive are, therefore, bringing in restrictions now to try to slow and stop the worrying increase in cases. The new restrictions are focused on reducing contact between people in household settings, which is viewed by the Executive as the most effective way to reduce the interactions between people at this time. It is not a lockdown, so hospitality and other businesses will continue to operate, but they will be subject to strict guidance, regulation and appropriate enforcement where necessary. The Executive have put a range of support measures in place for businesses to help to deal with the impact of COVID-19, and we will continue to explore ways of continuing support in the future.

Mr McGrath: I thank the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their attendance and response. Once again, as you mentioned, Mr Speaker, it was via TV that we heard about these matters. We then had to trawl NI Direct to try to find what the outcomes and actions are. It is not always

a clear navigation through that website to find out what the regulations and various changes are.

The public are rightly concerned about what they can and cannot do. The restrictions, which came quite quickly and for the right reasons, have resulted in changes in specific postcodes, which has added to and fuelled concerns that people have. However, given that the message includes suggestions of travelling only when necessary, and some of those places have businesses that were badly impacted by the original implications of COVID, it would be good to know whether you will introduce any additional specific help for those businesses and city and town centres that will be impacted by the lower footfall as a result of the new recommendations.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Chair of the Committee for his question. First of all, Mr Speaker, I will address the issue that you have rightly raised. At the beginning of COVID-19, the deputy First Minister and I felt that the Department of Health and, in particular, the Minister of Health had a heavy burden in relation to a lot of the health regulations. We offered up — I am not sure whether they were delighted about it or not — the two junior Ministers to help navigate the health regulations through this House. Given the pressures that are now on TEO around a number of issues, including high street task forces and other issues that we are involved in, we have decided that the time is now right to allow the Health Minister to bring the health regulations to the Floor of this Chamber. So, from now on, changes to the coronavirus regulations will be led by the Department of Health.

Why did we do that? Often, we had to get briefing from the Department of Health to the Executive Office and that was slowing the response down, and we did not think that that was the best use of time. So, that is one of the reasons, and we apologise, Mr Speaker, that you felt that there was a need to make your statement today, but that is one of the reasons why, today, we find ourselves in a sort of handover situation with the regulations. I just want to make that point so that people are clear around that.

With regard to the restrictions, we received a very full briefing from the Chief Medical Officer. I know that some people were rightly surprised by the level in some of those areas, but if you look at Belfast City Council area, some areas in Ballymena and some areas in Lisburn, there are now over 80 cases of COVID-19 per 100,000. When you look at other areas of Northern Ireland, it is as low as 10 and 11. That is why we decided that we needed to intervene in those postcode areas of concern.

I know that some people in those areas feel that we should have put it right across Northern Ireland, but that would not have reflected the danger that we felt some of those postcode areas were in. That is why we took the decision to put what is, I think, the House will accept, a minimum intervention at this stage. We hope that it works. We will review it in two weeks' time, and if it has not had the desired impact, we will have to revisit the restrictions.

It is a limited intervention. It does not impact on businesses at this stage. It is just about household contact. I understand the Member wanting to raise issues about support in the future, and we are certainly keeping that under review. The Minister of Finance is engaging with his counterparts in Westminster because you may have seen that there has been an announcement of £1,000 to £1,500

of support for businesses that have to close for three weeks. We are looking at that and the Minister of Finance is looking at that, and, indeed, we are speaking with the Minister for the Economy on this issue, and it is something that we will continue to monitor.

Mr Robinson: Does the First Minister agree with me that the key challenge for the Executive is protecting lives from COVID, but, at the same time, seeking to ensure that our economy can function as best as possible?

Mrs Foster: The Member has summed up the challenge that lies ahead of us. We want to protect the citizens of Northern Ireland from COVID-19 and to alert them to the dangers, but, at the same time, we want to effect a recovery for our economy, and, therein, lies the challenge. We have taken these limited intervention rules so that we can say to people that they need to be alert and they need to be aware in household settings. We hope that that will stem the spread of COVID-19 in that way.

It is a balancing act. We acknowledge that. That is why the Executive spend considerable time looking at the evidence that is presented to us and looking at the interventions that we can take. We make no apology for that because it is right that we have all the evidence in front of us.

Dr Archibald: Businesses and workers have faced a very difficult few months. Some have not yet been able to reopen, and some, although not yet, may be forced to close again due to restrictions being reimposed. The furlough scheme has been an absolute lifeline. What representations have Executive Ministers made to the British Chancellor about extending the furlough scheme and also the self-employed income support scheme?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for that question. We have made representations in relation to the furlough scheme both through our own party representations and, indeed, through the Minister of Finance, who wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer two weeks ago now saying that a cliff edge coming on furlough was going to cause a lot of hardship for a lot of people here in Northern Ireland.

3.45 pm

We have looked on with interest at the economic indicators that were put out today. Northern Ireland is very low in terms of economic recovery. We look at those stats very closely to see what we need to do to try to assist the Northern Ireland economy. You know as well as I do that we have an economy very much public-sector focused here, and we need to try to make sure that the productivity of our economy grows again in a sustainable way. That is one of the issues that I am sure the Minister for the Economy is looking at.

Yes, we have made representations on the furlough scheme. This is not about closing businesses; it is just about household contacts at the present time. We hope that it will be effective, but it will only be effective if people work with us.

Ms Bradshaw: I was in the Holylands this morning — it is part of my constituency — and there were 10 or 12 young people standing in the front garden, drinking away. My specific question in relation to the announcements last week is, given we know that they are not socially distancing in that community, do you believe that the term “avoid unnecessary travel” relates to them going home

to their families at the weekend? If so, can some further guidance be produced for the students?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question and declare an interest, because I have two children returning to university in the very near future. We have an ongoing dialogue with Queen’s University and the Ulster University. At the moment, we are not advising that people should not go home at the weekend, but it is something that we are going to continue to work on with the universities as to whether we need to look at more online learning so that people can remain in their own homes, as opposed to coming to Belfast.

The published guidance has been outlined on nidirect. When it comes to issues like travel, socialising outside the home, work, shopping and attending functions, people should use their discretion and common sense and continue to work from home where they can. Really ask yourself how important the journey or other planned activity is, how much additional risk you would bring to others by going out and engaging in that activity, how difficult it is going to be to maintain social distancing if you go to that activity, whether good hand hygiene is being operated and whether people are wearing masks. It is about trying to strike the right balance at this early stage. We may have to be more interventionist in the future, but we are trying to say to people at the moment that our evidence shows that it is around household contact. That is why we have taken the measures that we have.

Mr Allister: Mr Speaker, you will know that I am not noted for my level of agreement with the Member of Parliament for North Antrim. Indeed, maybe the First Minister could say the same. However, I must say that I do agree with his severe reservations on this issue. He said that we have to learn to live with COVID and that we cannot kill our economy. Messages such as that are contradicted, I have to say, for a trading town like Ballymena when it is headlined as, effectively, a hotspot. You told us, First Minister, that this did not impact on business. Sorry, but it does. When you pick out a town like Ballymena and headline it as a hotspot, then footfall is affected. Hence, I think, the original question: what are we going to do for those businesses that are now going to feel the draught from all of this? They have already suffered more than they can; I fear for their future now.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for agreeing with the MP for North Antrim. In relation to that, we do have to learn to live with COVID, so I agree with the MP for North Antrim as well. We do need to protect our businesses and grow the economy, but we also have to protect people’s lives. It is about livelihoods and lives. I say that very sincerely today.

As I have indicated, in Great Britain they are looking at a scheme whereby, if businesses have to close, they can be supported with a grant of £1,000 to £1,500 if they are closed for a period of three weeks. That is something that we would support, and we want to hear what we can do in relation to it and whether there will be Barnett consequential, given our very tight budgetary position. On a quadrilateral call with Scotland and Wales, both those jurisdictions raised the issue of the support that is available for people who have to self-isolate, stay at home and not go to work due to COVID’s being in the community. We know that some people, such as those who are on zero-hours contracts, will not have an income if they have to stay at

home. The Department for Communities is looking at that issue. We already have a helpline to deal with issues of severe stress. Again, there is no perfect answer to any of this, but we are trying to make sure that we put measures in place if we do have to move to close businesses. I very much hope that that will not be the case.

Mr Carroll: I thank the First Minister for her answers so far. Following on from her answer to my earlier question about the evidence that exists to show that the virus spreads rapidly in homes, and therefore requires action, but seemingly does not spread as rapidly in schools and workplaces, and does not require action, will she commit to making that specific information available to members of the Health Committee and the House?

Mrs Foster: It is not for me to commit on that issue. It is for the Minister of Health, of course. He has provided us with that evidence. The reason that we talk about households is because everybody is quite relaxed when they are in their household, as one would expect — it is their home — rather than in a regulated environment. I have had the chance to visit some schools to see how they are managing the COVID restrictions — very well is the answer that I gained from doing so. Of course, there has even been very good regulation in hospitality outlets as well. Those are regulated environments, where people are taking precautions. That is why we are asking people to be alert in the household setting, and to stay safe in order to save lives.

Mr Stalford: The question that was tabled relates to business support. At the Economy Committee, we have been discussing excluded groups. I have been told that there are 30,000 such groups, and, if they were to be paid the minimum grant of £10,000, the bill would come to £300 million. Can my Rt Hon friend tell me whether there is anything like that amount available in the Budget, because, ultimately, those interventions in the economy need to be paid for?

Mrs Foster: As the Member and House know, we have been able to make a number of interventions, both our own interventions through the Minister for the Economy, working with the rest of the Executive, and, indeed, through UK schemes that we have been able to take advantage of, such as the furlough scheme and the scheme for the self-employed. If one looks at the furlough scheme, for example, and the number of people in Northern Ireland who have been put on furlough, which, I think, was in the region of 211,000, one will see that there is no way that we would have had the financial wherewithal to support that scheme. We needed the Whitehall intervention to enable us to furlough those people. That is why we are appealing to Whitehall and the Chancellor again to intervene, so that we can have a tapering off of the furlough scheme. I think that we all accept that it will have to end. However, the point is that we are saying that we cannot have a cliff edge to the furlough scheme.

I know that, on 15 September, the House will debate Excluded NI. Of course we want to help citizens who are in difficulty and have not been able to gain from some of the schemes that we have introduced. However, it is a matter of having the financial wherewithal to be able to do that and, indeed, to identify those people in a way that does not allow fraud and ensures that we get the money out to the people in need. Again, I am sure that the Minister for the Economy will address some of those issues in that debate.

It is about ensuring that we have the finances available, and not making promises on which we cannot then deliver.

Ms Anderson: Today's announcement that the Infrastructure Minister will finally take the lead in providing a scheme for the transport sector is very welcome. As the First Minister will know, that sector, particularly taxi drivers and others, felt that it was like a game of ping-pong between the Department for the Economy and the Department for Infrastructure. In future, for those sectors where two Ministers are engaged or involved, will help be provided to ensure that all necessary assistance is put in place and they do not fall between two stools ever again?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. She will know that the deputy First Minister and I intervened to direct that the Minister for Infrastructure should take forward that scheme. It is disappointing that the scheme has not been put in place until now. It is wrong that that sector, in particular, has not had the help and assistance that it has been looking for.

We have also intervened in the area of childcare. She will know that, having been to the Executive Committee and spoken about this. Again, that was a split between policy and regulation, and the difficulties that pursued there. We are trying to make sure that it is an approach by the whole of the Executive, and that is what it is about. We are trying to identify the gaps in provision and then, if we can, to intervene and to assist. I hope that the scheme for taxis and the haulage industry can come soon and as quickly as possible.

Mr McNulty: Thank you, First Minister, for coming to the House today, and for your answers thus far. Pardon the oxymoron, First Minister, but why is your party happy to brief with false facts against other Ministers in the Executive?

Mrs Foster: Unfortunately, since the Executive returned, we have seen parties briefing out and putting things on Twitter after Executive meetings. There was a case on Thursday evening, after the EU exit meeting, where a full summary of that meeting was given to the BBC. That certainly did not come from the First Minister's party or the deputy First Minister's party. Unfortunately, we have leaks. We have some Ministers who love to resort to Twitter, who love to brief 'Good Morning Ulster', and then the rest of us are left to deal with those issues.

I say this very sincerely: everybody should wise up. We are dealing with huge issues in the Executive. People should stop briefing against each other. We are supposed to be in a five-party coalition dealing with all of these issues, and that is what I hope that we do moving forward.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, First Minister, for your answers so far. I will save your blushes over the little local difficulty, which I am sure you are having with the Member of Parliament for East Antrim, and cut to the chase.

Those who have been excluded in Northern Ireland have been failed by the Economy Minister, and have been failed by her comments, where she says that the responsibility lies with the Executive, and not her, to provide the appropriate funds for any schemes coming forward. Will the First Minister explain to the House why, if an excluded business was located in any of the English regions, Scotland or Wales, they would not be excluded?

Mrs Foster: Can I say to the Member, I hardly think that Sammy Wilson would ever be called a “little local difficulty”, and I would defend him on that to the very end.

In terms of Excluded NI, we are, of course, wanting to assist everyone who has had difficulties relating to COVID-19. That is why we introduced a range of schemes. However, when introducing a range of schemes there are always those who will fall through the gaps. What we now need to do is to deal with furlough and the self-employed scheme, and we have the backing of Westminster to do that. I also say to the Member, because we do not have tax-raising powers in Northern Ireland, we do not have the data on those people who were newly self-employed. The Member may not agree with it, but that is the reality. The Member should know that the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Finance have tried to get that data from the Treasury, but without success.

I have no doubt that we will have a full debate on those issues tomorrow. Be assured, that we do want to help and assist where we can, within our Budget, but we will also lobby Westminster to help those who have been excluded.

Mr Gildernew: In light of the ongoing worrying rise in positive COVID cases, and in the context of the necessary restrictions that have had to be put in place, can I ask the Executive to confirm whether the Economy Minister intends to provide updated workplace health and safety guidance in order to mitigate the spread of coronavirus within workplaces?

Mrs Foster: I say to the Member that that is a very good point. I am sure that he knows that the Health and Safety Executive have been proactive in working with employers and trade unions in the LRA forum to try to deal with some of the issues that have been brought forward. The LRA forum was a good sounding board when we were in the midst of COVID and in trying to get people to come back to work at that time.

I think that we do have good guidance at present, and that guidance has not changed, but we can always revisit guidance in the light of where we are with particular circumstances. Of course, the Member will be delighted, as I am, that Fermanagh and South Tyrone continues to be a compliant area.

4.00 pm

Mrs Cameron: I ask whether this debate on local restrictions is on whether the glass is half full or the glass is half empty. Does the First Minister agree with me that introducing restrictions that allow for a balance to be struck between our economy continuing and, more importantly for me, the health service remaining open, or reopening, is a way in which to live during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Mrs Foster: I remind Members of why we intervened back in March. It was to try to push down the curve and make sure that we did not have the number of deaths that were being predicted at the time, but it was also to protect the NHS from being overwhelmed. There are concerns about that at present, given that we are now entering the autumn/winter period, with all the usual seasonal dysfunctions that happen then. We are therefore very conscious of that.

I agree with the Member that the glass is half full. We are making limited interventions. We are not closing down businesses but are instead trying to say this to people: the

evidence points to household spread, so we are asking you to work with us on all these issues. I know that people can come up with all sorts of scenarios in which they think that there are difficulties. That is fair enough. What we are trying to say to people, however, is this: please, please use your common sense. Work with us. Try to stop the spread of COVID. In that way, we can control the spread. Do not forget that Northern Ireland, out of all the regions of the United Kingdom, is the best-performing region when it comes to COVID. Let us make sure that it stays there.

Mr Catney: First Minister, when we were talking at the Finance Committee, the honourable Member from Derry stated that this had fallen between two stools: the Department for the Economy and the Department for Infrastructure. I say that it fell between three stools, with the third being the Department of Finance. That question was asked in order to see where the power sat. I commend the First Minister and the deputy First Minister for at least bringing forward the regulations that state that the power that sat with the Economy Minister will now be transferred to the Minister for Infrastructure, from whom we are used to delivery and things happening.

Mrs Foster: It is only fair that I say this: the power does not sit with the Department for the Economy. The Minister for Infrastructure has argued that it does not sit with her, so what we have done is to say that she can use the Financial Assistance Act 2009, which was put in place after the local flooding some time back in 2007, if I am not mistaken. I think that I was the Minister of the Environment when the Financial Assistance Bill came through the House. We are designating the Department for Infrastructure to take forward the actions for taxis and haulage.

Mr Nesbitt: To return to Sammy Wilson, I must say that, as party leader, I found that to let the odd elected rep go is profoundly positive for party discipline. *[Laughter.]* My question to the First Minister is this: does she have any idea how Sammy Wilson came to the apparently mistaken belief about what you were lobbying for around the Executive table?

Mrs Foster: If I can point the Member to some of the tweets that were put out by some of my Executive colleagues, he may find the answer there.

Mr Speaker: That concludes the item of business. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

Health

COVID-19: Testing

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

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what actions he is undertaking to ensure that COVID-19 tests are accessible locally.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Testing capacity in Northern Ireland has increased significantly since the beginning of the pandemic and is delivered through two routes. First, we have increased capacity through our

health and social care (HSC) trust laboratories and local testing partners as part of our Northern Ireland Scientific Advisory Consortium. That is known as pillar 1 testing. My Department continues to work very closely with the network of local partners to enhance testing capability and capacity. Active plans are under way to develop this further in response to the recent increase in demand for testing.

Secondly, testing is delivered through participation in the national testing programme, which is managed by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in London. That is known as pillar 2 testing and currently includes four drive-through fixed testing sites and six operational mobile testing units (MTUs), with two more mobile testing units due to be operational shortly. MTUs are deployed in towns and villages across Northern Ireland in response to local need. The home-testing option is also available through the postal service, whereby the test is delivered directly to a person's home.

Demand for testing has increased significantly across the UK in recent weeks. I am aware that the national testing programme is experiencing exceptionally high demand. At times, that has made it more difficult for members of the public to book a test slot at a time or place that is convenient. Anyone who tries to book a test and is unable to do so, or who is offered an inconvenient time or location, is strongly encouraged to wait a few hours and then try again. I am advised that more appointments and home-testing kits are available nationally every day.

I am aware that there have been some problems with the digital portal, which have impacted on cases in Northern Ireland. The problems have caused testing slots to be offered at sites that are outside Northern Ireland. I understand that there have been similar issues with the digital portal across the UK. Matt Hancock has personally advised me that a fix to the digital portal is being developed. Again, our key message is that if you are experiencing problems booking a test, please leave it a few hours and try again.

Overall testing capacity is continually reviewed by my Department, and plans to further enhance capacity are kept under active consideration. I have spoken to Matt Hancock on a number of occasions over the last week, and the Health Ministers of the four nations spoke on Friday. My officials continue to be in daily contact with their counterparts in London to ensure that capacity for Northern Ireland is maximised through the national testing programme.

Mr Gildernew: We are all very conscious of the testing difficulties. I am sure that every Member of this House has been receiving representation from constituents about testing difficulties. I am also deeply conscious that we have, unfortunately, recorded another two bereavements as a result of COVID-19. I extend my condolences to the families that have been affected.

Minister, you announced recently that you had written to Matt Hancock about testing. Is that the first time that you have formally raised testing issues or problems with your English counterpart? Given the number of people who have been unable to access tests, what is your assessment of the impact that the testing disruption has had on the spread of COVID-19?

Mr Swann: I thank the Chair of the Committee for his supplementary questions. The four Health Ministers speak

regularly, and testing has been on the agenda for nearly every meeting that we have had. Over the past week, we have had intense meetings specifically about testing and digital portal access. What has been experienced in Northern Ireland has also been experienced by my counterparts in Wales and Scotland. The particular peculiarity is that the digital portal takes a postcode and measures the distance in miles, without taking the Irish Sea into consideration. My Welsh counterpart, Vaughan Gething, said that they had experienced a similar problem with the Bristol Channel. So it is not a problem that is peculiar to us, and how the digital portal programme assesses a person's location is being looked at. We have continual engagement with each other.

We have been made aware today that there is a significant backlog in the tests that are being processed through the national testing laboratories. We have raised that issue, and I am looking to see what impact that has on Northern Ireland's testing capability and on results from the national testing pillar. From our data, there does not seem to be a significant impact in Northern Ireland, but we want to make sure that it is not affecting us and the number of positive cases that are coming through. We are aware that the Department of Health and Social Care in Westminster is working with Germany in order to pick up some of the backlog that there is in our testing capability. That is similar to what the Republic of Ireland Government did in the past.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his attendance. Schools are back and there is no doubt that there is confusion among schools and parents and even in workplaces. Many schools are struggling to get through to the Public Health Agency (PHA) to receive appropriate guidance around risk assessments and they are sending large numbers of children home. There are reports of schools and workplaces demanding a negative COVID-19 result before individuals can return to work or school.

I welcome the information that was published by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) last week. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that he takes any offer of help or assistance from the Education Minister to bulk up the level of support from his Department that is required to deal with the volume of queries that are coming from schools and parents at this time?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for making a valid point. We expected an increase in the number of tests being sought when the schools returned, because we saw something similar in Scotland, but just not to the extent that we have had. We have been working very well between the two Departments and with the Minister of Education. My departmental officials have two meetings a week with Education officials to make sure that any peculiarities, misconceptions or misinterpretations of the guidance are ruled out. That resulted in the CMO issuing that specific letter last week to school principals to make sure that we had that clear sight and guidance.

Over the weekend, the PHA established a dedicated telephone line for school principals so that they can seek direct guidance from the PHA. We realise that it is a very pressurised and trying time for school principals who want to make sure that they are giving parents, pupils and their staff the correct advice about COVID-19 and how they should be managing each situation.

Mr McNulty: What is being done to ensure that staff and patients are being tested — and that test results are available — in a timely manner? I am talking specifically about what has been happening in Daisy Hill Hospital over recent days to some staff members and some patients in the medical wards. I want to offer my condolences to those families who have lost loved ones in recent days. I also want to convey my best wishes to those people who have contracted COVID and I hope that they can make a full recovery.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his comments and I especially welcome the support that is there for those families and staff who have lost a relative or have been involved where there has been a loss of life due to COVID-19. In my opening comments, I explained the two pillars that we work on — pillar 1 and pillar 2. Pillar 1 is our own in-house testing capacity in our HSC system, which is available for our staff and for patients to ensure that testing is accessible and timely but also for the reporting of tests and results. That is why we have the two pillars; that one is very specific to staff and patients who need that quick turnaround. Pillar 2 is used for the national programme, which is accessible to the general public should they develop symptoms.

Mr Chambers: Whilst I note the very high demand for testing locally, as well as the increase in our testing capacity, how important have the over 204,000 tests provided by the UK Government under pillar 2 been to our efforts in Northern Ireland to tackle the pandemic?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his comments. It is important to note that our access to the national pillar and the national testing programme have been vital for our response to processing tests and making sure that testing is available for those people who need it. In the past five days, we have averaged around 7,400 tests in Northern Ireland, so we are completing a significant amount of testing per head of population. We are above average in our testing per head of population not only on this island, by comparison, but across these islands.

4.15 pm

Access to pillar 2 is vital to the programme that we carry forward because that pillar in the national testing programme is also the testing support that we use for our care homes and care home staff who are currently green and not experiencing symptoms or do not have COVID-positive tests. Pillar 2 is vital for our response.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, my question follows on from Mr Gildernew's on the number of queries that we are getting through our constituency office. Are you minded to set up a public representatives' phone line to filter those through so that we are not just going through the general helpline?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. We are exploring with nidirect the possibility of doing that, because they were seeing something like, I think, 1,600 calls in the first week of the schools going back. The ability to filter out — I apologise, I do not mean "filter out", I mean direct to the right location — that is crucial in order to make sure that we get the right information to the right people who deserve it. That is being taken forward and explored by nidirect and the Public Health Agency.

Mr Carroll: Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far. The Minister may or may not be aware that the University

of Cambridge is testing every student once a week and that Boston University is testing every student twice a week. He will obviously agree that mass testing is fundamental to elimination, especially as we just heard as he entered the Chamber that a vaccine is unlikely to be available until 2024. Are there any plans for mass testing to be made available outside schools, universities, colleges and workplaces in order to ramp up the testing that is required?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. Again, I do not know whether he has been following announcements from my colleague Matt Hancock about, I think what is called Operation Moonshot — I guided him to the suggestion that he look for a better name, but, unfortunately, that is the direction they went — which looks for that national testing capability to be ramped up. I know that they are talking some time in advance. We will be part of that, as, again, I think Mr Chambers pointed out, because of that national input that we have to our national testing programme.

When that mass testing becomes available, Northern Ireland will be integral to it and will be part of it, but at this minute in time, due to the capacity that we have under pillar 1 and pillar 2, I will say to people that they should use the testing capacity wisely and use it if they are guided to get tested and if they have symptoms. They should not use it simply if they feel that they may have COVID and want to see whether they do. It is not something that should be abused. It should be used wisely.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for coming this afternoon. In light of a previous Member's comments about the confirmed cases at Daisy Hill Hospital, can the Minister reassure me that Health and Social Care staff will have access to COVID testing? Over the weekend I had contact from staff who stated that they have been refused testing despite being in that vicinity.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that. If she wants to contact my office specifically with those concerns, she can. If staff are experiencing symptoms, they have direct access to pillar 1 under their occupational health contacts. If they have symptoms or are in contact with a positive case they should be able to access that testing through the appropriate trust procedures.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. There is no doubt that the impending crisis around testing, accessibility and local capacity is important, and I hope that we can address those issues soon. The Minister will be aware of the ongoing issues surrounding the local testing centre in Craigavon, which is being used via the MOT centre, and the backlog that that has caused for MOTs and in holding up the decision to start driver vehicle tests. I wrote to the Minister some two weeks ago about this, and I was wondering whether he has considered any alternative sites, as indicated by his Department.

Mr Swann: Again, I appreciate the Minister for Infrastructure's support from the beginning when she was able to make MOT centres available as COVID-19 centres, because they were very suitable and fit for purpose for what we needed to do at that time.

My understanding is that that site is due to close in October, which will allow it to be reutilised for MOT testing, and I know that is something that is of particular interest in that specific area. If it is my call and I have to toss up between testing cars and testing people, I will come down

on the side of testing people. It will be a managed process, while we look for a new suitable site. We will make that transition as soon as possible, but we will ensure that we have continuity of testing in that area.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. An issue, that has been raised with me locally, is that there are variations in sensitivity between the different testing kits. Is the Minister aware of any differences between the kits that are used by the trusts, care homes and the PHA? That is particularly worrying, given that they are used in discharging vulnerable and elderly people from the hospital into the community.

Mr Swann: The specificity — I can never get that word, but anyway. I am guided by my scientific advisory consortium in regard to what tests are utilised in each setting, and also what tests are applicable to use. That is vital in the work we do. I would rather have a test that errs on the side of caution, than one that produces a number of false positives. The tests we use have been through the system and been approved, for the results that they give and their reliability. I do not think we are using any test system, or test, that I should be concerned about. If we used any such test, I am sure that my scientific advisory consortium and my expert advisory group on testing, would have highlighted it by now.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far. I am looking at the procedure and comparing the percentage at pillar 1 with that at pillar 2. I note that most in pillar 1 are within the healthcare system. Is there a percentage lying between those, that are testing negative? Can we find out whether one test is exactly coming out on the figures against the other one, and whether we are missing something in that?

Mr Swann: I do not have that specific breakdown of pillar 1 versus pillar 2, because, as I said in an earlier answer, they are looking at different cohorts in society. Pillar 1 is very focused on our healthcare system, whereas pillar 2 is for the general public. I can say to the Member that, across our entire testing programme, over 15% of the population of Northern Ireland has been tested. That is quite a high percentage.

Access to testing is crucial, but it must be reliable. A higher percentage of those tested now come out positive. It is not just that we are increasing the number of tests; the number of people who test positive is increasing disproportionately to the increase in testing. That is what raises concerns in the Department of Health.

Mr Nesbitt: I want to follow on from the concerns expressed by Mr McNulty, with regard to the timeliness of testing for patients and staff in hospitals. A couple of weeks ago, I had to undergo a process in Belfast City Hospital and, as part of the preparation, a COVID test. I assure the Minister that it was delivered not only in a timely manner, but by a team that offered professionalism and empathy in equal measure. That was important to me.

I accept that there may be ongoing issues that the Minister will address, as, indeed, there must be for all aspects of our reaction to COVID-19, but I would hate for this House to send out a message to those involved in testing that they are delivering anything other than a first-class professional service. I ask the Minister to ensure that those professionals are aware of our gratitude.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his comments, and his sentiments towards the staff. I am glad to see him back after his procedure. The point he makes is a valid one. When testing began in Northern Ireland, a short five or six months ago, and that is something that we need to keep in mind, those staff stepped outside their normal roles and routines to take up positions in our testing system. They have to be applauded and acknowledged, because they continue that work outside their routine. When I visited the Newtownards MOT centre, I realised the diversity of those volunteers who had come forward to provide the staffing complement for those testing facilities. They varied from student nurses, through speech and language therapists, to professional nurses. They all played a part, and they all continue to play a vital role in combatting COVID-19.

Mr Robinson: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Minister, is there any local mechanism that can speed up test results? I ask that because a constituent of mine who is a health worker has been waiting for their results since Friday at 2.00 pm. Also, why is there no PHA service at weekends to answer local queries?

Mr Swann: In regard to the PHA, it is not a public call centre. There is an indirect line that can be used to get guidance on the regulations. If the Member wants to supply me with the details of his constituent who is waiting for results, I will follow that up and pass it to the trust.

Mr Speaker: That concludes this item of business. I ask Members to take their ease.

Private Members' Business

Living over the Shop Scheme

Debate resumed on amendment to motion:

That this Assembly recognises the role that repurposed and attractive residential space above retail premises can play in promoting the success of town centres across Northern Ireland; notes that making high streets high-quality locations to live as well as work can aid the economic recovery from COVID-19; and calls on the Minister for Communities to consider establishing a living over the shop grant scheme to assist landlords to convert space above retail premises into residential accommodation. — [Mr Buckley.]

Which amendment was:

Leave out all after “repurposed” and insert:

“and accessible space above commercial properties could potentially play in revitalising town and city centres by providing additional affordable, accessible and high-quality accommodation; further recognises this potential to increase the supply of homes to meet demand; acknowledges that increasing this type of housing in high streets can help assist in the social and economic recovery from COVID-19; and calls on the Minister for Communities and her Executive colleagues to explore this option to reduce housing demand based on objective need.” — [Mr McCann.]

Mr Speaker: We now return to the debate on the Living over the Shop scheme. I call Cathal Boylan to wind up on the amendment. You have five minutes.

Mr Boylan: I welcome the opportunity to take part in this interesting debate. We all know that many Members certainly support our towns and want to try to revitalise them; there is no doubt about that. I have listened to my colleagues, and I bow to Mr Fra McCann, who is not in the Chamber at the minute, because he has been an expert in this field for long many a day. He was on the old Social Development Committee, along with my former colleague Mickey Brady, so he is well versed on the issue.

I want to pick up on a few points, and then I will pick up on some Members' comments. It is quite interesting that some Members obviously did not read either the motion or the amendment. The original motion asks the Minister “to consider” a grant scheme. From the comments of some Members, especially Mr Blair, in an intervention with Mr Durkan from Derry, it was clearly seen that they had not really read the motion or the amendment.

4.30 pm

It is interesting. Mr Beggs is not in the Chamber either. He mentioned that the 2016 report had sat on a shelf for four years. If you read some of the comments, you will see that, in June 2016 — the proposer of the motion would know this, because, if he had read it at the time, he certainly would not have included it in the original motion — a selection of property agents across all 11 council areas were consulted to obtain their views on a revitalised Living over the Shop scheme.

“All of the agents felt that, currently, the refurbishment of vacant ... accommodation in city and town centres is not currently ... viable, as the level of rents ... are not sufficient to provide an adequate investment return on the ... costs to carry out refurbishment to a standard that will meet building regulations and a finish that will attract tenants.”

If people had been listening to that or had seen it, they certainly would not be coming along today in relation to —.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I would like to respond to that point. I think that the Member was in the Chamber for the start of the debate, so he will have heard me say that Northern Irish councils have identified that 1,015 of the 3,595 non-domestic property vacancies would be suitable for residential conversion. As the Member well pointed out, that would go some way to helping with the housing stress that we are under.

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

Mr Boylan: I thank the Member for the intervention. I took notes when the Member moved the motion. We are talking about levels of £25,000 and up to £50,000 of interventions in some cases, and that is in the report. That is a lot of money. It is a about public spend; it is about looking after people and about proper spend in our town centres. That is what this is about, to be honest.

I want to turn to Members' contributions. It is interesting. The Member, in moving the motion, talked about the Minister considering introducing the scheme. Still and all, he said that he wanted direct action across the Executive. He is saying one thing. Why, then, did the Member not consider putting something to that effect in the motion? There are other ways and means. The Minister has already responded to the debate, and I will not repeat all that she said.

It is interesting to listen to the Member talk about footfall being down 79% — that was certainly the case in April — and all the other points that he mentioned. Nobody would argue that our high streets are not in decline — there is no doubt about it — but it is about how we go about revitalising them. The Member talked about online shopping. However, online shopping has hit all the towns; there is no doubt about that. That was some of his commentary. There are other ways and means, and other agencies have to play their part, including councils.

Mr Beggs talked about planning, and he has mentioned planning in a number of Committees. Planning policy and local area plans have a big part to play in revitalising our town centres, and the Minister mentioned some of the stuff that Belfast had done to try to revitalise its city centre. Is that me finished?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is, I am afraid. It is a timed debate. I am sorry about that.

Mr Boylan: I support the amendment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Grand.

Mr Newton: I thank my colleagues Mr Buckley and Paula Bradley for tabling the motion. Paula should have made the winding-up speech, but she has, unfortunately, had to go home because of some domestic problems.

When I was asked to make a winding-up speech, I tried to think of some introductory remarks on the motion and

the issues in it, and it came to my mind that, when you think about who was the most famous politician ever to live above the shop, you come to the name Margaret Thatcher and her political career. Then, we were reminded, during the debate, that Pat Catney also lived above the shop *[Laughter.]* It certainly has not done him any great harm in his political career.

I was extremely disappointed by the Minister's response. I know that the Minister wants to provide housing for constituents — I know that — but I was extremely disappointed by her response. She just dismissed it; in fact, it was a forceful rejection of the scheme. Indeed, she said that she would not even consider such a scheme. No matter how good, how different, how it might be worked up, what the priorities were or where the finance comes from, she would not even consider such a scheme. Minister, I feel for all the people currently on the growing waiting list in their need for housing.

Whether or not you like it or think it is appropriate for people to live in the city centre and contribute to the city centre, I was looking at the value of city centre living. In London, an area known as Beckenham, you can pay £240,000 to buy a flat above a shop. If you want to live close to Del Boy in Peckham, you can buy a two-bedroom flat for nearly £300,000, and, if you want to live above a fish and chip shop in Mayfair, you could pay £5 million for that privilege. That is successful use of housing in London. It is maybe not the intention or the area that we want to cover, but it indicates that it is possible to do the job of successfully living and that people will pay huge amounts of money to live there. Minister, we need to consider how we can make use of vacant space in city centres.

The need for a strategic approach to delivering such a scheme has been referred to by others. In proposing the scheme, Mr Buckley eloquently indicated that you would need the statutory bodies such as the councils on board. They have a major role to play in how this might be developed. I feel that you also need to have the arterial routes as suppliers for folk to live in the city and feed into the city. We also need to consider, as Mr Buckley indicated, the outlying towns and villages and how their high streets might benefit from such an initiative. That strategic approach, Minister, needs to be considered rather than just dismissed.

Such major schemes cannot go forward without specialist input from those experienced in town and country planning, experienced architects and those with imagination on how such a scheme can contribute. Kellie Armstrong indicated the need for play areas, green spaces and so on to make sure that it is an attractive area for families to live, work and play. Such schemes need to be considered with a holistic approach, a team approach and with everyone playing their part. We also need the potential for residents — tenants who may live in the properties — to have a need for security of tenure. That is where the Minister for Communities, whoever that may be, has a role. We need to make sure that the shops that exist in close proximity need responsible tenants. There is always the fear that, if you are living above a restaurant or fast food outlet, the potential dangers are, perhaps, increased. Families, obviously, need facilities. They need play parks, doctors' surgeries and schools close by. Those are all factors that can be taken into consideration,

as such a scheme makes its contribution to solving the housing problem.

I turn now to what others said. There was a variety of responses. Mr McCann, who is not in the Chamber, indicated that he would not support the motion but would support the amendment. He indicated that there was a need to deal with "the tangled web". He said that the Minister was willing to discuss all issues with the Committee. Well, the Minister is not willing to discuss this issue or this approach with the Committee. Mr Mark Durkan highlighted the needs in his city and the problems in his constituency. He acknowledged that there was a need to address the issue. I know from my time on the Committee that this is an issue that is close to his heart as well. He said that we needed to learn from the failed schemes of the past, and I agree with him. We need to learn, where there have been failures in the past. Mr Beggs indicated a need for flexibility and the reuse of town centres. He also indicated that planning policies need to be refreshed in order that schemes such as this can go forward. He highlighted the homelessness problem in his constituency, which is something that affects all of us. I have already mentioned Kellie Armstrong. She highlighted that we cannot go forward without grant support. Sinéad Ennis said that she would support only the Sinn Féin amendment. She stressed the need to address city centre development.

Now, when I look at the motion and the amendment, I am a bit flummoxed. The motion proposed by Mr Buckley states that we want to make:

"high streets high-quality locations to live as well as work".

The amendment talks about:

"revitalising town and city centres by providing additional affordable, accessible and high-quality accommodation".

Yet, we have a big issue. It seems to me that we are actually all on the same page in addressing the issue of providing additional homes and, at the same time, regenerating our city centres.

I have already referred to Pat Catney, but he stressed the potential affordability of LOTS schemes and the potential to enhance areas. I assume that he is talking about the city of Lisburn in his constituency and what could happen there. He also indicated that professional experience needs to be brought into play. Mr John Stewart indicated that this would certainly contribute to the increasing of local rates and highlighted the social potential of the scheme.

I am sorry that I have not got to everyone's comments, but most, if not all, Members made a very positive contribution, albeit that I might not agree with all that they said.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: OK. We will have a Division, which is always good fun.

Clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put in three minutes. I remind you that we should continue to uphold

social distancing and that Members who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come to the Chamber.

Before I put the Question again, I remind Members that it would be preferable if we could avoid a Division.

Question, that the amendment be made, put a second time.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before the Assembly divides, I remind Members that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly currently has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies. I also remind Members that social distancing continues to be observed whilst the Division is taking place. Please be patient at all times and follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 40; Noes 41.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Bailey, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan and Ms Ennis.

NOES

Mr Allen, Ms Armstrong, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Blair, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs Long, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Muir, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buckley and Mr Newton.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the role that repurposed and attractive residential space above retail premises can play in promoting the success of town centres across Northern Ireland; notes that making high streets high-quality locations to live as well as work can aid the economic recovery from COVID-19; and calls on the Minister for Communities to consider establishing a living over the shop grant scheme to assist landlords to convert space above retail premises into residential accommodation.

Assembly Business

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

Mr O'Dowd: I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 14 September 2020 be extended to no later than 8.00pm.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 14 September 2020 be extended to no later than 8.00pm.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments to change the top Table.

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

Private Members' Business

Race Equality

Ms Sheerin: Ba mhaith liom a mholadh. I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that the racial equality strategy 2015-2025 was not fully implemented and is now significantly outdated; acknowledges the commitment contained in New Decade, New Approach to the publication of a new and updated racial equality strategy within 100 days of the restoration of the Assembly; further recognises the positive contribution made to society by those from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds; deplors the discrimination black, Asian and minority ethnic communities face regularly; condemns racism in all its forms; commits to act urgently on the forthcoming report on the review of hate crime legislation; calls for the promotion of an anti-racism ethos in our schools; and further calls on the Executive to formulate and implement urgently a meaningful racial equality strategy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and a further 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. One amendment has been selected and is published on the Marshalled List.

Ms Sheerin: I rise today to urge Members to support the motion, to send a clear and unequivocal message to the population of the North that racism is a scourge that the representatives in this Chamber take seriously and will act with urgency to stamp out. Sinn Féin believes in a society that cherishes equality and respect as central tenets, a society free of discrimination in all its forms. The House must send a resounding signal that we have zero tolerance of racism here.

We tabled the motion to prioritise the updating and implementation of a racial equality strategy. In 2016, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination called on the Executive of the day to adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation without further delay, yet the racial equality strategy of 2015 has never been properly implemented.

We need to acknowledge the blight of racism and the very real and lasting impact that it has on the lives of many in our community. Racism thrives where it is not challenged, where people turn a blind eye to insults and derogatory remarks. Violent attacks and vandalism are the symptoms; hatred and intolerance are the cancers that cause them. Racism is not an arbitrary pie-in-the-sky notion that exists in books and films and stops there. It is 100% true that it should have been relegated to the dustbin of history long ago — it was not right then either — but it has not been. It impacts real people today. Families, mothers, brothers, fathers and daughters growing up as an “other” or feeling the constant need to justify their identity is not acceptable in any 21st-century society, and, given the history of Ireland, it is certainly not acceptable here.

As recently as 2018, the British Government exacerbated the hurt felt by the very people who they called upon to rebuild their country when they needed help by criminalising an entire generation of immigrants from the West Indies in a debacle that has now become known as the Windrush scandal.

Racism, like any form of prejudice, is a mould.

It grows under shadows, fed by hatred and intolerance and shrouded in secrecy. It is allowed to fester only when it goes unchallenged. As we in the North of Ireland are no strangers to, when discrimination becomes institutionalised, and when it is practised by those who make and enforce the law, it is legitimised.

5.15 pm

In a year unlike any other, in the middle of a global pandemic, we watched the fallout of the deadly virus called racism in America as the murder, in cold blood, of George Floyd on a Minneapolis street played out on our televisions and our timelines. People took to the streets, again. A few years ago, on a holiday in the Deep South of America, I stood outside the Lorraine Motel, and I felt the sadness of what had happened there overcome me. That the children and grandchildren of the freedom riders, the marchers and the students who staged sit-ins in diners still have to walk behind placards in their bid to be treated with decency and respect is beyond belief. It is shameful that, in 2020, because of the colour of your skin, protest is still required to live a life free of harassment and bullying. We can dismiss this as something that happened far, far away across the Atlantic, but the reality is that racism is experienced on these shores every day as well. Countless accounts of members of black and ethnic minority communities who have made their home here have told the same stories of verbal and physical abuse, of remarks and messages from behind a keyboard.

In a 2018 life and times survey, in answer to a question about whether there was more racial prejudice in the North now than 40 years ago, 41% of respondents said that there was more now. That is not acceptable. The European Court of Human Rights describes racial discrimination as:

“a particularly insidious kind of discrimination.”

It states that, in view of its consequences, it requires from the authorities:

“special vigilance and a vigorous reaction.”

Yet, in the North, we have less protection for victims of racism than anywhere else in these islands. We need to address this. We need the implementation of stronger hate crime legislation, the report on which we await. This legislation must tackle institutional racism at its core and should be based on international best practice. It needs to be clear in people's minds that bullying on the basis of race is a crime that carries a penalty and that it is unacceptable before the law here. Supplementary to this, we require affirmative action to ensure proper representation of black, Asian, and minority ethnic communities in our public sector and on the boards that make decisions. We should be, as part of this strategy, properly furnishing the groups who represent these communities with the resources that they require. The absence of ethnic monitoring means that we lack data relating to the presence of black and ethnic

minorities in government and industry. If you do not have the full picture, it is difficult to address the issues.

In recent times, much has been made of how this is a decade of centenaries. We are also in the middle of the UN's International Decade for People of African Descent, which we should honour in the Chamber. What better legacy could we have than creating a society where racism was nothing more than a horrible memory? For anyone who is brave enough to leave their home to make a life elsewhere, far from family and the surroundings that they are used to, Ireland should be a warm and welcoming shore. We all have a duty to call out racism when we see it and to act together to create a society built on justice and respect that treats everyone equally. The Executive have to demonstrate that they have zero tolerance for racism here.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): One amendment has been approved and is published on the Marshalled List. I invite Paula Bradshaw to formally move the amendment.

Ms Bradshaw: I beg to move

Leave out all after "further calls" and insert:

"on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to set up a working group with members of the black, Asian and minority ethnic communities to co-design and co-produce an updated racial equality strategy and to publish a timetable for the implementation of the strategy."

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has 10 minutes to propose the amendment and a further five minutes in which to make a winding-up speech.

Ms Bradshaw: I will speak to the Alliance Party amendment, but I thank the Sinn Féin Members for bringing this important subject to be debated today.

I represent South Belfast, which is noted as the most culturally, ethnically and socially diverse constituency in Northern Ireland. It is that diversity that makes it all the more enriched and prosperous, in all senses of the word. Therefore, the frustration for many, not least the minority ethnic community, is that the issue of race relations does not appear to receive the attention and concentration of effort that it deserves and requires. As such, our amendment is to provide a mechanism for fully engaging with and drawing on the lived experience of the BAME community to co-design and co-produce an updated race relations strategy for Northern Ireland. That community's input will not only provide space to link the amended strategy more closely to the issues faced but will ensure greater buy-in from this diverse community. The premise for wide and authentic co-design and co-production is that, firstly, we have the identification of all the problems and the solutions. Then we ensure that we translate the solutions into firm actions, outputs and outcomes. This is where I feel that the strategy from the Executive Office is light on detail, and where it needs to go further and to be more ambitious. That is why I am calling for an update as opposed to a replacement.

Our amendment also calls for a timetable for this work to be completed and, more importantly, implemented. The BAME community has been raising concerns for many years, not least at the lack of a sense of urgency in

addressing the issues that they face in many aspects of their lives.

To address the substance of the motion, I very much welcomed the inclusion in the New Decade, New Approach agreement of the need to produce a new and updated strategy within 100 days. To be fair to the Executive Office, nobody in January could have predicted that our lives and the work of the Assembly would have been so significantly disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, it is entirely reasonable and understandable that the target of 100 days may have slipped. However, it is time for this work to recommence.

Therefore, moving on from today, while it is important that the Executive Office leads on this work, with full engagement from the BAME community and other voluntary sector stakeholders, it is also vital that there is cross-departmental feed-in to the strategy and, in turn, complete cooperation with the agreed actions and their time frame for implementation. This departmental cooperation will be vital to ensure that the existing and forthcoming work complements the content and aspirations of the race relations strategy. This will require some work on assimilation and coordination, but it is very much necessary.

The next stage will be the requirement that sufficient funding is allocated so that the actions can be fully delivered in a timely fashion. Where cross-departmental working is required, it is absolutely vital that there is agreement from the start, with the collaboration forthcoming and not wrangled, especially with regard to financing, which, we in the Chamber know, has been the reason why many a fine project has not gotten off the ground.

Further to this, I have met with numerous voluntary sector groups, especially in my constituency, that are doing the most amazing work with ethnic minority communities with origins from all parts of the world. However, they are operating on an absolute shoestring with stressful levels of funding, uncertainty and risk. If we are serious about empowering and integrating people who choose to live here, we have to properly support those groups that have the connections, understanding and ability to properly engage with them.

In taking forward the themes of empowering and integrating people, we need to ensure that members of the BAME community are educated about all the aspects of our public services, with particular reference to providing them with an understanding of the standards of support and the duty of care that they should expect. In turn, equipping them with the power to stand up and to speak out for those rights.

On integrating, we know that individuals and families are coming to Northern Ireland to settle here for many years, decades and even centuries. The time has long since gone that we remove some of the barriers to their full assimilation into life here, in our schools, workplaces and community life in general. On this, it is equally important that we put in place measures to ensure that this integration is not blocked or frustrated by others through covert or overt racism, or, in extreme cases, through hate crime. I very much welcome the ongoing work in the Department of Justice into a review of hate crime legislation. It is this type of robust work that needs to be

replicated across many Departments to ensure that the relevant legislative framework is fit for purpose.

Measures may also be required to address educational achievement among BAME pupils. That can be a result of, or at least in part way perpetuated, by bullying and marginalisation in our schools. As such, there may be a need to produce anti-racism policies or to update the existing anti-bullying policies to reflect the needs of these pupils in securing the appropriate support.

Another key area that I feel the race relations strategy has a huge role to play in is in the workplace. From the time of recruitment processes, with regard to fair employment, through to access to training and promotional opportunities, it is in everyone's interests that the legislative and policy frameworks are workable and effective in ensuring harmony and integration for all BAME employees.

In closing, I hope that MLAs can support our amendment, and I place on record my thanks to those groups and individuals who have worked so hard over the years in campaigning for the rights of BAME members of our society. Their efforts are very much appreciated and welcomed by the Alliance Party. Lastly, I wish to send my best wishes to the members of Belfast Multi-Cultural Association whose cars were damaged at the weekend. If ever there were a stark reminder that we need a fresh look at race relations in Northern Ireland, it was this.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): All other Members who are called to speak in this debate will have five minutes.

Mr Robinson: I do not believe that any MLA would support anything but racial equality and would condemn all racial attacks in Northern Ireland from whatever quarter they came. We must also remember that, while the motion states:

"that the racial equality strategy 2015-2025 was not fully implemented and is now significantly outdated",

progress in dealing with this matter in a timely manner was prevented as the Assembly did not sit for three years. It is important that the strategy is moved forward, and this must be done with care to ensure that whatever decisions are made are practical and, most importantly, workable. Whilst I appreciate that speed is desired, it is better to ensure a practical and workable strategy. I fully believe that an interdepartmental approach is required, and I am glad that there is a racial equality champion in every Department. I also see benefit from each Department's observations being brought to an interdepartmental forum so that best practice can be seen to be the result. Speed is not the most important aspect; accuracy is. Any conclusions must be informed by the ethnic minorities. This is a positive way to produce the best possible strategy, fully informed by those who it is intended to help. That is a good example of best practice for greatest results that will be truly beneficial.

As I said earlier, I fully support the need for the racial strategy to be completed and implemented, but this must be a workable strategy with genuine beneficial results for Northern Ireland and the increasingly multiracial population, which we should all embrace.

Mr McGrath: I welcome this debate, because I think that it is timely. Over the summer, in places such as America,

we have seen some of the most atrocious behaviours from those who are meant to uphold and protect the law against those who should be protected. It is not an understatement to say that, in places such as America, racism remains and is not on the decrease. However, to simply look at such a splinter without acknowledging the plank in our own eye is wrong. We have racism in our society with the things that are said and done, the things that are not said and are not done and the things that are said and done and left unchecked. These are all existing in our society, and we have not yet successfully challenged or removed them. The scourge remains among us.

Many lauded the launch by the First Minister and deputy First Minister of the racial equality strategy here in 2015. It was a comprehensive document and contained 11 key actions. Sadly, many of them have never been introduced or developed. This is sad and an indictment of where that Executive and, to a lesser extent, this Executive places the challenging of racism. These matters contained in the racial equality strategy of 2015-2025 are as relevant now, this second, this minute, this hour. The strategy does not suffer from being outdated; it suffers from never being implemented. Would Members consider a review of the current Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order significantly outdated? That piece of legislation has not been touched for eight years. Surely, that legislation requires a review. Is it outdated to seek a review of fair employment legislation? What about working with the Department of Education to tackle racist bullying in schools? We have anti-bullying legislation that the Minister is yet to enact, however this legislation places the onus entirely on schools to record and monitor without having to actually report back to the Department, so we do not get a wider picture of what racial bullying actually looks like.

5.30 pm

Ethnic monitoring is a huge element of the strategy. However, there is a drastic need for it to be introduced. Without any form of ethnic monitoring, we will be searching for a solution to an issue that we do not even have a full picture of. There will be a new census next year, and, at present, there are 16 ethnic groups to choose from, with titles as generic as "African", yet there are literally thousands of ethnic groups and cultures in Africa. How on earth do we expect to gauge the needs of the people who live here if we do not know where they are?

I have been asking all Ministers about racial equality champions. The champions should be raising awareness of the racial equality strategy and Departments' commitment to it.

The authors, contributors and Ministers who lauded the strategy back then knew that what they were challenging was so deep-rooted and so systemic that it would take time to challenge. That is why the strategy was set for 10 years — a generation, nearly, of schoolchildren and wider society who could learn the benefits of a multicultural society where all are accepted, regardless of their backgrounds, beliefs, colour or creed. The only outdated action is the lack of action that has been taken to implement that strategy.

The passage of time means that all strategies should be reviewed and assessed, and having a living document is much preferable. I am not under any illusion that the current document does not need some amendment,

but I would like to see more concrete outcomes, more measurable activity to observe how it is being implemented to make sure that we see progress. Although some of the activities of the summer will have sparked new thoughts, ideas and approaches, those can also be incorporated into the strategy. However, it is not substantially out of date. It does not require renewed formulations. All the ingredients are there. It needs action, not more discussion.

Of course, it would be remiss of me not to highlight the fact that the party that proposed today's motion, highlighting the inactivity and suggesting that the strategy is out of date, is the very party that launched the existing one five years ago and then oversaw no implementation and co-contributed to three years of inactivity here on the hill and has been back in charge since January. There is more headline-chasing here —

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

Mr McGrath: — than substance. Many in the sector think that, if what we have is grand, let us implement it alongside a review and polish up what we have. People want action. I want action, and getting on will deliver action. Let us do the right thing.

Mr Beattie: I rise to address this important motion and support it. I shall keep my comments general, as opposed to getting into detail, due to the time. The fact that we are still talking about discrimination due to somebody's colour or ethnic background is really quite depressing. Dealing with it is long overdue. I simply cannot fathom why some individuals in our society feel that they have a right to treat their fellow human being in such a derogatory way through intimidation, discrimination, threats of violence and violence on the basis purely of the colour of their skin. Of course, those people will argue a variety of reasons for their bigotry and will use terms like, "I have black friends". However, the reality is that, if you treat someone differently purely because of the colour of their skin or ethnic background, you are a racist. You are in denial, if you say that you are not.

I have been very lucky in my life in that I have lived in many countries around the world. I spent a lot of time in Africa — in Uganda, Sierra Leone, Kenya and Somalia. While I was there, I immersed myself in the culture — wonderful, rich cultures; wonderful, rich and giving people. It has broadened my horizons. It has given me a wider left and right of arc to understand why they may wish to come here to eke out a better life than they might have in some other parts of the world. It has allowed me to see people as people. That is exactly what they are: nothing more, nothing less.

In Northern Ireland, black, Asian and other ethnic-minority people work in our factories, shops, garages and hospitality sector. They are in our care homes and our hospitals. They are paramedics. They are clinical and non-clinical staff. They are doctors and surgeons. Without them, we would be a poorer place, so we need to ensure that our black, Asian and other ethnic-minority people are valued, cherished, supported and protected. We need to do that through legislation, a racial equality strategy, an anti-racism ethos, education and civic society with better understanding. We must address it through our justice system. I am disheartened that we are not doing more. We need data to inform any strategy. The final draft

report on the review of ethnic monitoring gave a list of recommendations, including appointing an independent adviser on race equality; setting up an ethnic monitoring unit; extending fair employment legislation; and enacting a public-sector equality duty. It is not hard to do. It will take resource and money, but it is the right thing to do.

There is no place for racism in Northern Ireland. There never was, there never is and there never will be. It is important to future-proof our society and put a firewall in place between our young people and racism. This is not just for the Executive Office; this is cross-cutting. All Departments have a part to play. It is as much an issue for Justice, Economy and Education as it is for the Executive Office. There is no point in trying to package this in one place. Everybody needs to be involved, take ownership and be a part of it. We support the motion.

Mr Stalford: Much like Mr McGrath, the one element of the motion that I disagree with is the reference to the strategy being "significantly outdated". If the strategy was put in place for the period 2015 to 2025 and we are in 2020, you could probably say that, OK, we know things now that we did not know in 2015 that we should maybe include in the strategy, but it is not fair to say that it is "significantly outdated". As Mr McGrath did, I point out that we were without a Government for a period of time, but I do not wish to rehearse the reasons for that.

I am privileged to represent the constituency that I was born and reared in: South Belfast. It is a diverse and cosmopolitan constituency, and it has always been thus. Much like the rest of Northern Ireland, South Belfast has always been a welcoming place for people from beyond our shores. Seventy years ago, lots of Italian people came here in the immediate aftermath of World War II to make their home. Sixty years ago, in the early 1960s, it was people from Indian and Chinese backgrounds who came here and put down roots. In my constituency, I am proud of those communities and the contribution that they make to our society. They are people who came to Northern Ireland and invested in Northern Ireland at a time when nobody else wanted to because we were thought of as, frankly, a hellhole on the edge of Europe that no one wanted to be in. Those people came and made a contribution to our society.

Children do not naturally hate; they have to be taught it. I am the father of four young children, three of whom are at primary school. When I went to Nettlefield Primary School at the bottom of the Woodstock Road, there were very few people from a different background, whether that was eastern Europe, Africa or anywhere else. There are now, probably, about 25 languages spoken in the school. In Fane Street Primary School, as my colleague Paula Bradshaw can attest to, I suspect, there are probably more than 50. Botanic Primary School is the same.

So, I represent a very diverse constituency, but, as the father of young children, I see the children play peaceably and happily together. They have to be taught to hate. It is important, therefore, that we recognise the contribution that schools are already making to ensuring that children grow up respecting each other, loving each other and being kind and decent with each other.

In the school that my children attend, my daughter's best friend is from Romania and her other friend is from Estonia, and you see the contribution that the schools

make, fostering a spirit of togetherness amongst the children. So, I absolutely accept the reference to schools and why that is important. All I am saying is that there is already important work going on orchestrated by schools.

Co-design in any strategy going forward is a really important principle. We do not have the lived experience of people who have travelled here to make their home. We can never have that lived experience. Most of us in this room, if not all of us, were born here, and we have known nothing else. There are significant obstacles and challenges that people face when they come here to build a new life for themselves and to make a contribution to our society, especially things like getting access to healthcare, getting access to education for their kids and getting access to social services and benefits. All those things that people who were born here know inside out, those people do not know that, so assistance needs to be given there.

It is really important that we do not throw the baby out —

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

Mr Stalford: — with the bathwater. There is good work that the Executive can point to, but we can always do better.

Ms Dillon: The stats highlight clearly the increase in the number of hate-related crimes and racially motivated attacks. That is extremely concerning, particularly given that we are all well aware that many incidents and crimes in this category go unreported for many reasons, including language and cultural barriers, but also due to the fear of reprisal, especially where there is concern that there may be paramilitary involvement.

A 2018 Policing Board report found that some victims suggested that PSNI officers had assessed their credibility based on negative stereotyping. Whilst paramilitary groups targeting minority ethnic communities has been evidenced, no joint strategy appears to have been put in place to tackle that.

Current legislation in the North is failing victims, as highlighted by the previous DPP, Barra McGrory, when he stated that there is no easy opportunity to identify the race element in court. It is the law. It is the way that it is framed. The policymakers and lawmakers on these issues may want to revisit that. I will pick up on what Doug Beattie and others said in relation to that. We have many Departments that need to take responsibility here, including Justice.

These crimes currently come under the Public Order Order 1987, which does not meet the stipulations of international human rights standards. Serious consideration needs to be given to a restorative approach post-conviction or incarceration. That will assist in reconciliation and meaningful rehabilitation, as imprisonment alone will often not address the underlying issue. Any restorative approach must be victim-led and voluntary, but it is a very important part of the approach because that is what will lead to real and meaningful reconciliation, as we well know from our own lived experience here.

We need laws that properly meet the needs of victims, but as a community, and we, in particular, as leaders in our community, need to have a zero-tolerance approach to racism in all its forms. The best way to protect ethnic

minority groups from attacks is by ensuring that they are not seen as isolated and vulnerable. The way to do that is to ensure that we all, as individuals, reach out to our neighbours and those in our constituencies who may fall into those categories. It is not good enough to stand back or to put a statement out and say that what has happened to a person who lives near me or in my constituency is terrible.

5.45 pm

We have to be seen to be standing with those people; we have to be seen to be reaching out to our neighbours; we have to be seen to let our children play with those children. Too often you see that it is just easier not to, because they speak a different language and there are all kinds of barriers. If you have children who live near children of other cultural backgrounds, you should be encouraging your children to embrace that diversity. As Mr Stalford has already said, it is really, really important. No child is born to hate; they learn it. What we need to do is teach them differently, and as parents and leaders we all have responsibility around that. I thank the proposer of the motion and support the amendment.

Ms Anderson: It is a sad indictment of our society that, in this day and age, we need to call for the full implementation of a racial equality strategy, but unfortunately we do. We know from the 2018 life and times survey that a significant group in the North are intolerant of people whom they do not want as either a friend or a neighbour. Nelson Mandela said that no one is born hating another person because of the colour of their skin, their background or their religion. People must learn to hate. Children are not born hating, as has been said. They learn hate from within their peer groups, from their communities and, sadly, sometimes from within their own homes.

Prejudice is a blight on our society that needs to be tackled, and a good starting point would be to address it within our schools and our education curriculum. Schools are one of our children's earliest learning experiences, so we need to teach them that, based on our common humanity, we are all equal, no matter the colour of our skin, our background or our religion. Thankfully, many schools now include new nationals, so schools must adopt an anti-racist ethos that will stamp out racism whenever it raises its ugly head. That could be advanced through enhanced training of teachers to support them when dealing with children who suffer racist bullying, confronting narrow-mindedness and developing inclusive processes and procedures which include ethnic minority children. Teaching children that all human beings are born equal could reduce racism in the future.

Of course, it is not only schools that need to stamp out racism. This Assembly needs to step up to the plate by advancing, as was evidenced by my party colleague Linda Dillon, who highlighted the impact of legislative failure. Previously, I put questions to the SDLP Minister for Infrastructure, Nichola Mallon, about the legality of Translink facilitating the targeting of people on the basis of colour or ethnicity on cross-border transport services. It is just wrong that the colour of someone's skin, or their appearance —

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way? Just on a point of information, what particular evidence is she talking about where Translink staff are stopping members of the public?

It would be helpful if she could clarify exactly what she is talking about.

Ms Anderson: Transport facilitating buses being stopped and people being taken off the bus because of the colour of their skin. It is wrong that the colour of someone's skin, or their appearance, can determine whether they are singled out on a bus full of people. This is not equality, and, as has been said by the SDLP Chair of the Executive Office Committee, we cannot have things done and left unchecked. We need mandatory ethnic monitoring of how stop-and-search powers are being used. The powers of law enforcement officers to stop persons and seek papers confirming their identity and status is clearly provided for by law.

To our new nationals, Sinn Féin says, "Céad míle fáilte. A hundred thousand welcomes. We will do all within our power to protect you, particularly from abuse, racially motivated intimidation, violence and discrimination." As political leaders, we have a duty to send out a strong message to everyone within our society that racism is a cancer that we will not tolerate. An important first step, as the motion points out, is for this Assembly and Executive to ensure that we have a robust racial equality strategy accompanied by an action plan that clearly sets out steps that we will take, both legislatively and legally, to protect everyone within our society.

As the joint First Minister, Michelle O'Neill, stated today, there is a:

"Responsibility on us all to create a society free from racism, which values diversity and which treats everyone with respect."

As a Sinn Féin MLA for Derry, I want the North West Migrants Forum to, once again, hear that Sinn Féin message loud and clear. If anyone or any party in the Assembly or Executive is an obstacle to that, let us find out and call them out.

Mr O'Toole: I am now the third Member for South Belfast to stand up and speak to the motion. That is appropriate. I will echo a lot of what both Paula Bradshaw and Christopher Stalford said about the constituency of South Belfast: not only is it the most diverse in Northern Ireland, but it has some claim to be the most diverse on the whole island of Ireland. We are, rightly, proud of that. It adds to the richness of our community and the economic and cultural vibrancy of the place in which we live.

In 2020, we have all been focused in large part and to a much greater extent on deep questions about structural racism and racial inequality in societies. The issue was first forced into public debate this year by the appalling murder of George Floyd and the protests that followed in the States.

Like Emma Sheerin, I visited the deep south of the United States. It is difficult to visit that part of America without being deeply affected by the burning sense of profound historical injustice and unresolved wrong that continues to afflict it. That is not irrelevant to this part of the world. It is not something that we can ignore in our society, not least because, as I said about South Belfast, society is becoming more diverse.

There is no real difference in the Assembly about the importance and urgency of addressing structural racism

in our society. This afternoon, we debated one of our own long-standing pet preoccupations in this part of the world, namely flags, and associated questions of identity in this part of Ireland. Those kinds of debates and our tendency to have quite a few of them in this place — that is not to say that there were not aspects of this morning's debate that were not important — do tend to alienate many people from newer communities in Northern Ireland who think that these institutions do not do enough to reflect the fact that we no longer exist in a green/orange binary society, and that they face very real and profound injustices in their everyday lives and the economic opportunities that they and their families have.

The meat of the motion reflects the fact that a new racial equality strategy is needed because the previous one was not fully implemented. As my colleague Colin McGrath said, we cannot completely ignore the reasons for that racial equality strategy not being implemented and why we were not here to do that. I do not have any problem with the context of the racial equality strategy being reviewed. In fact, I think that it is essential, so, on that part, I completely agree with the motion. There is concern in the sector about taking time to go away and redraft an entirely new strategy at a time when there is huge urgency to implement what was agreed in 2014 but left on a shelf. What the motion should not be is permission for our institutions and Executive to go away and delay implementing what has already been agreed, including some of the issues around hate crime legislation, which Linda Dillon talked about very eloquently, given that we know that those issues need to be implemented. We should just go ahead and do it.

However, it is also the case that the context has changed since 2014. The context has changed since January 2020, when we came back to this place; yes, because of COVID-19, but also because of some of the circumstances around Brexit, which will fundamentally alter not just our economic relationships but the constitutional and legal underpinnings for the broader human rights agenda in Northern Ireland.

There is a very long list of unanswered questions that the British Government have failed to engage on that are directly relevant to how we proceed with equality legislation and the broader racial equality strategy here. There are specific things that we need to improve upon in the implementation of the existing strategy around budgets and meaningful accountability. If today's debate does anything, let it do this: let it not be the last time that we discuss this for months until we come back for a private Member's motion and an amendment to it. Let us keep up the pressure and keep talking —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Would the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr O'Toole: — about whether this is being delivered, and hold to account those who said that they were going to deliver this strategy. Let us hold them to account to actually deliver it. Yes, I want to see a new focus on delivering racial equality in society, but no, I do not want to see us just spending time —

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

Mr O'Toole: — debating —

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

Mr O'Toole: — what we should already be getting on with and implementing.

Ms Bailey: I am the fourth South Belfast MLA to speak. It is great to see all my South Belfast colleagues here today, and, obviously, I am proud to take the shout-out for my constituency being the most diverse across the land. I know for a fact — well, I would be pretty confident, — that Deirdre Hargey, the fifth MLA for the area, would be here today if her health allowed.

I am also part of the Italian immigration story that was referenced by my colleague Christopher Stalford. My family are all integrated educational alumni. There were 27 languages spoken in my children's primary school. All of those were reasons why I chose the school.

This motion really does confuse me. Many have already pointed out the problems with it. It states that:

"That this Assembly recognises that the Racial Equality Strategy 2015 - 2025 was not fully implemented and is now significantly outdated".

Unless I am mistaken, we are only in 2020, so there are five years in which we can rectify that and to look at what we need to do.

Let us be real, this strategy, like every other Executive strategy, is only as good as the political will to implement it. I have consulted with black and ethnic minority leaders over the last few days, and they, like me, believe that the strategy continues to be very much serviceable. The problem lies in the lack of implementation. Do we really have the resources to develop a whole new strategy when the current one has not been delivered or implemented? What is needed are action plans and resources to implement the undelivered 11 key actions already committed to in the current strategy, along with an anti-racism strategy that will also be resourced.

One key action in the racial equality strategy is the establishment of a Ministerial panel: that has not been done. So what has been done with regards to racial equality since January 2020 when the Assembly reconvened? I know of only two of the key actions that have been implemented: the appointment of departmental champions, for which we have had no updates on ongoing work and we know nothing about the training and resources given to them; and the subgroup has been established —.

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bailey: Yes, sure.

Mr McGrath: Would the Member agree with me that it is not good there has been only one departmental champion, as I understand it, who has been there since the strategy started in 2015 and the rest have continually turned over. They have had one training session in five years. If we talk about things being outdated, it is getting those people into a room to find out what they can actually do in a Department.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Bailey: That comes back to a strategy only being as good as the political will to implement it. There is still lots to do. The subgroup has been established and meets regularly on a quarterly basis. It is sad that it was probably not even consulted before this motion was tabled.

However, I believe that commissioning a new strategy could be quite a regressive move and would delay us tackling the racial inequalities that exist. Our time would be better spent reviewing and resourcing the current strategy as it is, and developing and rolling out anti-racism training which is absolutely key for us all to learn about tackling racism in our society. There is a need for more significant staff resources and funding to be dedicated to tackling racism, and that needs to be for the long term.

The Northern Ireland Assembly must renew its commitment to building a society in which racial equality and diversity is supported, understood, valued and respected and in which people from minority ethnic backgrounds have a sense of belonging that is acknowledged and valued by people from all backgrounds, as outlined in the strategy, in order to ensure accountability for the its implementation, while working hand in hand with the current subgroup and using its expertise to move us forward.

6.00 pm

We know that a lot of our BME community are key workers in the COVID-19 crisis. It is shocking to realise that those people appear to have suffered disproportionately during the crisis because of the inequalities and further barriers that they encounter in our society. Tackling those inequalities must be a priority. We must be prepared to learn from their experience, but we have limited time. The BME community has been patient enough with us, and we must act resolutely to ensure that our young people have the opportunities that they need and deserve.

Today's debate, regardless of any majority vote in the end, will carry no sway in mandating the Executive Office to deliver on either the current strategy or any future strategies. What it has allowed for has been the acknowledgement that, to date, we have failed to protect fully our BME population and failed to remove barriers to full participation for them. The fact that I am a white woman speaking to a room of other white people is also not lost on me. We have much to do —.

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

Ms Bailey: Yes. We have much to do and a lot to get done, but let us not rely on asking already under-resourced and under-pressure organisations to do that work for us. Let us today pledge to review and implement the strategy and to resource the next five years to make the world an easier place for our new communities.

Mr Carroll: First, the Chamber should commend the black- and ethnic minority-led groups that initiated the proposal to bring forward an urgent discussion and a call for action on racial equality to the Assembly. It is unfortunate that the BAME community felt it necessary to register its disappointment at the lack of political will to tackle racial inequalities here; indeed, it is a matter of profound disappointment and, frankly, is something that the Executive should be ashamed of. This is another example

of parties hypocritically saying one thing and doing another or, in this case, doing nothing.

There are some who claim that there is no structural racism in the North. The letter from the BAME community was prompted by the horrific murder of George Floyd. Some might say — I think that some in the Chamber did say — that it is something happening very far from here, yet we have the embarrassing spectacle of DUP MPs enthusiastically proclaiming their support for President Donald Trump — the tyrant in the White House — who has defended the murder of black people by police in the US and given encouragement and protection to racist vigilantes who have killed Black Lives Matter protesters.

The letter from the BAME community calls on the Assembly to ensure that people from minority ethnic backgrounds living here cannot be treated as lesser human beings and to put in place the necessary resources for a genuine racial equality strategy to be implemented. That needs to be done immediately. People Before Profit heeds the call from that community to support the motion. We will give it our full support. We do not want just to see the motion passed but to see it implemented in full, with the full participation of the BAME community. We need to fire up the effort to eradicate racism from every aspect of our society.

I acknowledge that we tabled an amendment to the motion that was, unfortunately, not accepted. The amendment sought for the Assembly to support the call for all fines and threats of prosecution for those who organised and attended the socially distanced Black Lives Matter rallies in Belfast and Derry on 6 June to be dropped. As everyone in the Chamber knows, the health guidelines have been breached by many events and in many ways during the pandemic. Unlike all those other events, the Black Lives Matter protests were organised in the safest possible, socially distanced way, with masks, sanitiser and gloves, yet it is only the Black Lives Matter protesters who have been systematically criminalised. I repeat: the Black Lives Matter protesters were systematically criminalised. Therefore, the treatment of the Black Lives Matter organisers and protesters is a blatant example of institutionalised racism. Members of the black and ethnic minority community were visited in their homes the night before the protests and threatened with prosecution by the PSNI. What a disgraceful state of affairs. On the day of the protest, people of colour and many who were attempting to attend the protests were harassed by the PSNI.

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: Yes.

Mr Stalford: I hope that the Member will recall the debate in the House on the breaches of health regulations that took place at Milltown cemetery. I hope that he will recall that, on that occasion, I highlighted the discrepancy between the treatment of people taking part in one event and the people taking part in the Black Lives Matter event.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Carroll: I am sure you did. However, have the police visited people who run care homes where there have been COVID-19 outbreaks? Have the police called into workplaces where there have been health and safety

issues raised about COVID-19? If the Member cannot see the issue, I am sorry, but I cannot help him.

To treat the protesters in that way, legislation had to be undemocratically rushed through the Assembly. It is a blatant example of institutionalised racism, and it appears to be completely lost on some in the House as well as the Member for South Belfast. The Justice Minister and all those who stood over, voted for and defended what occurred on 6 June say that they are not racist and that they support civil rights and racial equality, but they did not do it on 6 June. The failure to recognise institutional racism does not stop here. In the city council, some parties who claim to support civil rights and racial equality and the Black Lives Matter movement did not support a motion tabled by my party to drop the fines and threats of prosecution relating to 6 June. It is really shocking.

The point is that the Assembly voted for a racial equality strategy but did nothing to seriously implement it. Now we have the danger of more lofty gestures when there is still a refusal to acknowledge institutional racism towards the Black Lives Matter movement. That is called hypocrisy, and even the dogs in the street are barking about it. We call on all Members of the Assembly to vote for the motion as a way of fully acknowledging the structural and institutional racism in our society and the need to act in order to eradicate it. We call on Members to fully take on board the demands of the BAME community. We call for the Black Lives Matter protesters' fines and the threats of prosecution to be dropped immediately and for a sincere apology to be issued to that community for the treatment that they have received.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the junior Minister, Gordon Lyons, to respond to the debate. You will have up to 15 minutes.

Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to some of the concerns that Members have expressed about the current position of the Executive's racial equality strategy. I want to reassure the House that addressing the needs of all of our minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland is a particularly important matter for us and one that has been and will continue to be a priority. As the Executive's 'Racial Equality Strategy 2015 - 2025' acknowledged, we are under no illusion about the size of the challenge involved in tackling racial inequalities, and that will require time, effort and resources. Mr Beattie said that this should be a cross-departmental issue. Of course, it will be. Additionally, we have to recognise and our strategy recognises that every one of us has a responsibility to play our part in combating racism and racial inequalities. Success requires the support and active participation of all sections of society and not government alone.

The strategy, however, establishes a framework for action for the Northern Ireland Executive and commits to 11 key actions. Good progress has been made to date in implementing those key actions, and I will highlight them now: specifically, the structures to support delivery, including the racial equality subgroup to act as the voice of minority ethnic people and the racial equality champions in each Department, are in place. Work on developing a joint work programme is ongoing, as the subgroup have been exploring ways to work and make best use of the connections with the champions.

The Department engages regularly with the members of the racial equality subgroup along with people from a broad range of organisations that represent minority ethnic groups. A review of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 and relevant aspects of other legislation is under way and research into ethnic monitoring, which also includes the potential for amendments to our fair employment legislation, has just been completed.

Ethnic monitoring can be defined as the process that is used to collect, store and analyse data about people's ethnic background. That system is critical to achieving racial equality, monitoring service usage and ensuring that services are meeting users' needs. Without that monitoring, Departments and agencies will find it difficult to identify gaps and monitor whether racial equality work is having any impact. The racial equality subgroup has been engaged to inform the final research report, which we expect to receive in the coming weeks. It will be used to develop future proposals, and we will want to engage with other Departments and agencies to explore the possible and most appropriate options for implementation.

There is growing evidence of a disproportionately high number of BAME deaths from COVID-19 in England and Wales, and we understand that work is ongoing with the Department of Health to examine the situation here.

Mr McGrath: I thank the junior Minister for giving way. He has twice mentioned the racial equality subgroup, which is supposed to operate under the auspices of a ministerial subgroup. Does he agree that the early appointment of that ministerial subgroup would be really useful to help garner the views that are being expressed and pass that information through to the various Departments in order to help them to reflect on and change anything that needs to be done?

Mr Lyons: We can consider that as part of the monitoring of what is taking place and how we can best hope to implement the strategy. I appreciate that the Member has raised that point with me.

I was talking about BAME deaths in England, and that example reinforces the need for reliable evidence gathering to fully identify the extent of racial inequalities across the board. Our work on ethnic monitoring will support the establishment of an improved evidence base.

A review of the delivery model for the minority ethnic development fund, which is a key element of our policy for supporting racial equality and good race relations, has also just completed, and we expect, again, a final report in the next few weeks. The findings will inform the future operation of the fund. We are also working with the Department of Education to identify ways to tackle racist bullying in schools. Again, that is supported by the racial equality subgroup, which is also engaging with the PSNI to agree actions to increase identification and monitoring of race hate crime.

A draft refugee integration strategy for all refugees and asylum seekers is being finalised, and we hope to publish that for consultation later this year. That is of the utmost importance at this time, particularly given the increase in those who have sought asylum here over the last number of years. We have drawn on the learning and best practice from our work with the Syrian vulnerable persons' resettlement scheme (VPRS), which will help us to inform the development of that strategy.

Indeed, the Syrian vulnerable persons' resettlement scheme is a shining example of successful cooperation and collaboration across Departments, agencies, local councils and the community to achieve results that really improve people's lives. To date, we have successfully welcomed 1,815 individuals here, and we are committed to the continuation of what is now known as the global resettlement scheme. The work that is carried out by the Executive and all partners on making the scheme a success is central to what underpins the racial equality strategy — all sectors working together to tackle racial inequalities. That work has been widely recognised as best practice and provides a model for approaches to addressing other areas of racial equality and marginalised communities. For example, it is planned to extend the remit of the current structures that oversee the Syrian VPRS to deal with the issues that are faced by asylum seekers who come here outside of a formal scheme.

The 'Northern Ireland Racial Equality Indicators Baseline Report: 2014-2017' was published in November 2018 and presented data that measured the progress of the racial equality strategy. We are pleased that the report shows headway that has been made in a number of areas. Notably, it shows that there has been a significant decrease in the proportion of respondents reporting that they are prejudiced against people from minority ethnic communities. In 2014, that figure was 24.8%, and, in 2017, it was 19.7%. We do, however, appreciate that there is more to do, and we will continue to work to fully implement the actions that are in the strategy.

6.15 pm

At this juncture, I take the opportunity to highlight that the racial equality strategy is a 10-year strategy of which we are in year 5. It was never meant to be that the strategy would be fully implemented at this stage, and, as highlighted, we have a number of key actions that are ongoing and at critical stages. We believe that those actions remain important in our efforts to address racism and inequality and in ensuring that people of all backgrounds and ethnicities can participate equally in society. We, therefore, remain very much committed to seeing them through to completion.

I acknowledge the reference to the racial equality strategy amongst a list of other strategies in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document. That is in the context of the Programme for Government and strategies that could underpin it. While there was an action in 'NDNA' to publish a new comprehensive timetable within three months for the development and delivery of the strategies that are necessary to achieve the outcomes of the Programme for Government, it was not explicit or, in my view, intended that a new racial equality strategy would be published, as such a strategy exists and has not run the full term to enact all its commitments, which remain important today.

Members, however, will be aware that the Executive agreed at their meeting of 17 February a two-stage approach to the PFG. Those were first, preparation of an immediate outcomes-focused PFG that is to be ready by April 2020, and, secondly, development of a new strategic PFG reflecting agreed longer-term priorities, and that is to be ready by April 2021. In the weeks following that Executive meeting, good progress had been achieved towards preparing a PFG 2021, and an intensive

engagement process had been initiated to take the views of stakeholders ahead of the programme's planned publication in April. However, in mid-March, in the light of the developing situation with the COVID-19 pandemic, it was decided that work on the PFG and 'NDNA' should be temporarily paused.

The changes that have been brought about by that crisis and its impacts are, as we all know, considerable. The Executive have, therefore, subsequently agreed a revised way forward on the Programme for Government. Those are first, an activity-based recovery programme is to be developed as the basis for driving economic health and societal recovery, which will continue through to 2021. Secondly, a new outcomes-based strategic PFG is to be developed for the commencement of April 2021 that is informed by citizen and stakeholder engagement and co-design. It will also have to reflect any Executive decisions on the prioritisation of the actions in the 'NDNA' document. However, we remain committed to our goal of full implementation of the racial equality strategy, which will continue to contribute to addressing key outcomes on equality and good relations.

To say that the current strategy is outdated suggests that those key actions that have been set out and that we are progressing are no longer appropriate. While we understand — our officials have discussed this with partners across the sector — some frustrations with the speed of progress, we have not had feedback that suggests that the frustration is with the overall aims of the strategy or, indeed, that those actions that have been identified are no longer needed.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the junior Minister's giving way. He touched on the inherent problem, which is that if you hit reset on this project and go right back to first principles and to the very start, it may end up taking longer to secure the outcomes that you want.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I absolutely agree. We do not want to go back to that starting point. Given that people are waiting for the strategy to be implemented, I think that that would take longer. Not only that but those in the sector are not calling for a new strategy. There is nothing wrong with the outcomes in the strategy, which we all expressed in the Chamber today that we share, or how we go about it. What people really want is an increase in the speed with which those are delivered.

The motion requests a commitment to:

“act urgently on the forthcoming report on the review of hate crime legislation”.

That is not within the remit of my Department but it is being taken forward by Judge Desmond Marrinan on behalf of the Department of Justice. I understand that he is analysing responses to his consultation, and DOJ expects to receive his final report at the end of November 2020. Any recommendations relating to devolved matters that require new legislation or amendments to current legislation will be considered and brought forward by DOJ in due course.

The issue of an anti-racism ethos in our schools is being addressed by the Department of Education. The Addressing Bullying in Schools Act 2016 will require schools to record incidents of bullying, their motivation

and outcome, including racial bullying. The Minister of Education, Peter Weir, will announce the commencement of the provisions of the Act in due course. In addition, key elements of the curriculum include mutual understanding, citizenship, cultural understanding and ethical awareness. Our schools have the freedom to use a variety of resources to introduce key concepts, such as the impact of racism in society, into many areas of learning. In fact, today, on the first day of Good Relations Week, we are celebrating 14 more schools, which serve Urban Village areas, achieving a School of Sanctuary award.

As part of its work on tackling the enabling factors of hate crime, DOJ has commissioned the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to review the primary and post-primary curriculums to gain an understanding of the teaching of topics that contribute to reducing hate crime and to ensure that issues such as racism are adequately addressed in order to increase understanding of diversity and the negative impact of prejudice-based bullying.

It is worth noting that the PSNI hate crime statistics indicate that there has been a decrease in racially motivated crimes and incidents in the last 12 months. However, we will not be complacent.

On the point of addressing the contributions made by members of our ethnic minority communities and racism in general, I once again reiterate that we have made it clear, in previous answers and statements, that tackling racial inequality with good race relations is one of our key priorities. We recognise the need to continue our efforts across government and wider society to tackle racism and the racial inequality that has been brought into even sharper focus by recent events. We remain committed to the implementation of the strategy and welcome the ongoing support and advice from the subgroup.

Let me just finish by saying that racism, in any of its manifestations, is an evil that can have no place here. We reiterate that today. We have a zero tolerance approach to racism or discrimination of any kind.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Kellie Armstrong will make a winding-up speech on the amendment. The Member will have five minutes.

Ms Armstrong: I thank all who have spoken. We have heard a unanimous voice from the Assembly, stating very clearly that, in this Good Relations Week, racism is wrong and has no part in our society. I thank Ms Sheerin for tabling the motion. It has helped to focus our attention on the fact that we have a number of issues with our existing racial equality strategy.

Like many Members, I have spoken with members of the black and minority ethnic community and representative bodies, and they have indicated that they do not wish the hard work that was completed in advance of the 2015 strategy to be wasted. What needs to happen is an effective implementation of the current strategy, given that, as many of us in the Chamber will acknowledge, not all of the recommendations have been carried out. Let us not delay by writing a new strategy. The Alliance Party's amendment says that we would like to see an updated strategy. We want the strategy to be updated by the people it most affects. I appreciate that Members have said that a working group exists. Members of the BAME community have confirmed that many of the people who are part of

the working group are volunteers. Many of them have lost funding for groups, and many of their employed members of staff no longer have jobs. We would like to ensure that, if we are going to include people's voices, we include those people and ensure that they are supported to take an effective part in looking at the update of the strategy. That is right and proper. Any of us, who have worked with strategies in the past, recognise absolutely that, part way through a strategy, you look back at what has been done and what needs to be done in order to see it fulfilled.

We have only 18 months of this Assembly term left. If we wait until the end of it to see the rest of the recommendations implemented, they will never happen.

It is noted by the Equality Commission that the current strategy has a few problems. It lacks outcome-based actions, and that needs to be reviewed. Actions should be designed to address the inequalities experienced by people from minority ethnic communities in areas such as health and social care, education, housing, employment and participation in public life. That is why we go back to the amendment that we have tabled that calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to act. Responsibility for racial equality lies with the Executive Office, and it will be the Department that rolls that out across all the Departments. All the Departments recognise the need to improve on racial equality in the work that they do. That is why they have champions, but those champions are hidden; we do not know who they are, and we do not get reports on what they are doing. We would all like to see those actions happening as soon as possible.

We also lack effective data recording to measure how effective measures are or where there are opportunities for improvements. As we all know, in order to access investment, you need to produce a fact-based business case. Unless we have appropriate data collection, that is impossible.

If we are to have racial equality, we need to address negative attitudes and ensure that black, Asian and ethnic minorities are visible and that their voices are heard.

As part of this Good Relations Week, we need to do more to ensure that strategies are reviewed and updated to ensure that they remain effective and still deliver an outcome. As mentioned earlier by Ms Martina Anderson, one of the key ways in which we could do that is through teacher training in our schools. Of course we want to see better racial equality training and help for pupils in our schools, but we need to start with the adults who are with them in their classes. To be honest, that teacher training needs to be published so that we can all see the content of it.

In the disability community, we say, "Nothing about us without us". The same must apply to the racial equality strategy. This room, as has been acknowledged, is white. I am going to use my white privilege to say that I do not know what it feels like to be a person who has black skin or who is from an ethnic minority in Northern Ireland today. They do, and those are the best voices to have an input on that. The BAME community must have an integral role in updating the current strategy, and we must take leadership by timetabling effective delivery of all the recommendations.

Following on from the Black Lives Matter movement and the impact that COVID has had, our society needs to do

more to achieve better good relations for everyone. The timetabling is key. People do not want to hear about what we will do: they want to see a timetable for when it will be done by. I ask that the Assembly supports the amendment and the motion. We have an opportunity to make a difference, but we have short time left to do so.

Mr Gildernew: I support the motion, obviously, and the amendment. Colleagues from the across the House have highlighted the important areas that are in urgent need of reform to tackle the institutional and structural racism that is evident in the North. Whilst having these discussions, it is important to close with some reflection on the positive impact that migrants have on our society and to highlight why they deserve better. At this point, I should declare an interest in the sense that — we have heard today from many South Belfast representatives — I represent South Tyrone, and we, too, have a very vibrant and valued ethnic minority community. Indeed, that exists right across Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and Mid Ulster.

In 2017, the migrant population of the North comprised 138,000 people — a mere 7.5% of our population. Of a total of 1.85 million people living in the North, 3.3% were born in the EU 26 nations, and only 2.6% are from the rest of the world. Moreover, since the EU referendum, international inflows have decreased by 13%, while outflows fell by 7%. That suggests that this problem is linked to the Brexit campaign that dubbed migrants as a problem and led to an increase in racist hate crimes. That is also evident in the very significant shift in attitudes displayed in the North of Ireland life and times surveys between 2013 and 2017.

6.30 pm

In 2017, out of a total of 835,000 workers, 83,000 were born outside these islands. That accounts for 10% of the working population. Despite those relatively low numbers, when respondents in the life and times survey were asked about their attitudes and whether the needs of migrant workers were putting a strain on schools, a worrying number of respondents agreed: 17% strongly agreed, and 28% agreed.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Gildernew: I will.

Ms Dillon: Would the Member agree with me that we, as leaders, have a responsibility to remove that negative language and to ensure that people understand the value of migrants: that they are not a drain on our resources; they are actually a benefit to our communities?

Mr Gildernew: I absolutely agree. I referenced South Tyrone and my background in an engineering company. The South Tyrone engineering and food manufacturing sectors are world-leading, but, in the early 1990s and the early 2000s when I was involved in an engineering business in South Tyrone, we were being constrained not by the economy or the lack of ideas or an inability to export but a shortage of skilled workers. People came bringing not only their skills, their diligence and their enthusiasm but their deep, rich culture as well. Our society has benefited massively from that.

We see shifts in attitudes, and that needs to be a wake-up call to everyone in the Chamber. Recent, and in my view shameful, media reports have created a false narrative of

a migrant invasion, targeted at refugees. That narrative is used to create fear in the population that migrants are coming to take our jobs, our benefits and our houses. A load of nonsense. Scapegoating migrants and refugees for British Government failures in service provision and, in some cases, their handling of the COVID-19 pandemic is an age-old stratagem.

Throughout the pandemic we have seen that many of our skilled, front-line workers are migrants. We are forever indebted to the work that they have done for us all in our health service, our shops, our factories, our delivery services and in other front-line services. Migrant workers are often recruited to work in places in the North. Therefore it is important to note their crucial contribution to our economy. Immigration provides vital skills to our workforce. It is estimated that minority-ethnic enterprises contribute about £16 billion per year to the economy across these islands.

In my own constituency, Dungannon is one of the places that has benefited most from immigration. In 2017, Dungannon had the largest proportion of overseas-born residents in the North. Workers come to staff our engineering companies, our meat plants, they add diversity to our schools, and they support businesses in the town. It would do your heart good to walk through Dungannon square on a Friday afternoon and see the wide range and diversity of culture of the young people from across the world, as they interact, banter and engage with one another, and, indeed, wear tops from sports across our whole society. They contribute in so many ways.

However, despite their hard work, many migrant workers are exploited for their labour. They receive a smaller wage than local people for the same job and often work in very precarious conditions. That was evidenced by recent outbreaks at local food-processing factories across these islands, where the workers tend to be majority migrant. As migrants are here on work visas or have insecure status, they are afraid to speak up in case they lose their job.

Martina Anderson mentioned racial profiling. That issue has been raised in relation to Black Lives Matter, which Gerry Carroll mentioned, and in relation to transport. There is no requirement for anyone from those areas to produce passports in this country, or across these islands. We should not allow creeping racial profiling to come in by identifying people solely because of the colour of their skin.

A recent Unite survey showed that of the 20% of the workforce at a COVID-19-impacted meat processing plant, 43% were migrants who live with two or more of their colleagues, and 11% live with five or more. An overwhelming majority of them said that they continued to work while sick as they could not afford to lose pay. That shows that we must protect those workers as we protect everyone else. They are in need of additional consideration, given their precarious work and the fact that many of them live in houses of multiple occupancy.

However, when discussing those clusters, we rely heavily — indeed, too heavily — on data from elsewhere on these islands. I note the acknowledgement by Gordon Lyons on the data, but I have not seen anything clear to date by way of evidence. It is a huge gap.

As Emma pointed out, due to the lack of the implementation of the racial equality strategy, there is

little ethnic monitoring in workplaces at present. It would provide us with the information that we need. We are also limited — Gordon Lyons referred to it — in data on how COVID-19 affects black and Asian minority ethnic communities in the North. We are aware of the difficulties that they have faced across the islands, but we do not, to my knowledge, have concrete information and data yet. That is an issue that we must address quickly.

The same issue applies to the under-reporting of crime, mentioned by Linda Dillon. We see an under-reporting of crime and a reluctance in some of the communities to come forward and report a crime in the first place. That is something that we absolutely need to tackle.

In the years since the Good Friday Agreement was signed, we have progressed into a much more open, accepting and multicultural society. Since the violence ceased, migrants feel safer to come, work and contribute to life here. As a result, our communities benefit from that contribution and the rich diversity that they bring. As Martina highlighted, having more migrant children in schools gives our young people the opportunity to learn about other cultures and languages that they, otherwise, may never learn. Early intervention against racism is key to halting its growth throughout our society. That will have a major impact on our children and young people, as they learn to be open-minded and tolerant, and creates a racism-free future. Both of my lads — in primary and secondary school — regularly talk about their friends who, clearly, come from other countries, and they benefit from that. One of our Members stated the important and relevant fact that no child, instinctively, is racist or bears hatred: that attitude is learned.

One of the key components of the Black Lives Matter movement was the need for broader education in schools. That includes a more comprehensive curriculum, including dealing with the skeletons from the colonial era and the long-term effects that that has had on our society globally. Creating an anti-racism ethos in schools is key to assimilating black and Asian minority ethnic communities into our society as children alongside their peers. It is important to emphasise that those who are prejudiced and display prejudice are in the minority, but we cannot take that as a reason to be complacent.

Finally, I apologise to Members that I did not get round to many of the very fine contributions that were made, but it is fair to say that the House is united in our view that we need to deal with the issue quickly and robustly. I thank the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities, the African and Caribbean Support Organisation and the North West Migrants Forum, who have contributed to those bringing the debate to the House today. I support the debate and the amendment.

Question, That the amendment be made, put and agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that the racial equality strategy 2015-2025 was not fully implemented and is now significantly outdated; acknowledges the commitment contained in New Decade, New Approach to the publication of a new and updated racial equality strategy within 100 days of the restoration of the

Assembly; further recognises the positive contribution made to society by those from black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds; deplores the discrimination black, Asian and minority ethnic communities face regularly; condemns racism in all its forms; commits to act urgently on the forthcoming report on the review of hate crime legislation; calls for the promotion of an anti-racism ethos in our schools; and further calls on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to set up a working group with members of the black, Asian and minority ethnic communities to co-design and co-produce an updated racial equality strategy and to publish a timetable for the implementation of the strategy.

Adjourned at 6.38 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 15 September 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Stalford: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday, the Infrastructure Minister, via social media, said:

"I do not have the powers to provide support schemes for the taxi industry or for bus operators. I've never had these powers. The Economy Minister has these powers but won't provide support."

Subsequent to that, I wrote to the Economy Minister yesterday evening:

"Dear Diane,

This evening (Monday 14 September) the Infrastructure Minister made a statement via social media regarding financial support for the road freight, taxi and coach hire sectors.

Does the Department for the Economy itself have legislative powers to provide financial support to the road freight, taxi and coach hire sectors?

Yours sincerely,

Christopher Stalford MLA

Belfast South"

I have received a detailed response from the Minister, part of which includes the following:

"In looking to the remit of specific Departments within the Northern Ireland Executive Schedules 1 and 3 to the Budget Act 2020 allocate funding to DFI for 'transport licensing, enforcement and regulation', as well as 'support for transport services including grants in respect of rail and road passenger services including fare concessions'. Therefore, support for transport services is not restricted to fare concessions. On a reasonable interpretation, taxis and ferries would clearly be regarded as transport services."

The reason that I raise all this and have read it into the record is because it is important that Ministers are honest. I am asking for a ruling on the honesty and veracity of the statements that are being made, in this instance by the Minister for Infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: The Member will be aware that it would not really be appropriate for me to make a judgement such as the Member is asking for. You have made your points on the record. I also refer Members to the fairly significant amount of debate and commentary on this matter yesterday. The Member has made his point.

Private Members' Business

Hardship Fund for Businesses Excluded from Existing COVID-19 Support Packages

Mr Stewart: I beg to move

That this Assembly is deeply concerned at the significant impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the local economy; acknowledges the substantial financial support package put in place by the UK Government to support employers, employees and the self-employed; recognises that thousands of sole traders and microbusinesses in Northern Ireland have not been able to access financial support; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to establish a new fit-for-purpose business hardship fund targeted at those businesses that have so far been excluded from existing support packages.

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

Mr Stewart: I welcome the opportunity to table the motion and I thank the Minister for coming along today, although it is regrettable that it took a motion from the Ulster Unionist Party to highlight the plight of businesses that have fallen through the cracks and been excluded or unable to avail themselves of all the packages to date.

This issue has gained a lot of traction recently, due in part to the passionate and sustained lobbying from groups such as ExcludedNI, or excellent business organisations such as Enterprise Northern Ireland, that have actively highlighted the plight of many thousands of directors, sole traders and business people who to date have been unable to avail themselves of any government support, along with highlighting the need to see a business-focused economic recovery plan.

It has not taken me until recent weeks to acknowledge their plight — this is an issue that I and others have been actively promoting since early April. When the initial business support grants of £10,000 and £25,000 were rolled out, we all welcomed them and understood the reasons behind getting them out so quickly. However, at that stage, I said that it was imperative that we created additional schemes to sweep up companies that were unable to access those grants.

As the campaign has grown, the Minister for the Economy has repeatedly said that designing and rolling out a new scheme would not be within her remit but would be in that of the Executive. However, in March, the Minister acknowledged the issue and said:

I hope to be in a position to respond further to meet the particular needs of businesses here, particularly around self-employed people ... and for businesses who cannot avail themselves of other measures that are available. — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 127, p84, col 2].

The Minister acknowledged back in March that it was within her remit, and I argue today that it still is. Whether it was at the Ad Hoc Committee, or at the Economy Committee, or at debates in the Chamber on economic recovery, I have been at pains to point out from the beginning that, while this was the biggest health crisis in a century, it was quickly becoming the biggest economic crisis we had ever faced. From the outset, I have argued for an ambitious economic recovery plan, but also creative and generous government intervention in the form of economic support packages to businesses that, through no fault of their own, have seen their turnover decimated by the impact of coronavirus and lockdown measures. If that required a complete reprioritisation of our Government and Executive's spending, so be it.

There is no doubt that via the job retention scheme, the self-employed scheme and the £10,000 and £25,000 grant schemes, a huge broad-brush stroke approach was applied to business support, and I fully acknowledge just how vast the support was and continues to be. That was essential and absolutely necessary and it has saved hundreds of thousands of jobs and countless businesses from going under. For those who were able to avail themselves of that support, it has been an absolute lifeline.

However, given the nature of those schemes, a significant minority of businesses and entrepreneurs did not meet the qualifying criteria. That was quickly recognised and, as far back as March, I joined Economy Committee colleagues in calling for a bespoke hardship grant, targeting those people, to be established. When the Department for the Economy finally announced its business hardship grant back in May, it was cautiously welcomed and it was felt that it would be able to provide the safety net for businesses that had missed out. It was then hugely lamentable that not only did the qualifying criteria change three times in the 24 hours prior to its launch, but, ultimately, the criteria led to thousands of self-employed directors, sole traders and social enterprises again being excluded or being unable to avail themselves of the grant.

So obtuse were the criteria that almost a quarter of the hardship grant funding was returned unspent. That underspend, along with funds returned from the original business grant schemes, ran to over £53 million returned to the Executive in July. How is it that almost two months on, and despite my protestations and those of other members of the Economy Committee and sustained lobbying from business groups, there is no new bid from the Department for the Economy to create a new support scheme for those businesses that are continuing to cling on by their fingernails?

Scarcely a week passes without a business person from my constituency, or across the country, often in tears at

the hardship they face, contacting me or a colleague. We are contacted by private dentists, consultants, architects, promoters, events managers, chefs, drivers, micro-manufacturers. The list goes on. Those people are the personification of the entrepreneurial spirit that we as an Assembly are supposed to champion. They are individuals who, in the past two or three years, perhaps, have given up lucrative careers in the private or public sector to start their own career and become self-employed, blissfully unaware of the devastation around the corner. Unable to access schemes, they, initially, knuckled down, praying that support would come. Many have taken out loans, maxed out credit cards or borrowed from family members, but they were resolute in their determination to survive. They were convinced that they would not be forgotten about by the Minister or the Executive. Sadly, they have been forgotten about, and it has taken today's motion to get the issue on the agenda.

I understand that there are always practical areas, grey areas and funding implications, and I understand that the Minister has many plates to spin in her portfolio, but the fundamental responsibility for a package of support for excluded businesses and business owners must, and does, rest with the Department for the Economy. The Minister cannot take credit for the previous schemes when rolling them out and simply wash her hands of them when the new versions are not coming forward.

Departmental officials told the Committee that they are unable to provide a new self-employed hardship scheme, potentially, because the raw data is not available from HMRC, but the Minister tells us that it is not her responsibility. What is it: the Department cannot, or will not? Or, is it the case that the Minister agrees with her permanent secretary who told the Economy Committee, two weeks ago, that, if it is only to keep businesses going for six or eight weeks as we head into more turbulent times, we have to wonder if the resources would be better deployed elsewhere. Tell that to a company director who is lying awake at night, wondering how to pay the bills — a company director who has maxed out every line of credit that they have got, but is resolute in their determination to survive and, whilst other businesses receive help, is told that they are not worth saving, or, if they have survived this long, they will be OK. Is that the sort of support that we want to see from the Executive and the Minister?

In Ad Hoc Committees and briefings to the Economy Committee, the Minister has rightly said that she will not be found wanting when it comes to an economic recovery plan, or providing support for businesses. When I questioned her about a similar scheme to the Welsh resilience fund, at the Ad Hoc Committee in April, she said:

"We will be looking for a package for the Northern Ireland economy. We will be looking at something along the lines of the Welsh resilience fund, for instance, but we will not be looking at just its mitigation measures; we will be looking at something to take us a step further."

Four months later, we have no sight of any bespoke resilience fund, bids or plans for a new hardship grant scheme or of a full economic recovery plan.

I finish with a heartfelt plea to the Minister on behalf of all business owners in Northern Ireland who are committed to survival and crying out for similar support measures

to those that others have received. I implore the Minister and her officials to urgently create a new fit-for-purpose hardship scheme that will target those who have been excluded to date. If there are difficulties, or if the rest of the Executive will not commit to releasing funds, our focus will turn to them, but there must be a bid from the Department for the Economy that is based on a credible, shovel-ready scheme that will show businesses that they are committed to supporting them and easing their financial woes. In the absence of any such proposal or commitment, we can only assume that the Department is being led by the remarks of the permanent secretary and is saying that they are not worth saving. Thank you for the time today. I urge all Members to support the motion.

Mr Dunne: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue. We all recognise the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on the local economy. We acknowledge the significant amount of real financial support that has been delivered by our UK Government and Executive over the past six months, particularly through the Department for the Economy.

The Department has provided £340 million support to over 30,000 businesses through the business support schemes for large, small and microbusinesses throughout Northern Ireland. We must recognise and commend the efforts of the Economy Minister, Diane Dodds, in supporting the local economy through such a challenging period, and the Department's staff, LPS and Invest NI staff, all of whom have been involved in grant administration and dealing with the day-to-day queries from constituents.

Those support measures, alongside the UK Government initiatives, including the furlough scheme, the self-employed income support scheme and the various rate relief measures introduced, have all been absolutely critical for the survival of so many businesses and the protection of thousands of jobs right across Northern Ireland.

10.45 am

The Minister has rightly prioritised our economic recovery and published the economic recovery strategy, 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy', which sets out the framework to deliver higher-paying jobs, a highly skilled workforce and a more regionally balanced economy. The establishment of an expert-led economic advisory group and a tourism recovery steering group are other progressive measures aimed at stimulating, rebuilding and reviewing our economy, and, importantly, giving confidence for the future.

There is also the immediate challenge of avoiding another lockdown, which would have a devastating impact on our economy and our ability to recover from the past six months. Every sector has been affected over those six months. However, certain sectors have undoubtedly been hit hardest, and some are still unable to trade given the restrictions that remain. Some sectors have been more significantly impacted than others, including tourism, travel, hospitality, aerospace, leisure and the arts, which will require ongoing tailored support.

There are many small business owners out there — they have been mentioned — who initially took great risks to start their own business. That is highly commendable, and we fully support it. However, COVID-19 has hit

those businesses hard, with a drop in demand, a loss of production and, indeed, as we are all aware, the reduction in footfall in cities, towns and villages. All that has had a detrimental effect and a major impact on those businesses.

The internet remains a growing challenge for the retail and service sectors, but it is also an opportunity for business growth. More could be done through our various agencies to support and encourage those businesses to adapt and diversify.

While we are actively lobbying for the extension of the furlough scheme, we must be realistic and realise that it will have a limited lifespan. However, its continuation on a phased basis is critical, especially over the next few months. There is a need for additional support to sustain existing jobs and businesses in Northern Ireland. There is a role for Invest NI to look at alternative support measures for businesses and support for upskilling, training, online activity, innovation and research and development.

I believe that the UK Government and the Executive must make strategic interventions to stimulate and protect more sectors that are facing the greatest ongoing challenges in the immediate term. I urge the Executive to look at all the options to see what support can be given to sole traders and small and microbusinesses. We recognise the pain and the loss that they are suffering. The Executive should come to a decision to utilise any underspend from the various grant support funds and support those hardest hit as we seek to sustain and rebuild our economy for the future.

Dr Archibald: I am glad to have the opportunity to speak to the motion. I thank my Economy Committee colleague John Stewart for tabling the motion.

Over the past number of months, I have consistently highlighted those businesses and entrepreneurs who have missed out from the British Government and the Executive support interventions. The Economy Committee has collectively listened and made the case for the extension of supports for those who were missed out from other schemes. We all recognise the scale of the interventions that have been made to support businesses. Over £700 million has been made available by the Executive in rate relief and business grants to support businesses impacted by COVID-19.

We also recognise that there is a need to focus on and to fund the economic recovery. However, simply pointing that out repeatedly to those who have missed out on any support because of their business type or when or how they established their business is neither helpful nor welcome. Many sole traders, the newly self-employed, businesses with no premises and small manufacturing businesses have all missed out simply by the nature of their business.

As Mr Stewart said, we have been told that the necessary data to target newly self-employed individuals, for example, has not been forthcoming from HMRC. Last week, the Economy Committee strongly endorsed enquiring whether the Executive would fund a grant if HMRC would deliver it directly to those individuals. I hope that the Economy Minister, in her response, will indicate whether she is willing to consider that.

I argued for support beyond the original grant schemes. The Minister agreed that we needed a fund for those who fell through the cracks, and we got the hardship fund. When the criteria were published, there were those who still missed out. I argued for the widening of the criteria of the fund to include those still excluded, and was told that there was a limit to the funding. It has since become apparent that there was over £60 million of underspend across the grant schemes, which showed that support could have been widened. Surely lessons have been learned that would help in the speedy design and delivery of some much-needed and welcome tailored and targeted support.

Every MLA has been contacted by business owners and entrepreneurs unable to access support, some of them not eligible for even universal credit. I have listened to and read about the depths of despair of some of those individuals. With bills mounting and no sign of any income, many have already taken on further debt that they are not sure will ever be repaid. We are all realists here, too. We know that not every business or job will be saved but for those who have missed out, it is about giving them a lifeline to keep the lights on and a chance to reopen, just like all those who got support simply because they had a premises.

These are business owners and entrepreneurs, hairdressers, tradespeople, photographers, taxi drivers and small manufacturing companies that have created jobs and support families. Those small and microbusinesses and their workers are the backbone of our economy. This is not about pouring money into business accounts simply to pay bills. It is about protecting livelihoods and supporting workers and families.

I have consistently argued to the Economy Minister, and to my own Executive colleagues for that matter, that we need to find a way to support those who have missed out on all the support to date. The Finance Minister has made clear that he will consider bids brought forward to support those excluded from other schemes. Other Ministers, in particular the Economy Minister, need to make a bid for funding to support those individuals.

We have heard about the bids that the Economy Minister made in relation to economic recovery, and there is certainly a need to have an economic recovery strategy that addresses the long-term structural issues in the local economy, including low productivity, by focusing on skills development and strengthening workers' rights as well as the economic recovery from COVID-19. In doing that, however, we need to instil confidence in the businesses and entrepreneurs that make up our economy that we are willing to support them through the difficult times as well as to reap the benefits in the good times.

I will, therefore, support the motion, and I urge Members to do likewise.

Mr Catney: I want, first, to recognise, as others pointed out, that the Executive have provided a lot of support. They have provided rate relief schemes, grant schemes, microbusiness schemes, help for tourism, apprenticeships, higher education and supply chains but nothing for 100,000 single-person businesses and the newly self-employed. That cannot be right. Even those who have been self-employed for a long time were hit by the subtle differences in the self-employed income support scheme

and the job retention scheme. If you were an employee with a salary of over £50,000, you were covered by the furlough scheme to the tune of up to £30,000. If you were self-employed and earned the same amount, you were excluded from any support.

We can see the impact in all our constituencies, with the rise in the number of those on universal credit. Those are people who have worked hard to set up their businesses. They are the backbone of our economy. Surely it is more efficient to support workers to stay in work rather than put them through the hardship of being unemployed.

We all have stories about those who have been left behind. I was contacted by a person who had worked hard to get extra qualifications while working in two retail jobs. After three years borrowing money from their family and friends, and while caring for a young family, they opened the doors of their business at the start of the year. As soon as lockdown was announced, they contacted me about what support was available. One week passed, then two, and I kept telling them that I had asked the questions and hoped that something would be announced soon. One month went by, then two, and now six months have passed, and they have got absolutely nothing. The money that they borrowed from friends and family is gone, the business is gone, and they are on universal credit.

It takes great courage to open a business. You move out of your comfort zone and do the best that you possibly can. That becomes part of your way of life and changes your whole outlook. Believe me, I have never come across anyone in business who is not a hard worker. I can tell you: there is no such thing as working 37 and a half hours or 40 hours. You do what has to be done.

The support did not happen. That person has gone through so much and was contributing positively to our economy. In comparison to the big schemes already announced, it will only take a modest scheme, Minister, to cover those businesses that have received absolutely nothing.

At this time, it is on all of us in the Chamber to help all our constituents. This is surely more important at this time of crisis. I hope that you all support the motion and that the Minister takes the view of the Chamber on board and puts in place vital support for our businesses, which should be kept going for longer than six months.

Do I have any more time, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: You do.

Mr Catney: I do. I want to address the point that my colleague from South Belfast made concerning the letter that he wrote to the Department. I have asked numerous times in the Finance Committee who that sits with. On Monday, the news came out that the First Minister and deputy First Minister were going to bestow powers on the Minister for Infrastructure.

Mr Speaker: Mr Catney, you are up to speak on the motion.

Mr Catney: Yes, this is related to the motion, sir.

Mr Speaker: In the immortal words from yesterday, could you cut to the chase?

Mr Catney: I ask the Economy Minister to look at the powers that she has and stop trying to put the blame on

other people. Deliver what powers you have. If you are not able to do that, pass it on to some other Department.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member who moved the motion. I support the motion, because it is a topic that has been on our minds for the last number of months but, much more importantly, is one that has caused considerable distress and upset to sole traders and others across Northern Ireland.

I am deeply disappointed that we still have no tangible progress. The national support measures have not been perfect but they have provided a substantial structure to keep businesses going through this very difficult time. Nonetheless, there have been gaps where devolved regions have stepped in or, in the case of Northern Ireland, not stepped in. Nonetheless, I thank the Minister for agreeing to meet me and representatives of ExcludedNI last week. I think that she will agree that their arguments were persuasive and clear and that it is now time for action.

Over the past few months, the Minister and the Department have told us that it is too complex to do and that it is too difficult, and some say that, if businesses have survived this long through the worst of the crisis, why do they need any assistance? I will tell you, Mr Speaker, and Minister. They are business people who pay tax, contribute to our economy and sell Northern Ireland to the world. We must not turn our back on them. They have exhausted personal funds and, in some cases, taken on substantial debt to keep their businesses going. Help may be the difference between closure or moving into recovery. The reality is that this can be done, because it is quite clear that it is happening in other parts of the United Kingdom. We all know that Scotland has access to HMRC tax information, but that is not the case in Wales or in any of the English regions, all of which have stepped up to deliver for those businesses. During our meeting last Thursday, it was agreed with the Minister that she will once again contact HMRC to look into how we can overcome these complex information issues, if indeed they are complex. I welcome that, but we now need action.

Why would someone want to take the risk of setting up a business in Northern Ireland? We would not be having this debate today if these businesses were located in any other part of the United Kingdom, so why is the Minister denying businesses here the opportunity to receive help?

Money must, of course, be carefully and responsibly spent. We have heard outrageous figures mentioned in the Chamber by way of support. We need to break these businesses down into small bites and work out what they need. Some can be helped by just a few thousand pounds. Very few are looking for the large sums of money being paid out to others.

11.00 am

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for taking an intervention. A response to an Assembly question for written answer I asked indicated that 2,000 people became newly self-employed between April 2019 and December 2019. The scheme in Scotland that you mentioned gives a grant of £2,000 to those individuals. That would be £4 million, which is not a huge amount.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Dickson: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. The point is very well made by the Member. I thank her very much.

We must, of course, spend our resources carefully and responsibly, and I understand that the Department is particularly risk-averse following its failures under the renewable heat incentive (RHI). However, the Minister should not sit and wait for the Executive to give a green light to everything that she has the authority to do.

We face a major economic crisis. Our business support schemes should not be underspending by such large magnitudes. I know that, on this, the Minister requires Executive go-ahead, and I note that, at last week's Committee meeting, it was mentioned that an options paper had gone to the Executive. However, that paper does not contain a recommendation to help the particular group of people whom we are talking about today — another ministerial failure.

The great public anger will become even greater if, at the end of this financial year, there are funds that could have been available to support the Northern Ireland economy. That anger will be manifest if the Minister returns that money to the centre or to HM Treasury.

In closing, we need action, and we need it now. Today, the Minister is receiving a very clear message from the House to support our sole traders and microbusinesses. I hope that she will sort this out once and for all. Today is the day for the Minister to bring good news to this sector and to our economy. The spotlight is on her. It is up to her to succeed or fail.

Mr Middleton: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on all our lives. Faced with the largest public health issue of our time, the Executive and Ministers had to respond. They had to put in place arrangements to treat those who were infected, while trying to limit the spread of the disease by introducing social-distancing regulations, as a result of which many lives have, no doubt, been saved. That was always the priority.

However, those essential regulations also significantly affected our economy. The Economy Minister and the Executive have had to respond rapidly and make decisions to support the many businesses and individuals who were affected and faced a major reduction in income. It will be no surprise to many inside and outside the Chamber that the Health Department was the largest spender on its response to COVID. However, the Department for the Economy significantly outweighs all the other Departments in its COVID-19 funding response.

We should recognise the significant amounts given in direct support to businesses and other sectors during the crisis. Twenty initiatives launched through the Department for the Economy include the business support grant schemes totalling over £300 million, the microbusiness fund, the apprenticeship intervention packages and the higher education and skills packages. Whilst another Minister in the Chamber had to be instructed to assist those in her remit, the Economy Minister has been proactive in getting support packages in place.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: I will indeed.

Mrs D Kelly: I just want to correct the inaccuracy. The First Minister and deputy First Minister clearly stated that they had to confer powers on the Infrastructure Minister to enable her to assist the taxi and coach industries etc, because the Economy Minister had failed to do so. I am fed up with this misinformation: the disingenuous nature of comments in the Chamber from others who ought to know better. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for her intervention. However, she is incorrect. Unfortunately, the Minister for Infrastructure did drag her feet on this issue. The public will judge for themselves. Unfortunately, however, that is not the topic of today's debate, which is about the fact that the Department for the Economy has been proactive in trying to get support packages in place.

It is important, however, to recognise that whilst many businesses were able to continue to trade, there were other businesses and individuals who suffered significant economic hardship and fell through the cracks of support. There are also specific sectors that continue to face very challenging times and they need support too. The aerospace, tourism and hospitality industries are just some that need support.

There are significant challenges ahead. We have to deal with the immediate issue of trying to prevent a second lockdown, which would be devastating for the economy, so we need to be mindful of that whenever we have these conversations. The other issue is the ending of the furlough scheme. I know that the Executive have written to the UK Government to express their feelings on the need to ensure that —.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much for giving way. Will the Member confirm that all in his party are fully supportive of the measures that the Executive are taking to prevent the spread of COVID-19?

Mr Speaker: I should have reminded the Member after the last intervention that he has an additional minute.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for his intervention. I think that the First Minister has clarified that the Executive have been very clear with regard to the measures that are in place. However, I think that in all of this it is important to be mindful that there is a health risk of a second lockdown, which would be completely devastating for our economy. I think that there would not be too much left if coming out of the other end of that.

The Executive must collectively determine what the greatest challenges are and be strategic in the support offered given the budget envelope within which it operates. That could be in the form of further grant schemes, but as the economy opens up I think that it is important that there is further help for skills, training, marketing, exporting and securing supply chains — I know that that is something that is specifically raised with us on a regular basis.

Like the Chair of the Committee for the Economy, I welcome the 32 bids that have been put in and which focus on the economy recovery. They are all aligned with the economic recovery strategy, the aim of which is to help the vulnerable and to ensure that viable businesses and sectors are still there to provide people with jobs.

I thank the Member for tabling the motion. The Minister has been very clear in wanting to get support out as rapidly as possible where she is able to do so, and where we can ensure that those who require the support can get it.

Ms Dolan: As Sinn Féin's spokesperson for employment and workers' rights it is deeply concerning to hear of the threat of large-scale redundancies that are facing workers at this time. The Economy Minister has acknowledged that more than 100,000 people could become unemployed by the end of 2020. Of course, we already know that the number of people who are claiming unemployment benefits has more than doubled from March to August, and it increased by 800 last month to 62,700.

The past few months have seen workers and unions try to negotiate redundancy packages. While not all redundancies can be prevented, redundancies are always an option of last resort. Redundancies in the North have also more than doubled over the year, with August seeing 700 redundancies proposed and 820 redundancies confirmed. Up until yesterday, a further 880 have been proposed this month.

Economic leadership and the right economic interventions can help businesses to mitigate job losses. While I acknowledge that the Minister has attempted to mitigate job losses and to support businesses, her inaction is literally costing people jobs and putting many people out of business. Let us not forget that behind every one of these numbers is a person who has to pay for food, shelter and, more than likely, to raise a family.

The Minister has regularly tried to divert attention for her lack of action to the wider Executive and to the Finance Minister. However, in reality the Finance Minister has consistently provided funding to the Department for the Economy when it was needed. The Department of Finance provided a total of £411 million to the Department for the Economy in order to finance the small business grant, the hospitality, tourism and retail sector grants and the student hardship grant. The responsibility for making bids lies with the Economy Minister, who is responsible for economic policy. The Minister cannot continue to pick and choose when she wishes to assume that responsibility. For the sake of non-rateable businesses, small manufacturing businesses, the newly self-employed, sole traders and microbusinesses, I urge the Minister to take heed of the comments that have been made today and to make the necessary funding bid to support those who have been left behind by the previous schemes.

Mr Stalford: Over the last eight months, the word "unprecedented" has managed to become a cliché, because we all refer to the "unprecedented" times in which we live. They are unprecedented times. At the time that devolution was first restored, I do not think that any of us could have foreseen what this year would bring. Not only has there been, obviously, a significant health crisis but, as a direct consequence of that and as a consequence of the decisions that we made, there is an economic crisis, because we decided to put vast swathes of the Northern Ireland economy into cold storage. Those are the decisions that we took on the basis of the advice that was given.

As a general principle, everyone should accept that the best and speediest way to economic recovery will be not government largesse but the opening up of as much of

the economy as we can as quickly as we can within the advice that it is given to us. Government is not the solution to every problem, but, on the whole, the Northern Ireland Executive can stand over the record that they have. We can point to the significant investment that has been made in order to help keep our country alive, literally, and to keep our economy alive

Ms Dillon: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr Stalford: I am happy to.

Ms Dillon: Thank you very much. I accept that government is not the answer to every problem, but why is it the answer to every problem for some and no problem for others?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Stalford: I am not quite sure what the point is that the Member makes, but I certainly accept that there have been people who have missed the opportunity for help, and it is important that we, if we are in a position to and can afford to, should assist them; of course we should. As I was about to say, it takes a lot of courage and bravery to start a business. People invest their life savings in businesses and new projects and trying to provide a means of income for their family and support for their kids. Of course, if we are in a position to assist those people, we absolutely should do so. The question is whether we are in a position to do so. Is the budget line there? Does the resource exist? What options are the Executive looking at? I welcome the fact that the Economy Minister has said that an options paper has been forwarded to the Executive for consideration.

I am interested in this, and I hope that the Minister will outline it. I have no intention of attempting to play the Economy Minister off against the Finance Minister — that is not useful or helpful — but, when members of the Finance Minister's party take to their feet and attack the Economy Minister, it is worth asking how many bids the Department for the Economy has lodged with the Department of Finance, awaiting a response. I would be interested in that, and I hope that the Minister will be in a position to answer that in her summing up.

Ms Sugden: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: One moment, then I will.

In these times, it is important that we should have a singular direction and a singular focus from the Executive. There have been occasions throughout the past eight months where that has been undermined, but it is important, especially when, as I have said, we are talking about people who, in many cases, have invested their life savings in starting an enterprise. Of course it is important that we should examine the options that are available for us to help them.

Ms Sugden: I recognise that this is a whole-of-the-Northern-Ireland-Executive to try to help the people of Northern Ireland — we are one Government, after all — but it has to be led by the Economy Minister. Will the Member acknowledge that there are other financial supports — for example, rate relief — that could be extended to some of those who have been excluded? I know from questions that I have asked the Finance Minister that he is not prepared to do that, so I think that this has to be a whole-government approach, rather than one of pointing fingers.

11.15 am

Mr Stalford: The Member is absolutely right. Almost every Department has made a positive contribution to helping our economy to keep going. It is not just the grant schemes from the Department for the Economy. It is also, as the Member mentioned, rates relief from the Department of Finance; childcare support from the Department of Education; support for charities from the Department for Communities; and interventions from DAERA and the Minister for Agriculture. The Executive are pointing in the right direction on that.

One final point is that there are other instruments that can be used to help our economy, beyond simple cash handouts from the Government. Money can be spent on training, marketing and attracting investment. I think that, in particular, marketing this place as a good place to do business is something that we —

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stalford: No. I have four seconds.

Mr Speaker: No seconds.

Mr Stalford: Marketing this place as a good place to do business is something that we should be doing.

I think that I filled my four seconds better than Stewart Dickson ever could.

Mr Speaker: Actually, it took, maybe, 10. Anyway, I call Linda Dillon.

Ms Dillon: My point was about those who were excluded, Mr Stalford. Mr Dunne outlined that any underspend should be directed towards the Economy Minister. The Economy Minister had a £60 million underspend. Maybe that should have been directed towards those people.

I welcome the motion and the calls for a fund to be implemented to support those impacted by COVID and left behind by previous schemes. A report published in April by the Centre for Progressive Policy found that Mid-Ulster is likely to suffer much more than many other areas. Mid-Ulster is my constituency. It is a constituency that I am very proud of. I am very proud of all of the hard work that people of the area have put in, against all the odds, to build up their businesses.

As stated before in this Chamber, Mid-Ulster has the highest rate of VAT-registered business outside of Belfast. That is in spite of the fact that we get no foreign direct investment and in spite of poor infrastructure in terms of good roads and facilities such as electricity. It is because we are very lucky to have a strong history of engineering and small manufacturing entrepreneurs in Mid-Ulster, who, against all odds and in very difficult, challenging times and despite historical underinvestment, have built their businesses. Now, yet again, they have been left out and abandoned by our Economy Minister.

The Mid-Ulster economy is heavily reliant on manufacturing, and according to Manufacturing NI, 12% of firms believe that they will not survive until the end of the year. Other economic projections show that the closure of the furlough scheme is also likely to result in significant job losses in that sector. With that in mind, it is difficult to understand why the Minister continues to leave small manufacturers behind in support schemes. The Minister insists that she has made bids for funding, but we would

like to see the detail of those bids and how they will benefit our small manufacturers.

I could give many examples, as others in the House have done today, of how the lack of support has impacted on some businesses. I have also a number of examples involving couples whose businesses happen to share the same premises. That will not address the issue that Claire Sugden raised around rate relief, because these are couples who have two separate businesses that happen to share the same premises, but only one business could actually benefit from the scheme and claim £10,000. That meant that, if you were part of a couple who happened to share one premises, but your business was separate, you paid all your bills separately, you lost out on any form of support. Those people need assistance.

Ms Sugden: Will the Member give way?

Ms Dillon: Yes.

Ms Sugden: I recognise the issue that the Member is raising. I intend to raise that issue with the Finance Minister because I believe that it is a flaw in the scheme. Those businesses should have been supported because the intent behind the scheme was to provide financial assistance, not to pay off bills to do with the premises. Would the Member support me in lobbying the Finance Minister to try to ensure that businesses that exist in one property and have only one rates bill are entitled to the same support?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Dillon: Thank you. I believe that scheme is the responsibility of the Economy Minister. It was delivered by LPS simply because that was the quickest way to get the money out, but the Economy Minister is the Minister we need to lobby. I absolutely will support you in doing that.

My last point is that all Ministers need to carry out their own responsibilities. It is the responsibility of the Economy Minister to come up with proposals and schemes. It is her responsibility to make bids to the Finance Minister. It is then his responsibility — I sincerely hope that he does this — to finance the schemes. As I said, we have all been lobbied by the excluded groups. They need support. The fact that they have survived to date does not mean that they do not need support. They have many outstanding bills, but, as was outlined by Mr Stewart, despite many challenges with their mental health, they have struggled on. They need support, and they need it now. I have asked questions of the Economy Minister on a number of occasions in the Chamber. I do not believe that I have received a simple, straight answer to any of them around how we are going to support those excluded people.

I ask everybody to support the motion so that we support those who are newly self-employed and those who have worked hard to establish businesses and yet, to date, have received no support.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Member for bringing this important motion before the House today, which I am happy to support. Over the past six months, I have been inundated with pleas for help from businesses in my constituency. Although we were able to guide them to many of the support packages, including grants, the furlough scheme and the package for the self-employed, a significant number of people and businesses have fallen through the safety net of support.

I come from a border constituency. One of the major issues that I have come across is the lack of support for cross-border workers. They have not been able to access the Irish Government's pandemic payment scheme or the job retention scheme here and have been left to fare on universal credit. Those highly skilled people are struggling to keep their families going on universal credit. I have raised this issue with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, the Economy and Communities Ministers, and the Finance Minister. I have also written to the Taoiseach, the Tánaiste and the Social Protection Minister in Dublin.

Many of my constituents who cross the border daily for work are highly skilled workers who engage mainly in the construction sector. They pay their taxes and feel abandoned, North and South. The responses from all the people whom I wrote to were uniform; they all pointed to the relevant EU law and agreed that the responsibility to bring forward a bespoke package for the cross-border worker is with the Department for Communities. Everyone said that the responsibility lay with the Minister for Communities, apart from the Minister for Communities and her party colleagues. I agree with the Member who spoke previously: every Minister should fulfil their responsibility.

All those who are newly self-employed and the self-employed who are deemed to be company directors are frustrated, scared and financially on their knees. They are the entrepreneurs who are the bedrock of our economy. They have bravely taken the risk to establish a business. Their staff can be furloughed, and yet they have nothing. There are then the businesses that have multiple premises. They were ruled ineligible for business support grants. They are our small independent traders. They have shops and outlets in different towns or cities. They, too, are entrepreneurs and are the backbone of our high streets, and yet someone in Netherleigh thought that they should not be eligible for support, despite a package being put in place by the Scottish Government for similar companies in Scotland.

Finally, there has been dreadful treatment of our bus, coach, taxi and haulage industry.

Ms Dillon: Will the Member take an intervention?

Mr McNulty: No.

After months of denying responsibility, the Minister for the Economy surrendered the power and responsibility to the Executive last week. It has now been passed to the Infrastructure Minister to deal with. I am confident that the Minister, with, hopefully, the support of the Finance Minister, will deliver a package of support that the sector so badly needs, and quickly. Some in the House try to suggest that it was a game of ping-pong. Take the politics and the politicians out of it and listen to the sector. One of its leaders — Karen Magill — spoke unequivocally on the radio yesterday; she called it as she saw it. She noted who has been consistently honest and supportive of the sector through all these months: Nichola Mallon.

I strongly support the delivery of support and/or a support package for those who have fallen through the safety net of support.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. I appreciate that a lot of this arrived in the House very fast and there was an initial learning curve on who should step up for what issue, but does the Member agree that,

when we resolve the issues, at every point, we have to find the fastest vehicle for getting help to those who need it? There are examples of that not happening, and that deeply concerns me.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Member for her contribution. I agree: people who are on their knees financially just want support. They do not care where it comes from.

I strongly support the delivery of supports and/or a support package for those who have fallen through the safety nets of supports. That is imperative for services in our community, for businesses and for jobs. If this place is to mean anything to the people whom we represent, we must act collectively and deliver a package of support for those who need it most and need it now.

Mr O'Dowd: It has been an interesting debate with a bit of ping-pong in it around political responsibility or roles in the Executive. I suspect that businesses and sole traders and the self-employed will not care which Minister delivers it as long as it is delivered and that the minutiae and the workings of the Executive are of little interest to them. Unfortunately, we all have to work the processes that are in place in the Executive and in the Assembly and the financial management of all those processes to ensure that proper processes are followed.

I admire any Minister who rolls up their sleeves and says, "I'll have a bit of that. I am going to stick my neb into somebody else's affairs, and I am going to work to try and ensure that a project is delivered", whether it is in response to COVID-19 or anything else. That is what is needed across the Executive, and that is what is needed now.

I want to take one step back before getting into the heart of the motion. Before COVID-19 hit us, we had another major economic crisis looming over us: Brexit. The uncertainty around Brexit, the implications of Brexit and the ongoing political shenanigans around Brexit would be hard enough for any economy to deal with without having to add COVID-19. Then COVID-19 came, and we had that added to us. However, before all those things, it is worth noting that our economy, even prior to the pandemic, had fewer businesses per head than England, Scotland and Wales and had the lowest number of business start-ups anywhere across these islands. Our economy was in bad shape before all these things. The economy, under the charge of successive DUP Ministers, has never been kick-started. It has never seen the promise of the Good Friday Agreement and of the institutions being driven forward in that economic regeneration.

In fairness to those Economy Ministers and to the Executive, we had a worldwide recession in 2008, so it was always going to be difficult for anybody who was in charge, but the point that I am trying to make is this: following the same old will not get us out of the crisis. I have serious concerns — listening to the presentations today from the DUP Benches only confirms those concerns — that the DUP's thinking behind this is driven by a number of factors. One, it does not like government intervention in the economy. Mr Stalford has more than hinted at that, if not confirmed that, today. It does not see that as an economic way forward: I do. Even in normal times, there is a responsibility on the Government to make economic interventions. Even the most right-wing of Tories intervene in the economy, but they intervene in the

economy for the favour of a certain section of society. Two, I am of the view — I said it at the Economy Committee the other day —

Mr Stalford: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: Just let me finish this point. The Minister has made a decision in that regard, and she has decided not to fund those groups. I will let Mr Stalford in, and then I will finish my point.

Mr Stalford: It is interesting to hear the Member for Upper Bann proclaim himself an interventionist. That being the case, why is he so determined to keep us living under EU state aid rules?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

11.30 am

Mr O'Dowd: I am not a defender of the EU fiscal policy and nor is my party. The EU has many merits, but there are also things wrong with the EU, and I disagree with him on the need for the Government to intervene.

The point I am making is that the Minister has made a decision. The evidence points me in that direction. The contributions today point me in that direction, as do the most recent bids from the Department for the Economy to the Executive and to the Finance Minister. There were 32 bids, totalling £78 million, and not one of the bids was for the excluded, the sole traders and the directors that we are discussing today. If there is no bid, that says to me that there is no proposal in the Department for the Economy to support those groups.

I am also concerned about the prioritisation of those bids. They are prioritised from 1 to 32. The first bid is for the technology sector. You could say, "Yes, that's very valid. It is a sector with a future", but it is also one of the sectors that have weathered the storm of COVID-19 best. Parts of it have actually flourished during COVID-19, so why is it the number-one priority? That says to me that the same old thinking is going on that was there under previous Economy Ministers and meant that we had the fewest business start-ups, the lowest productivity and higher levels of economic inactivity than many parts of these islands. We need a new direction and new thinking, and part of that has to be an acceptance that the groups that are holding up and shoring up our economy need support. Yes, we should chase international investment, technology firms and all those things, but the people who are maintaining the economy now are many of the people who are listed in the motion and need support. If we lose them, we will certainly have 100,000 unemployed by the end of this year and more.

I appeal to the Minister to change her decision — my view is that a decision has been made — and make a recommendation to the Finance Minister and the Executive for a viable proposal —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: — an affordable proposal to support these bodies.

Mr Muir: On a Friday night in mid May, businesses across my constituency and across Northern Ireland learned that they would be excluded from the much trailed hardship scheme. Trained for weeks, the details of the scheme were

eventually released at 9.00 pm on a Friday, leaving many in tears, desperate for help and hoping that they would not be forgotten and would be picked up by a further scheme. It is nothing short of disgraceful that, exactly four months on from that Friday night announcement, we are having this debate today because of inaction and failure to provide the required support.

From the start of the crisis, I have been in regular contact with businesses in my constituency that have been left in utter despair. Schemes are announced in other parts of the UK covering businesses just like theirs; Northern Ireland receives the equivalent funding; owners await announcements from the Minister for the Economy; and, if anything eventually gets brought forward, they are excluded from it. I have so many examples of businesses in North Down and beyond that are not able to access business support grants for so many reasons, including those whose business rates were over the NAV thresholds, some very marginally — in one example, by £1; company directors with no PAYE employees who could not apply for the hardship fund; domestic ratepayers, such as bed-and-breakfast owners; those who did not operate out of fixed property, who could not apply for grants based on rateable value; and the newly self-employed who did not meet the criteria for the UK self-employed support scheme. Unfortunately, a number of those businesses have not survived the last six months of inaction. Those that have desperately need financial assistance now if they are not to go the same way as the others.

Not only is providing help for those currently excluded morally the right thing to do, but it is the right thing for the economy today. The Minister has said that she does not have the data to provide the support that is being asked for, but that is to fail to understand that the issue is beyond the newly self-employed and does not look at what Wales was available to achieve without the HMRC data. Minister, where there is a will, there is a way.

Mr Stewart: I thank the member for giving way. While I appreciate that the argument has been made by officials and by the Minister about the lack of data, the key to other schemes has been demonstrating hardship.

Some businesses are doing very well. They are not asking for support. They have managed to ride the storm and actually grow their businesses. Others are experiencing massive hardship. If that criteria can be demonstrated, raw data are not needed. The bank account information is there. If their turnover has been decimated, surely they should be able to access a fund without that raw data.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Muir: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I agree entirely with the Member. Unfortunately, my impression is that there is not the will, so a way is not being found. We are able to look at hardship funds and other schemes that have been rolled out across the rest of the United Kingdom.

Finally, on the subject of money, we hear that the funding is not available to support everyone. I acknowledge the financial challenges that face the Executive. However, today, I have received news from the Finance Minister that over £124 million has been assigned to a pending economic recovery strategy, but is yet unallocated because of non-submitted or delayed bids. That does not inspire confidence in the Department or the Minister.

Figures such as £300 million to support the excluded are bandied about without drilling into the potential demand, and with the assumption that everyone needs £10,000. Proper examination of the issue would, I suggest, reveal a different result. However, unfortunately, it was only last week when the Minister met representatives from ExcludedNI to explore their needs and how they could be met. That was after I had requested the meeting on BBC Radio Ulster and questioned whether the Minister would go to it.

In conclusion, it is long beyond time that the Minister for the Economy should have brought forward a hardship scheme for businesses that have been excluded from existing support packages. I have written to her on numerous occasions about the issues that have arisen in the debate. Unfortunately, I eventually received only generic responses, offering little more than tea and sympathy. Minister, the time for tea and sympathy is up. The time for action is now.

Mr Speaker: I now call Roy Beggs. I advise the Member that he has four minutes.

Mr Beggs: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I support the motion. It begins by talking about the Kickstart scheme, which helps 16- to 24-year-olds who are on universal credit to get into employment. It was announced that it would apply to England, Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland was not mentioned. It has been operational since 2 September. What is happening in Northern Ireland? That scheme helps young people, the businesses they work in and the economy. What we do not want to do is experiment with our own individual system and then find out that it is flawed. We should have learnt from the renewable heat incentive scheme that if there is a system that is widely applied, we can learn from it quickly and get it on the ground.

We all have to recognise that much support has been provided in Northern Ireland. We are fortunate to be part of the United Kingdom. There is the furlough scheme, for which the Chancellor has footed the bill. Thank goodness that it has been there to date. Clearly, it cannot disappear. We need there to be a continuation of some sort to assist those who rely on it. Otherwise, Northern Ireland, in particular, will lose out. We are at huge risk of losing thousands of jobs; jobs in skilled teams that have been put together and risk being decimated. We need to look carefully at that and ensure that funding continues.

There has also been COVID-related support through a range of other measures. For example, the business support grant that has been paid out through the rate system was a good, quick way in which to get money out on the ground. However, we have to recognise that there is a degree of concern that it may not always go where it is needed. I have heard of wind farm owners getting additional money when they still have their wind turbines turning. Clearly, some people have benefited who may not have needed it. There has also been a range of other business support grants and, in particular, help for apprentices. We have to recognise that.

We also have to recognise, however, that many people have been excluded. There have been attempts to address that in other parts of the United Kingdom. The question is why it has not been worked on here. The excluded include those who are newly self-employed and many

microbusinesses, which may actually operate from home and therefore have not benefited from the business support grant. Many of those business owners will have taken great risk — perhaps remortgaged their homes and taken loans — and may not be in a position to take further loans that are on offer. We need to recognise that those additional loans that have to be repaid are more likely to benefit larger, more established businesses. We also have to recognise that many of those people who have set up their businesses, perhaps employ only themselves and may even be paid through dividends — so are unwaged and do not qualify — are our entrepreneurs. These are the people who put their neck out, who think of new ideas and who can generate new employment in the future. It is important that we recognise that they are important to our economy and that they are not excluded.

I am pleased that, this week, the Executive Office granted powers to the Infrastructure Minister so that the taxi industry and the coach industry, and perhaps the wider transport sector, can benefit. However, why has it taken so long to widen those powers so that someone can address the issue? As asked by my colleagues, why have all of those people who have been excluded to date not been included in a hardship intervention scheme? Such schemes are operating in other parts of the UK, and we must ensure that businesses, companies and employees can survive without facing huge burdens of debt and going under.

Mr Speaker: I call the Economy Minister, Mrs Diane Dodds. The Minister will have 15 minutes.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you, Members, for the motion and debate. A range of important and relevant areas have been covered this morning. I will take each of the key issues that have been discussed in turn.

First, I share the deep concern expressed in the House for the significant impact that COVID-19 has had on the Northern Ireland economy. It is undeniable that the economic impact has been significant and has had implications across the entire economy. Huge economic impacts, which might normally take months or years to unfold, occurred within weeks as a result of lockdown and industry shutdowns. My Department estimates that, during lockdown, our economic output was operating at 25% below normal. Nearly all sectors were affected by the social-distancing measures, and many businesses have availed themselves of business support schemes and grants from the national Government and the Northern Ireland Executive.

The motion references the extensive range of support put in place by our Government. That has provided a much-needed lifeline for many local businesses and individuals. The shutdown of many industries resulted in the widespread furloughing of workers, with just under 250,000 — almost a third of those eligible here — being furloughed and around 78,000 availing themselves of the self-employed income support scheme. Together, these claims amounted to over £1 billion in support for jobs in Northern Ireland.

Despite this, there has been a spike in the claimant count over the past three months. July was the third month in a row where the number of claimants was above 60,000; levels last seen in 2012 and 2013 after the previous

recession. To put it another way, around seven years of jobs' growth has been wiped out in a matter of weeks. Although the local economy is showing signs of recovery, with many sectors improving, it may take some time before we see overall economic activity back to its pre-pandemic levels. I do not underestimate the challenges that lie ahead of us. That is why, from the Chamber this morning, I reiterate my call for an extension of the furlough scheme. It is important that we continue to support jobs in our local economy and in sectors where that tail of recovery will perhaps be longer than it is in others.

The Executive have difficult decisions —

Mr Dickson: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: No, I am not giving way. I have a lot to get through and I will reference many of the points that Members made during the debate.

The Executive have difficult decisions to take about what and where interventions can and should be made and what form of support is offered. They need to ensure that spending can be justified as providing value for money and that it will make a positive impact in the medium to long term. Not all businesses or individuals have been impacted by COVID in the same way. Some businesses effectively stopped trading, whilst others continued as normal or even saw an increase in productivity. It was a delight yesterday to announce a further 50 jobs in the digital sector, created by one of our own who has gone to America and who is responsible for much of the foreign direct investment that has come to Northern Ireland.

11.45 am

Since we moved to reopen the economy, some sectors have seen immediate pickup, while others will face much lengthier challenges or face challenges further down the line. I have already referenced hospitality and aerospace. I make the point because the Executive, with a limited amount of financial firepower, must target that firepower and be strategic with it. The Executive must recognise that the economy is in a different place today from where it was during lockdown and that support will come in different forms. When the economy was in lockdown, we clearly needed to get money out to businesses quickly. As part of our immediate Northern Ireland response to the pandemic, my Executive colleagues and I introduced an unprecedented range of local financial support to help those on whom COVID-19 had impacted. That support had the objective of protecting jobs, preventing business closures and promoting economic recovery. My Department led on the business support grant schemes and the microbusiness hardship fund. We have paid out over £340 million to date across the schemes, providing much-needed support to many businesses experiencing hardship.

As well as the business support measures administered by my Department, a range of further support has been provided locally. The Executive put in place a four-month rates holiday for all businesses and 12 months' rate relief for businesses in targeted sectors. Funds have also been made available for childcare, charities and sports clubs, amongst others. Although an extensive range of support was provided, it is simply not possible for the Executive to support every individual and business facing hardship with the funding envelope available, and I will say more on that later.

The Executive are currently preparing an economic recovery framework. I recommend as essential reading to the proposer of the motion 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy'. That document has guided our path in the Department over the past number of weeks. It provides a framework for the next 12 to 18 months to build a more competitive, inclusive and greener economy by addressing the key structural weaknesses in our economy and by focusing on sectors in which there is potential for growth and higher-paying jobs. That does not mean that other sectors will be ignored. All sectors bring their own unique benefits to our economic ecosystem.

To drive forward that agenda, I have secured £25 million to deliver digital and online selling, improvements to operational processes and supply chain resilience, the use of new technologies, business planning and the provision of loans and equity investment. I have reallocated £13.6 million from my budget to address pressures and skills in education. I have submitted 32 bids to the Department of Finance to deliver a wide-ranging and comprehensive programme of interventions to further the rebuilding agenda. I must say that I agree with Mr Dickson that it would be inexcusable that money should be returned at the end of what will be an extremely difficult and challenging period. That is why again today in the Chamber I am urging the Finance Minister to get on with allocating the funding that he received after the Chancellor's July economic update.

Miss Woods: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: No. I am not giving way.

I have established the tourism recovery steering group and am working on the draft tourism recovery action plan. Many of the 32 bids would support actions in that plan. I have allocated £14 million to fund an apprenticeship return, retain and result initiative, over £12 million to fund an apprenticeship recruitment incentive initiative and over half a million pounds to an apprenticeship challenge fund.

I will address Mr Beggs's point about the Kickstart scheme. I agree with him that Northern Ireland could benefit from a Kickstart scheme. Last week, I spoke to the Minister for Communities, because Kickstart is essentially an employment scheme as opposed to a training scheme. I offered her my and my Department's help in the development of the scheme. She has confirmed to me that her Department is currently scoping out such a scheme for Northern Ireland, and I hope that it will come forward fairly quickly.

Recently, along with Invest NI, I have announced a £1 million digital selling capability grant and a £5 million equity investment fund targeted at early- and seed-stage SMEs, both of which opened for applications last week. The Department for the Economy has a record of working to provide support. I thank my colleague from Foyle for referencing the Audit Office report which indicates that, by far and away, after the Department of Health — where you would expect actions in a health pandemic — the Economy Department has been prolific in its support for the economy and businesses in Northern Ireland. Again, I recommend that report as essential reading.

The motion specifically references sole traders and microbusinesses that were unable to access the business support measures because they did not meet the eligibility criteria. Within the available funding, the hardship fund

aimed to support as many businesses as possible. However, with approximately 125,000 businesses in Northern Ireland and a budget of £40 million, difficult choices had to be made about the number and type of businesses that could be supported. Also, the Executive, as a whole, supported my decisions on the hardship scheme.

However, I know that people are still hurting and that there is still more work to do. Whilst the majority of self-employed people were eligible for the self-employed income support scheme if their business was adversely affected by COVID, I recognise that those who have recently become self-employed have been unable to access the scheme. I think that everyone would acknowledge that establishing a local scheme would be challenging because it requires access to a national database via HMRC. I have written to HMRC to enquire about such database access.

I also understand that the Department of Finance has contacted Her Majesty's Treasury about a number of issues in the UK-wide schemes, including widening the eligibility of criteria of the self-employed income support scheme to include those who have recently become self-employed. Furthermore, I have proposed that the Executive should write to the Chancellor to ask him to look again at some of the people who have been omitted from the scheme and to consider bringing forward measures across the UK. I will, of course, also work with my colleagues in Westminster who have been extremely vocal in support of that UK-wide scheme and the need for UK-wide measures to bring in these levels of support. Should support not be forthcoming, and should the Executive collectively determine that a bespoke local scheme is required, I will be happy to deliver such a scheme.

Members have referenced the money that has been underutilised from the three business support measures led by my Department.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mrs Dodds: No.

I will make it clear — particularly for Ms Dillon who seems to be under some misunderstanding on these matters — that my Department administered the business support measures on behalf of the Executive — this was not Department for the Economy core funding. Underutilised funds have been returned to the Department of Finance, as was requested, from the very outset of the schemes. Those funds will be reallocated for further funding and support. To aid that process, I have provided an options paper to the Executive with a wide-ranging list of areas where there will be gaps.

Ms Dillon: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: No.

That has been discussed on a number of occasions. On 13 August, at the proposal of the Finance Minister, it was agreed that the reallocation of the underspend from the business support measures would be considered as part of the overall funding allocation to deliver the Executive's recovery framework. I look forward to moving ahead with that recovery framework, seeing the list of proposals — including those in my options paper — from the Executive and getting down to work to make those things happen.

Again, at my instigation, we widened the scope of the £10,000 scheme to include those small manufacturing businesses that benefited from industrial derating. I would be happy to join Ms Dillon in writing to the Finance Minister to indicate that I would also support further rating relief for manufacturing businesses, not just in Mid Ulster, which I visited recently, but right across Northern Ireland.

Ms Dillon: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: No.

In conclusion, let me be absolutely clear: the scale of the challenge that is facing our economy is unprecedented. Getting our economic, societal and health-focused response to recovery right is absolutely vital. We must all ensure that the decisions that we take are strategically focused but also support families and jobs in Northern Ireland. I remain committed to working with my Executive colleagues to continue to support businesses and individuals as best we can moving forward, recognising that the next few months will be extremely challenging, not just for the Executive but for families and for prosperity in Northern Ireland.

Dr Aiken: I thank everybody who was involved in the debate. I am sure that Members will grant me the indulgence of directing most of my remarks to the Minister for the Economy

There is a fundamental issue here. The Northern Ireland economy is driven by the small and medium enterprise sector. It is an entrepreneurial economy. In January of this year, the Ulster University business school said that Northern Ireland has created an ecosystem for entrepreneurs, with 100,000-odd SME companies. We have more SME companies and entrepreneurs in Northern Ireland than there are per capita in Wales, Scotland and the north of England, but we can say that we had that ecosystem that was supportive of our entrepreneurial sector.

We have heard from people across Northern Ireland about the importance of the manufacturing sector — small companies with directors who take risks. One of the biggest issues that we have in Northern Ireland is that we need to encourage more of that risk-taking. We need to encourage companies and people to become involved in business. We have a manufacturing sector in west Tyrone that is unique across these islands in its ability to develop new ideas and products. We have people in our creative industries sector who have ideas and are willing to take risks and do something that, quite frankly, was not even there nine months ago. These are people who are willing to do those things.

These are people who are the future of Northern Ireland and who are going to transform our economy. That should not come as a surprise to anybody, particularly the Minister for the Economy or her Department. That ecosystem has been growing steadily, not because of what the Department for the Economy and Economy Ministers have done but because those people have had to do it on their own. They have succeeded in ways that very few people have seen. However, right now, because of a system that they have no control over, with the added implications of a pandemic, that ecosystem is being killed off.

We hear about papers and proposals and bids, but we are eight months into this process. Many of those people

have already gone to the wall. How many times have MLAs listened to people saying that they have gone to the bank and the bank says, "Unless you get support we are going to have to pull the plug"?

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree with me that the Minister actually supported my colleague Mr O'Dowd's point when she said that 50 additional jobs had been created in the IT sector? That industry is flourishing at the moment, yet that is where her number-one bid to the Executive is going.

12.00 noon

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much for your intervention.

I was struck by the remarks that the permanent secretary of the Department for the Economy made to the Committee. I find it extraordinary that even a sentiment by a senior civil servant in Northern Ireland would be that some of those businesses are not worth saving. For somebody who is on a superannuated salary, has a pension and is the permanent secretary of a Department that, to say the least, has not had a stellar record in promoting jobs or in good governance to say that is absolutely shocking. The Minister should go back today and have the permanent secretary in her office and ask him to apologise and to make sure that his remarks are changed. That sent a message out to every entrepreneur in Northern Ireland. We have another example.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Dr Aiken: Yes, please.

Mr Allister: The Member deals with an important point. The Minister today had the perfect opportunity to disavow those callous, cavalier comments by the permanent secretary, but she did not take that opportunity. Does that create a fear that, in fact, those comments still drive the approach of the Department?

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much for your intervention. That takes me on to the next point, which is about the culture in the Department for the Economy and the culture of what we are trying to do to support small businesses and entrepreneurs. They are asking for our help. They are not asking for our help because they just want another handout or they want to do something else; they want our help so that they are actually still here when we get to the end of this year.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Member for giving way. In talking about those small businesses and entrepreneurs, does he agree that the entire House should be appalled by the statement that the Minister made when she described them as "difficult choices"? It is her job to deal with difficult choices.

Dr Aiken: I thank you very much. Again, one of the things that we have heard through here is that we want to see some leadership. We have had eight months of committees, groups, papers and whatever: we need to see some leadership. We need to see somebody saying, "We need to do this". We do not want a Minister who gives £53 million back without asking some fairly substantial questions about what extra resources are needed and what we are doing to sort out this part of the economy. We are hearing this in the United Kingdom, from a Minister who sees clearly what happens in England, Scotland and Wales but sees Northern Ireland as different in some way.

Her answer is not righteous indignation and a demand for more money to do it; her answer is, "Let us form another committee. Let's send another paper". That is not what the people of Northern Ireland want to hear.

I was very disappointed to hear from the Minister today. I thought that the Minister would see where the concerns are. I thought that she would come to the House and say, "These are substantial issues that need to be sorted out. I have heard. I want to do something. I want to do something for 99% of our economy". That is the size of our SME economy.

Mr Catney: I thank the Member for giving way. It may have come out on Monday that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister were going to bestow powers on a different Minister. I need to know where they come from and how they come out. Rather than give out under the grant scheme, there are powers that sit in your Department, Minister, that you are not using, but you are asking them to move to a different Department. I hope that you are *[Inaudible.]*

Dr Aiken: I thank you very much for that.

Here is a question, and it is a question that everybody in the Assembly should ask: is the Department for the Economy fit for purpose? Is it capable of carrying out its role? Now, we have heard evidence from the Economy Committee about the language being used by the permanent secretary, but we see something else here, and this is the fundamental bit: where is that support for our SME sector? Where is that support for our entrepreneurial sector? Does nobody in the Department for the Economy or the Minister understand what our economy is built on? I am not hearing any understanding from the Minister. I have heard absolutely no —.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for giving way. With regard to the language and understanding of the Department and the Minister, does the Member agree that generic written responses outlining all the government financial support that a business is not eligible for and pointing to nirect, when individual circumstances are raised with the Minister, could be described as nothing more than a kick in the teeth?

Dr Aiken: One of the most disappointing things is the number of times that people have been told, "the computer says no. The fact is that you do not meet this criterion or that one". We are coming to the end of the time, and I could continue pointing out the inconsistencies of the Department for the Economy and the Minister.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Member, because he has been very generous in giving way, unlike the Minister, it has to be said. Does the Member agree that this is the bread and butter of Northern Ireland? In our constituency offices, we are all aware of the nature of these businesses. They are often family-owned, and they are the fundamental building blocks of our economy. I had hoped that the motion would nudge the Minister in the right direction. I am bitterly disappointed that that appears not to be the case. I take the Member's point that we really start to move into the realms of, "Do we understand our economy?".

Mr Speaker: The Member has about 10 seconds.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much. It comes as no surprise that I think that every Member should support the motion. My final appeal to the Minister is, "Show some leadership.

Sort out your Department, and do something for the entrepreneurs of Northern Ireland".

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly is deeply concerned at the significant impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the local economy; acknowledges the substantial financial support package put in place by the UK Government to support employers, employees and the self-employed; recognises that thousands of sole traders and microbusinesses in Northern Ireland have not been able to access financial support; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to establish a new fit-for-purpose business hardship fund targeted at those businesses that have so far been excluded from existing support packages.

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

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

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. I ask Members leaving the Chamber to do so.

Mental Health Crisis Support

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to wind up. All other Members will have five minutes. I call on Mr Alex Easton to open the debate on the motion.

Mr Easton: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the importance of collaborative and well-resourced services that support those in mental health crisis across Northern Ireland; notes with concern a COVID-19 survey conducted by the stress, trauma and related conditions (STARC) laboratory at Queen's University Belfast, which found that one third of people locally met the criteria for depression; highlights the success of the multi-agency triage team (MATT) partnership between the health and social care sector, the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service in providing on-the-spot mental health support to people in emotional crisis; and calls on the Minister of Health to commit urgently to the expansion and funding of this project to all health and social care trusts.

As everybody knows, we as an Assembly have been very much united recently on the urgent need to tackle mental health issues in our society. We are all aware of the significant increase in mental health issues due to COVID-19 and the results of lockdown. In order to try to tackle that, a study by the stress, trauma and related conditions (STARC) laboratory at Queen's University has been recently undertaken, and the results on the state of the population's mental health are extremely worrying.

Some of the statistics and findings are as follows: of the 470 people surveyed, three out of 10, which is 30%, met the criteria for anxiety, and one out of every three met the criteria for depression. For COVID-19-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 20% met the criteria. On becoming infected with COVID-19, 41% were extremely worried and 64% were extremely worried about infecting others. Concerns were expressed about the health service, with 72% of individuals being highly concerned about the ability of the health service to care for COVID-19 patients if the situation became worse. On job security, 28% were highly concerned about their job security because of COVID-19, and 50% were highly concerned about the financial implications of COVID-19. There were concerns about school closures, with 41% being highly concerned about the impact of school closures on children during the COVID-19 pandemic. There were also concerns about the Government, with 49% being extremely worried about the Government's ability to manage the COVID-19 situation.

Overall, the findings showed that those with prior mental health conditions, those who had high exposure to COVID-related information via the media, the young, those highly concerned about being infected and key workers suffered the most with mental health issues. I found it very interesting that the media have been identified as affecting the well-being of our population, and that is something to think about.

The following recommendations were made in the study. I believe that the Health Minister and his Department

should look at these, and they have probably already done so. There are groups of individuals who may be more vulnerable to experiencing mental health issues during this time. The study states that government bodies and other relevant:

"decision-makers should be mindful ... to these groups when creating, amending ... COVID19 related policy."

Given the impact of COVID-19 media exposure on mental ill-health, "clear media guidelines" on the reporting of COVID-19 information "should be drafted and implemented". The study states that there should be:

"A public health campaign to educate the public about reputable sources"

of COVID-19 information in the media and how to manage their consumption of COVID-19 news. On that point, at the Health Committee, I recently mentioned to the Health Minister the issue of how we can promote the COVID-19 vaccine when it arrives, because there is a clear mistrust among some in the wider community due to misinformation, lies and other factors.

Concerns about the financial implications of the pandemic, including job security, must be "carefully considered by the Government". The study states:

"A priority at policy level should be to plan efficiently and effectively for how a potential increase in the need for mental health services will be handled in light of this pandemic."

The study reports that service provision:

"will be important to improve the outreach of services to those who may have difficulty accessing them due to the nature of their diagnosis ... those with concerns about social distancing or infection, individuals who are considered 'high-risk' and may be shielding for prolonged periods and those who may not be able to access services digitally. Academics and clinicians must work together in order to help bridge the gap for those who are unable to access services. This includes the implementation of more regular follow-ups with clients ... Further consideration from both a research and service provider standpoint should consider how positive mental health and well-being could be fostered during periods of isolation."

It also states:

"Mental health organisations, particularly in the charitable sector, will need to be adequately funded to ensure easily accessible mental health support is available when needed and that they are supported with the resources needed to deliver services".

12.15 pm

Funding should be considered for a mental health workforce to support the potential influx of individuals needing mental health support, including psychological well-being practitioners. That may free up waiting lists for higher-intensity mental health services. The Department of Health launched its mental health action plan in response to COVID-19 on 19 May. The strategy outlined key points, which are supported by the survey, including the use of innovative approaches to service delivery, the importance

of helping and supporting those who have been negatively impacted by COVID-19, and the importance of multidisciplinary and multisectoral collaboration. It is important that the strategy is well coordinated, well resourced, that it addresses those in need in hard-to-reach groups, and that it ensures that the mental health workforce is well supported.

The multi-agency triage team (MATT) partnership operates between the health and social care sector, the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to provide on-the-spot mental health support to people in emotional crisis. Mental health practitioners and paramedics work alongside police officers to assess and respond to calls made either to the police or ambulance control using 999 or 101. That has had the associated benefit of reducing reliance on hospital, ambulance and PSNI resources.

MATT has been operational in the Belfast and South Eastern Trust areas since the start of July 2018 and has been supported by the Public Health Agency (PHA). More than 55 skilled staff across the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, the PSNI and the South Eastern Trust volunteered to take part in the project initially. After COVID-19-related disruption, it resumed operating on 12 June. A team of two police officers, one paramedic and one mental health practitioner is on duty over a 12-hour night shift on Friday and Saturday. The team was initially funded, until March 2020, by the Department of Health transformation fund. The Minister previously stated that he urgently wanted to examine the potential for a significant expansion of the multi-agency triage team partnership between the health and social care sector, the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service. However, MATT's future remains unclear. We would like to see more regular reporting.

As recently as 10 September, the Minister referenced the project as part of the Department's initiatives to prevent suicide. We would like to see that continuing, Minister. MATT provides a vital and essential intervention at a most critical point, and it should be maintained. However, building resilience and taking a preventative approach to the roots of mental illness is as important, if not more important, than treating mental illness. It is important that we do not neglect the need for a holistic approach as we continue to exist with this virus, and we look to the Minister as he leads on the mental health strategy, as continued MATT services will be critical. The crucial role of voluntary and community services must also be recognised.

In conclusion, we must recognise the impact of COVID-19 on our population's mental health. We recognise the importance of MATT and call on the Minister to commit urgently to the expansion and funding of that project to all health and social care trusts.

Ms Flynn: I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of the motion. I thank Alex and Paula for bringing such a crucial issue to the Assembly. As the motion says, poor mental health has been identified and, I think it is fair to say, universally accepted as an area of concern, given recent events that populations across the world have faced due to COVID-19.

While I am glad that this area of health is receiving the attention that it deserves, what we need to do next to help those in crisis must be more than just positive mental health slogans; it must be more than interdepartmental

working groups' reports and recommendations. It needs to be the delivery of true parity of esteem between physical and mental health. Strategies need to be funded, and communities need services. Importantly, however, if a person is unfortunate enough to find themselves in that moment of crisis wanting to end their own life, help needs to be accessible.

A great example of how on-the-ground crisis support and intervention can help to save a person's life is that of the multi-agency triage team.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. We spend a lot of time together on the all-party group (APG) on mental health and suicide prevention and the recently facilitated APG, from the Member for East Londonderry, on dual diagnosis. You mentioned the need for collaboration and for agencies to work together to tackle this problem, and that is absolutely true. Do you agree that it is to the detriment of some Departments that the Desertcreat College did not go ahead, given that a lot of time spent together, between these services, is multi-agency? A training opportunity would have been really useful so that they could be better at their jobs when on the streets serving the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call Ms Flynn, the Ulster Unionist Party have only given me one name. If the Member wishes to make a speech, I can add his name to the list.

The Member has an additional minute.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Member for his comments. The important thing to focus on now is moving forward into the future. Thankfully, we now have the recognition that it will take a lot more intervention, cross-departmental working and that, obviously, includes the agencies on the ground who are doing brilliant work. Thank you.

I was about to say that I am sure that all the agencies involved, and the respective Ministers, appreciate the value of sustaining such partnerships and interventions, just like the multi-agency triage team. Hopefully, that will continue into the future.

I am also pleased to comment that, since taking up my role as an MLA and as Chair of the Assembly all-party group on suicide prevention, the members of that APG, along with many cross-community groups and organisations from statutory, community and voluntary backgrounds, all wholeheartedly supported and encouraged this model. We all recognise that emergency departments are not a suitable place or an appropriate environment for anyone who is suffering and in a state of crisis. We recognise that, when helping someone in a mental health crisis, working in silos, whether in the justice or the health system, does little to de-escalate or effectively assess and treat the person who needs the help. In fact, many with lived experience advised that it can have the opposite impact and make that person feel worse.

I know that the Department of Health is conducting a review into crisis services, as part of its mental health action plan, as referenced by the previous Member to speak. I also want to highlight that other crisis services currently exist, for example, the crisis centres in Derry and Belfast, the CAMHS Crisis Teams, adult crisis services, Lifeline: 24/7 Crisis Support Service and last, but not least, the vast network of groups and individuals, who are rooted

within their communities and who people, instinctively, think of when they need help.

Therefore, I call on the Minister of Health, following that review, to invest in crisis services and in communities. For me, the expansion and funding of this project would signify another small step in the right direction towards genuine parity of esteem for mental health. More progress towards the full implementation and funding of the suicide prevention strategy could signify hope to someone watching the debate at home, someone who has lived through such experiences or, indeed, currently living through such an experience.

It is important to note that, although this multi-agency model which is made up of ambulance staff, PSNI officers and community psychiatric nurses (CPNs) has successfully operated within the Belfast and South Eastern Trust areas — which lies in my constituency so I know it well — it has done so only at a limited capacity, operating over the weekends. The reality is that a mental health crisis can take hold at any time and therefore it is right to have access to such services throughout the week.

It is also important for Members to note that one of the key aims within the suicide prevention strategy is

“Ensure suicide prevention services and support are delivered appropriately in deprived areas where suicide and self-harm rates are highest.”

This, rightfully, includes urban and rural communities. At present, with the multi-agency team servicing only two out of five of our trust areas across the North, there is definitely room to expand.

In closing, the most striking feedback that I have received about this project has been both from families in receipt of the service and from the ambulance and policing staff who have visited people in their homes. The staff have spoken of a sense of confidence in working together to help someone in what can be extremely difficult, challenging and complex circumstances. Families have described a feeling of understanding and compassion for the person receiving the treatment in what is a much more safe and familiar environment for them.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That is probably the very best point at which, I am afraid, I have to bring your comments to an end.

Ms Flynn: OK. Go raibh míle maith agat. Thank you.

Mr McGrath: I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this motion. This is an incredibly important discussion that is being held in homes, schools and workplaces the length and breadth of the North. No matter what our age, job or background, all of us are affected by, and must give due consideration to, our mental health. I agree with the spirit and content of the motion. Never has a collaborative and well-resourced mental health service been more needed.

We are in the midst of a mental health crisis. The most recent health survey for Northern Ireland presented some distressing statistics. Around one fifth of respondents scored highly on the GHQ-12, suggesting that they may have a mental health problem. The motion makes reference to a more up-to-date figure that one third meet the criteria for depression. The report also highlighted that the most deprived areas continue to be more likely to

have a higher score, almost 25%, than those in the least deprived areas, where it is only 12%.

We need a committed and adequately resourced response to this issue. We all accept, for example, the need for a mental health champion and the importance of the role. I welcome Minister Swann's recent appointment of Professor Siobhán O'Neill to the post. I have met her, and there is no doubt that she is committed to, and ready for, the task at hand. However, I ask this genuinely: are the Executive committed to that as well? She has no budget, no staff and no direct authority. This is certainly not about playing politics or who is to blame. It is just about ensuring that we get the best possible outcome. If she does, it would be great to hear about that.

It is clear that the voluntary sector is taking the lead on this and achieving some phenomenal results. I look at my own area in south Down and see the fantastic responses being made on the ground by MYMY (Mind Your Mate and Yourself), Life Changes Changes Lives, PIPS (Public Initiative for Prevention of Suicide and Self Harm) and Newcastle Community Outreach. Those are some of the groups that I work with. I am proud to try to help and support them with what they do. That is to say nothing about the great work being done by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the Irish Football Association (IFA) and many other sporting groups. However, why should organisations and charities have to struggle year on year to pick up the slack and find funding and volunteers? Why are we leaning so heavily on the voluntary sector and not supporting them more?

I spent 18 years of my life working with such issues as a youth worker. I have seen at first-hand how this problem has evolved, and I can tell you that we are failing our children. We need further support as well for perinatal mental health care and early intervention for primary and post-primary school anxiety. We have no legislation on cyberbullying despite the NSPCC highlighting how important this is. Our children are being exploited in the most heinous and horrific way. We need to find legislation to combat this online scourge and not minimise the abuse that they suffer.

In the last year before the formation of the Education Authority (EA), £1.5 million was spent on post-primary school counselling services, and nearly £2 million was spent on primary school counselling services; that is £3.5 million. In the last financial year, the EA spent only £2.3 million to cover all primary and post-primary. Why is that? Has there been a change in budget or a change in priority? Perhaps the Health Minister could liaise with the Education Minister to try to find out.

Being impacted on by other issues, such as addiction to drugs, alcohol and gambling, means that many of the young people in our society are not equipped with the skills to sustain a job or a housing agreement. Social deprivation in some areas results in third generation unemployment. What do we do? Well, last year, we had nearly 15,000 children and young adults under the age of 24 being prescribed and dispensed diazepam, and nearly 3,000 prescribed and dispensed pregabalin. Throwing a pill at the issue and hoping that it will go away will not cut it. The issue is not going away. In fact, too many are being left to be seen by our trusts. The Health Minister has told me that nobody should be waiting more than nine weeks for access to either adult or child and adolescent mental

health services, or 13 weeks to access psychological therapies.

Yet, I have been told that, in one trust, some children are waiting more than 57 weeks for an appointment and the average waiting time in one trust to access adult mental health services is 92 weeks. Does that scare you? It certainly frightens the life out of me.

I know that I paint a bleak picture, but it does not compare with the darkness that envelops all too many in our society. We must do more. We can do more. I wholeheartedly support the motion.

12.30 pm

Mr Chambers: It is a stark fact that one in four people across Northern Ireland is likely to suffer poor mental health. It can strike at anyone: young or old, strong or weak, rich or poor. It can have a trigger point or none. For far too many people it is an unspoken illness. The message that "It is good to talk" is one that cannot be repeated often enough, yet, for too long, it was not given the focus or the resources that it needed or deserved. There is an unlimited body of evidence to show that mental illness is associated with greater risk of physical illness. Physical illness, in turn, increases the risk of mental illness, and one should no longer be viewed in isolation from the other. That is why, when the Ulster Unionist Party took up the Health portfolio, after it was passed over in the House, sometimes repeatedly, by other parties in January, we said that we would make mental health a key priority.

The COVID-19 pandemic has underlined the need for this area of healthcare for our community and its absolute importance in supporting the mental resilience of all our citizens. Despite the immense challenges of recent months, the Ulster Unionist Party has been able to deliver on a number of its key manifesto priorities. Minister Robin Swann established the position of an Interim Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland, and his choice of Professor Siobhán O'Neill has been widely supported. He also moved quickly to publish the mental health action plan, along with the 38 actions in it. Given the immediacy of the challenges associated with the pandemic, it was only right and proper that it was accompanied by the COVID response plan, detailing the psychological well-being and mental health response to it. In addition, there has been more progress made in relation to specialist perinatal mental health services, the development of managed care networks for child and adolescent mental health services and improving the role and profile of mental health in primary care in the last few months than in the years before.

Despite the progress, nothing could have prepared us for COVID-19. I fear, therefore, that some in our society will live with the consequences of anxiety and depression well beyond the immediate physical risk. In the longer term, we need a service that is fit for purpose and is funded to meet the often complex needs of our population, but, in the short term, we also need a service in place that can provide immediate and urgent mental health support. The work of the multi-agency triage team is one such form of support, and, after it was piloted successfully, it was little wonder that it was quickly extended to cover the Belfast area. At a time of COVID, with all the additional pressures that that puts on our hospitals and staff, there has never been a more important time to avoid unnecessary

attendances at our emergency departments. By putting in place preventative and early intervention practices, that is exactly what the multi-agency triage team does. Of course, it is not just the service leavers or the health service that benefits; it also provides clear benefits for the PSNI.

Before I sit down, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I will once again repeat the phrase "It is good to talk". No problem exists in anyone's life that cannot be resolved. There is no weight on your shoulders that cannot be lifted, and there are no bad thoughts that cannot be eradicated. Just sitting down with someone — a professional or a trusted friend — to talk about your issues can be the start of the journey to recovery and taking back control of your life. There is no shame or sign of weakness in doing so.

Ms Armstrong: I thank those who tabled the motion. I also, regardless of our political differences, take the opportunity to thank Mr Easton for being so open about his mental health challenges during the summer. That took immense coverage, but I have no doubt that, by doing so, he helped a lot of people.

I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party to support the motion. Its wording is clear, and I hope that the Minister's response to it is as positive as his response last week.

The report of the stress, trauma and related conditions lab was stark, but it was also, in many ways, unsurprising. As long ago as March, Lord Alderdice, speaking from a position of direct professional experience, raised the prospect in Parliament of a mental health pandemic caused by the sheer inhumanity and, thus, inevitable severe psychological impact of what we were asking people to do. Going without human touch, social contact or anything that delivers the sense of camaraderie and belonging that makes us human will have a deep psychological impact, particularly on those who live alone or in isolated households or communities. A word such as "loneliness" seems relatively tame, but it has a profound impact on our mental health. Being detached from social contact and social norms leads to a proven disturbance in the ability to assess others' intentions and, thus, maintain and build human relationships. One consequence of that will, in some cases, inevitably be symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and disorders that seem to be associated, such as borderline personality disorder. The stress, trauma and related conditions lab report endorses that view. As we have heard, one fifth of the people studied and, therefore, more than likely, one fifth of the population have exhibited symptoms of PTSD associated with the experience of lockdown, and almost one third show symptoms of depression and anxiety. That could be an underestimate.

What lockdown asked of us, as fundamentally social animals, was necessary to manage our initial response to the virus, but it was inhuman in the literal sense. Therefore I take the opportunity to re-emphasise that, in every response to the coronavirus restrictions legislation, my colleague Paula Bradshaw cautioned that it must remain in place for not a second longer than necessary. There are many reasons for that, but the main reason is the profound and appalling impact that it has on mental well-being. I also caution against anyone making public statements about reinstating lockdown. We need to be sensitive to people's experiences of it and recognise that, if we tighten restrictions in a targeted way, that is not remotely the same as reinforcing lockdown. It is important for our collective

mental well-being that we get the phraseology correct and do not create a wholly unnecessary fear of a return to where we once were.

I put on record my frustration that the mental health strategy has been set back from its original timescale. It is more urgent now than ever. We can be clear that one of the defining aspects of the pandemic, when we look back on it in a few years' time, firmly in the rear-view mirror, hopefully, will be the mental health issues arising from it. We will need to proof almost everything that we do for its impact on mental well-being. This is the time for speeding up that work, not delaying it.

The MATT partnership that others have spoken about, which began in the South Eastern Trust two years ago, seems to have been a clear success. As much as anything, it reinforces the need to consider mental health and well-being in everything that we do and to have people trained to deal with it in their everyday life, particularly in professions in the health sector and the police. I have no hesitation in recommending its roll-out across Northern Ireland. The experience of the past few months reinforces the urgency of that.

Although it is not mentioned in the motion, I expect that the Minister will work with Education to ensure that the mental health and well-being of our young people will be supported, given that their young lives have been so impacted. We do not want their legacy to fall to Health. I hope that we can get clarity on that from the Minister. The Alliance Party supports the motion.

Ms Bunting: Before I make my remarks, I declare that I am a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board and am on the advisory committee of the East Belfast Survivors of Suicide group.

I am immensely grateful to my DUP colleagues for tabling this timely motion. For all manner of reasons, a significant section of people in Northern Ireland have poor mental health, and, without doubt, the restrictions arising from COVID-19 have exacerbated an already bad situation. Those who serve on the Policing Board are all too aware of the time that officers spend dealing with people in mental health crisis. Numerous officers spend many shifts in A&E, either guarding a vulnerable person who presents a danger to themselves or others or searching for a vulnerable person who has left hospital grounds. Several hours can often be spent on such a search. The police return the person to hospital, and, at the first opportunity, due to desperation and despair, they run away again. The circle, which ultimately helps no one, continues, as does crime. To be clear, it is absolutely not that the police or the board begrudge such time or resources but rather that the police find themselves in circumstances of last resort, filling a gap in provision that is not really theirs to fill. No one else wants to take responsibility. That is not good enough.

There is an infamous photograph showing a room that looks like a break room in a police station after a significant event. Many officers are standing, some are seated, some are sipping hot drinks. All are waiting, apparently to resume their tasks at the finish of their break. It is no break room in a station; it is a hospital corridor. That is no place for police officers to spend their shifts when there is so much more going on outside that they must also address. There has to be a better way, and MATT may

well be that better way. I have been delighted to see its implementation. From personal experience, I know that it is a terrible and frightening thing to come upon someone deep in crisis. One wrong word could have immense consequences. The partnership approach will not only address numerous problems but, most importantly, is a preferable way for a vulnerable person to be given the immediate treatment and support that they need from professionals equipped to deal with such a scenario.

Members will be aware that last Thursday was World Suicide Prevention Day. Those who represent Belfast will also know that City Hall was lit up on two consecutive evenings to raise awareness of the issue. Thanks should go to the Lord Mayor, Frank McCoubrey, for obliging that request. I also commend and thank those who give so selflessly to come voluntarily to the aid of those who find themselves in crisis. That is far from easy work, but they can do only so much.

For the long-term approach to the matter, it was a welcome development to have seen the much-awaited Protect Life 2 strategy published and superb news to hear about Professor Siobhán O'Neill, with whom I have worked at East Belfast Survivors of Suicide, being appointed as our Mental Health Champion. I was grateful to hear the First Minister speak yesterday during Question Time of the scoping exercise to understand the full extent of the mental ill health problem in Northern Ireland. I do not envy anyone that task, and, quite honestly, I am nervous about the result. However, fear is no reason for inaction, and movement on the issue is desperately needed and long overdue. That is the long term. Belfast — east Belfast in particular — in recent weeks has seen a number of people reach the end of their tether. Their crisis had become absolute, their coping mechanisms exhausted, with the most tragic of consequences. Today, I implore our Health Minister to consider a short-term, urgent intervention in Belfast to prevent more lives being needlessly lost to suicide and before ideation takes hold. We are all somewhere on the line between good and bad mental health. Some of us in the Chamber will have had personal experience of struggling and just not doing so well. For those who have not, the mantra must be, "There but for the grace of God go I". How dreadful it must be to reach crisis point and feel that you just have no options.

MATT has proved to work well. I suspect that the Minister has little to lose and much to gain by the expansion of the project across Northern Ireland. Accordingly —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I am sorry to interrupt the Member.

Ms Bunting: — I urge him to take this action as a matter of urgency.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is a part of the job that you hate, when someone is doing well. I am really sorry, but the rules are the rules, Joanne.

12.45 pm

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Members for tabling this — cuirim fáilte roimhe seo — important motion and for bringing focus to the challenging area of mental health. I am deeply impressed with the genuine empathy that Members have shown for the issue, and that is to be welcomed.

I declare an interest in the sense of my social work career and working in this area, particularly the invaluable training that I received on placement with a home treatment crisis response team.

The North's long-term record on mental ill health, high numbers of suicides and low spending on mental health is well-documented and has been considered by the Health Committee. The pandemic has, no doubt, exacerbated mental ill health for many, whether through isolation, bereavement, loss of income or the virus itself and the fear and anxiety that it has created.

While since January most of the Committee's time has been focused on issues arising from the pandemic, rebuilding services as well as the broader transformation agenda, the Committee has raised mental health aspects of the crisis, and mental health is an issue to which it intends to return in detail as soon as possible.

One of the Committee's first sessions after being re-established in late January was with Koulla Yiasouma, the Children's Commissioner, in relation to children's mental health. A commitment cancelled due to the pandemic was an informal meeting with the mental health policy group, which we hope to rearrange as soon as we can.

Mental health issues have continued to be threaded through all the Committee's work, with members raising issues about the percentage share of the budget allocation to this area, and acknowledging the inclusion of perinatal mental health in the action plan.

In May, to mark mental health week, the Committee discussed the increased hardship suffered by those with addictions due to COVID-19. The North of Ireland Alcohol and Drugs Alliance (NIADA) advised the Committee of an increase in desperation among substance users, long waiting times for access to opioid substitution treatment, and regional variations in access. It also highlighted the lack of local content testing services for new street drugs, and the difficulties that that brings, the difficulties for that group to engage virtually, and the challenge of accessing PPE. NIADA warned that its experience, which is substantial, suggested that a rise in substance abuse often accompanied a recession.

On a more positive note, we heard of effective support from the Public Health Agency to organisations within NIADA, good partnership working across organisations, and imaginative solutions during the difficult period at the start of COVID, which we welcomed. The Committee made follow-up enquiries to the Department on the matters raised, including issues outside the Department's immediate remit, such as the availability of broadband, which can have a significant impact on access to services and healthcare, particularly given the current reliance on virtual engagements.

Remaining to be scheduled are the Committee's consideration of the mental health action plan and a future mental health strategy. To that end, we intend to engage with the mental health champion.

Consideration of mental health care links to the review of urgent and emergency care. The Committee wrote to the Minister recently seeking an update on that work as we know that the pandemic has increased the pressures on emergency services and departments, impacting on crisis response times and capacity.

The Health Committee is very much aware of the range of mental health challenges that we face, and the collaborative inter-departmental and cross-agency working that is required to address them. The Committee hopes to play its part in delivering the change that we need in that respect.

I want to touch on the issue of media guidelines, which I think was mentioned. The Samaritans have produced extensive media guidelines in the reporting of suicide. An alarming issue raised its head again this week in reporting sometimes inaccurate figures and engaging on social media in a way that is not helpful. Indeed, it can sometimes be deeply hurtful to the impacted families and those working in the sector day and night with those people, and we should acknowledge their input. This project is one of many health transformation projects, and will work properly only if properly funded and co-production applied.

I acknowledge the debate taking place later today on the crisis response service in Derry. It is important that we provide services in a way that meets the needs of people, and that are accessible and meaningful. Colin McGrath mentioned the nine weeks, which is, obviously, not even being reached. Nine weeks can seem like a year; nine weeks can be too long. We need to deliver services in an accessible way.

I welcome the developments that the Minister of Health has brought in this area and the appointment of a mental health champion, and I welcome the fact that the Executive have made a significant commitment.

Ms Hunter: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this topic. I thank the Members for tabling this important motion. As our party's mental health spokesperson, I can say that it is definitely needed and I wholeheartedly support it.

I am sure that Members right across the House can agree that it is extremely distressing when a constituent approaches our office about waiting lists or lack of counselling support and there is so little that we can do. I recognise the value of the multi-agency triage team. Its work reinforces the need for on-the-spot mental health support and shows the importance of collaborative work and policies in the delivery of mental health care.

In my time serving as a councillor for Derry City and Strabane District Council and now as an MLA for East Derry, I have been greatly impressed by the work on and commitment to mental health care from local voluntary groups that I have met. They are providing vital services to their local communities in the midst of our ongoing mental health crisis and during COVID-19. One such service is the community crisis intervention service (CCIS) provided by Extern in the north-west, which provides a safe space for those in that area who suffer from mental ill health and, often, suicidal ideation. It operates an out-of-hours service on Thursday evenings right through to Sunday mornings, and I welcome the debate later today about CCIS. While last week's news that funding has now been secured until next March is most welcome, longer-term funding must be ring-fenced for organisations that are as crucial as this.

Since CCIS opened in January 2019, it has carried out 467 time-critical and immediate interventions, saving lives. The mental health action plan published earlier this year noted that the focus on:

“crisis services requires close work between officials and services going forward.”

That includes de-escalation services. It is, therefore, disappointing that CCIS continues to fight for long-term funding. We cannot put a price on work such as that.

Last week, I chaired the first meeting of the all-party group on addiction and dual diagnosis, and I thank all Members who helped me to establish the group. It shows the support in the House for that important topic. I hope that the APG will bring together a wide range of stakeholders and continue to better inform all our work on the sensitive and complex topic of mental illness and addiction. After speaking with the Northern Ireland Alcohol and Drug Alliance, I am mindful of the members of society who come into contact with the criminal justice system. They have unmet health needs, with mental ill health and addiction often being primary issues.

As we work towards removing the stigma around mental illness, I ask the Minister to please continue to keep mental health at the top of his agenda. We want our young people to grow up in a better, improved and inclusive Northern Ireland. They look to us, as politicians, to lead on mental health, so that is what we must do.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Given that it is 12.53 pm, if I were to call another Member, they would not have time to take an intervention and be finished before 1.00 pm, which is when the Business Committee is meeting, and I understand that Mr McGrath wants to run down to the basement to get some lunch.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm, and I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when the sitting resumes will be Question Time with the Minister of Education. This debate will resume after Question Time and the questions for urgent oral answer that have been tabled. The next Member to be called will be Karen Mullen.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.54 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McGlone] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

Face Coverings: Home to School Transport

1. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Education whether he will consider making face coverings mandatory for all post-primary students travelling on home to school transport. (AQO 651/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for his question. I believe that my Department has maintained a simple, clear and consistent message: that it is strongly recommended that all pupils using school transport, irrespective of age or the form of transport, should wear a face covering. That has been widely publicised through a range of communication channels. It is mandatory for all people aged 13 and over, unless they are exempt for a medical reason, to wear face coverings on public transport. The distinction between dedicated school transport and public transport services are because members of the public do not use dedicated school transport, which means that there is an overall lower level of risk.

The guidance took account of the advice of the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), who both input into the drafting process and did not recommend that face coverings were to be made mandatory on dedicated school transport. While I believe that the current position of strongly recommending their use is appropriate, the advice will be kept under review and it will continue to take account of the expert advice provided by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser.

Mr McGuigan: I hear what the Minister is saying about clear guidance. I do not accept that this guidance is clear; parents and young people have expressed concern about the inconsistency around the issue. We have mandatory face coverings for over-13s in public transport, and the Minister advised for the use of face coverings in communal areas in post-primary schools. Surely, Minister, you would agree with me that it makes more sense to make face coverings mandatory for post-primary students who are travelling on a bus to school.

Mr Weir: If I agreed with you about making it mandatory, we would have made it mandatory. I think that what we need is a balance of things. We need to ensure what is appropriate advice for the circumstances. Dedicated school transport is different to general transport because there is not the same mix of ages.

The big problem, particularly with COVID-19, with regard to risks are not, generally speaking, between children; we know that there is a relatively low risk. It is actually about a mixture of children and older adults, with older adults being more vulnerable. Because school transport is dedicated purely to those who are using it for that

purpose, a different approach is taken. However, I think that it is also appropriate that a balance is struck. If we have something that is mandatory, but not enforceable in practical terms, then it becomes a little bit of a bit of paper exercise. It is like saying, "Here is something which has to happen", when actually, from a practical point of view, schoolchildren will not be subject to fines or to any level of punishment as a result of not wearing face coverings. I think that if we simply say that something is mandatory but we have no means or practical measures of enforcement, then there is a slight danger that it becomes a bit of a toothless tiger.

Adjustments have been made to advice on a range of issues and, as I have indicated, I will be liaising closely with the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser. For example, there was a change made with regard to movement around schools on the basis of advice received from the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser. I will always be guided by what is there with regard to public health, and we will always try to be responsive, so the advice on a range of things will have to be agile.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answers. Face masks are one form of prevention. Is the Minister confident that enough time, facilities and resources are being made available for the cleaning of buses during and after use?

Mr Weir: There are always things that can be done more perfectly. As part of the overall provision that was made to restart, as the Member may be aware, about £42 million was made available. Off the top of my head, around £3 million of that is for school transport. That is to try to ensure that there is additional cleaning of buses and additional transport provision to try to ease the burden.

We have also sent out a clear signal that parents should explore active travel where it is doable and that, in the absence of that, parents should explore whether it is possible for them to take children to school directly themselves. Those are all measures that will mitigate the pressures on school buses.

In many ways, the Member in his question makes a valid point, which is that, if we home in on one aspect of things, we miss the wider picture. As with all measures that are being done to combat the threat of COVID, it is about providing a cocktail of measures, all of which play a role in trying to deal with the threat that is there.

Mr Carroll: I disagree: the Minister has been anything but consistent. He has performed U-turns left, right and centre all over the place throughout the crisis. Following recent changes announced by the Executive, can the Minister explain to me and the House how the virus spreads in the home but not in the school?

Mr Weir: I would, perhaps, be more worried if the Member were to get up and say that he agreed with me on something. I maybe would start questioning my advice at that point.

This may be a wider question for the Executive as a whole. The Executive as a whole have taken a view on the education of our young people and the major damage that would be done to our young people if schools were not being made available as much as possible and as normally as possible. That not only impacts on their education but has wider implications for society. It has wider implications

for mental health, and, if we do not in the long run provide education for our young people, it will fuel poverty. It will have financial and economic implications and health implications.

The Member asked about homes. Obviously, in the context of specific areas in Northern Ireland, the Executive have taken a view that additional restrictions will apply in a home environment. That, in part, has been fuelled by the fact that, in comparison with a school or, indeed, a business, where there is a very controlled environment, the spread of the virus is a lot more uncontrolled in a home environment. The measures that have been taken by the Executive are to alleviate the spread of the virus. As with a lot of things, it means that there is a level of restriction on people who are behaving perfectly and observing every conceivable action to prevent the spread of the virus, but, unfortunately, the irresponsible behaviour of some is creating problems for all of us.

AS Levels

2. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the impact of the exclusion of this year's AS-level work and grades on next year's student cohort. (AQO 652/17-22)

Mr Weir: It was made clear when the revised arrangements on grading were put out that the purpose of awarding AS grades this year was to enable young people who were not planning to continue to the full A level in 2021 to at least have an outcome that would enable them to progress to the next stage. The learning at AS level is an integral part of developing the necessary knowledge and skills, regardless of the assessment arrangements. The position taken on the cohort is in common with other jurisdictions. The normal procedure on AS levels towards A levels in Northern Ireland is therefore that you can take a percentage of a mark that was received at A level and then add that to a percentage of the mark taken at the A2 part of A level. Effectively, you are combining two marks. It becomes a lot more difficult — indeed, impossible — if you are trying to have a percentage of a grade, particularly an assessed grade, and are trying to combine that with a raw mark. You are trying, effectively, to combine a percentage of a letter grade with a numerical value, so to marry the two is difficult. Also, that would put in place a range of issues around equality for many of our students doing A levels. There would be implications if it were tried to marry the two together.

Mr McGrath: I am sure that that answer meant something, but you lost me halfway through it.

Is there not simply a change whereby pupils have done an awful lot of work over the past year and, in ordinary circumstances, that work and effort would contribute to their result next year and that is not the case this year? Students have spent a full year doing work that would normally contribute to a grade but is now not being considered. All of the pressure will be on their one year's worth of work, going forward.

Mr Weir: We are in unusual situations. The awarding of exam results this year was not, I think, what any of us would have wanted, but it is also the case that the situation around A-level results in 2021 will be the same for everybody, irrespective of where they come from. In Northern Ireland, in particular, that is important, and

it is certainly in line with what is happening in England and Wales and with the Scottish approach to Highers. With A levels, more than with any other qualification, our students are in direct competition with students from other jurisdictions. That means that the comparability and portability of our A levels are critical, because we represent around 2.5% of the overall number of A levels. It is critical that the universities and the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) cannot say, "Your A levels are not of the same standard because they are not based on the objective evidence of exams. They are based in part on a level of assessment". We cannot face a situation in which our A levels are downgraded or considered to be of less worth than their counterparts across the water.

Not only is there direct competition there, but we need to ensure that all students in Northern Ireland are treated equally. We have direct control over the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) A-level grades, which represent about 80% of A levels here, but 20% of the A levels done in Northern Ireland are set by English and Welsh boards. If they are awarded on a completely different basis from those in Northern Ireland, you are not creating equality between students; indeed, you are not even creating equality between the different A levels. A student may get 2 CCEA grades and one from Pearson, AQA or Oxford, Cambridge and RSA (OCR) or another awarding body.

Mr Irwin: Are there any plans to decouple the AS level from the A level permanently?

Mr Weir: No. When it was made clear, in March or April of this year, what the arrangements for 2020 would be, there was reflection on the implications of a one-year decoupling. The ideal situation is having the AS examinations, with the mark contributing to the A level. Generally speaking, that is a sound system. The current situation, if you like, is to deal with the particular circumstances of COVID, and, if we can get back to a greater level of normality in exams, that is all the better. Certainly, the intention is that the actions taken as regards the 2020 AS levels will be a one-year solution. It is not something that I would like to see pertain for any longer than it has to.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, you mentioned that other jurisdictions were doing the same as we are doing here. Can you guarantee absolutely that that will not change during the year? A number of our students sit exams that are not only from CCEA but from other areas, and, if the other areas take the AS, it will have a detrimental impact.

Mr Weir: I cannot guarantee what other jurisdictions will do; that is clearly the case. From that point of view, we will always need to keep an eye on what happens elsewhere and keep in close coordination. The overriding concern is to ensure not simply the integrity of examination results but, in particular, that none of our Northern Ireland students are treated unfairly in any way in comparison with their compatriots elsewhere or, as the Member rightly pointed out, with Northern Ireland students who take examinations from bodies outside Northern Ireland. There will always be an examination of what is happening, and I will make sure that, at any stage, our students are not disadvantaged when it comes to A-level results.

A levels, more so than any other examinations, become a national and international gateway to university places, in particular; more so than, for example, the GCSE market, which is a lot more self-contained in Northern Ireland and is, principally but not exclusively, used for progression and employment in Northern Ireland.

I certainly give the assurance that we will make sure that we are on a level playing field with other jurisdictions. The dilemma that will sometimes come is that different jurisdictions also go in different directions, but the one thing that I am certain of is that it would be utterly wrong for Northern Ireland to go on a solo run as regards A levels, particularly given our size and because I do not want to see any student in Northern Ireland being disadvantaged.

2.15 pm

Schools: Mid and East Antrim Borough Council Area

3. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the current arrangement between Carrickfergus Grammar School and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, whereby the school is using a council-owned building, which is also used and run as a community centre, as a satellite classroom. (AQO 653/17-22)

Mr Weir: The COVID-19 pandemic had a very significant impact on society. In seeking to get pupils back in to education, my Department provided guidance for schools on how to achieve that while enacting measures to minimise risk. Although I had no direct role in the discussions between Carrick Grammar and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, I had the opportunity to visit the school to see the arrangements that had been put in place. It is part of a wider, deeper partnership that allows the school to use nearby council premises, which relieves some of the pressure directly in the school. I am also aware from the visit that good work is ongoing — I think that it is at planning stage — on shared facilities such as sports pitches. Although I cannot comment on individual school arrangements, I welcome the cooperative arrangement between local government and, in this case, Carrick Grammar.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for his answer. As he alluded to, it is one of a number of projects that have taken us to a new level of collaborative working between educators, local government, elected reps and other agencies, such as Sport NI, in my constituency. The project was due, of course, to the current pandemic, but does the Minister agree that those partnerships could really be the new norm, reflecting previous reports?

Mr Weir: I am always wary of the phrase "the new normal" given the events of the last number of months. That level of cooperation, co-design and working together is very much a shining example. I was very impressed by the work in Carrickfergus between the council and the school. Although none of us has a crystal ball to be able to gaze in to the future, we will be moving ahead in what may well be a fairly tough financial situation, so we need to ensure that we get the best possible delivery for society and communities as a whole. If there is one good thing to emerge out of COVID, it is that it can help to break down

barriers and make sure that, across government and different institutions, there is less of a silo mentality and we look to see where there can be the best possible benefit for schools and wider delivery for the public. I encourage others to look at what is happening at Carrick Grammar; it is a shining exemplar of some of the things that can be done in the future.

Ms C Kelly: Minister, is your Department undertaking to look at the potential of utilising community and other civic buildings for schools in the event of localised outbreaks and school closures?

Mr Weir: We will liaise with schools, the EA and others in relation to that. To some extent, it is something that can be drawn out at a later stage. If we are talking about localised lockdowns — we have seen what has happened over the last week or two — the aim must be to try to protect schools as much as possible from that happening. If, next year, there is a need for a greater spread of pupils to enable examinations to take place, people in the community have been in contact to say that they would be happy for their local hall of whatever description to be used. There is an opportunity that can be utilised. At the moment, it is not one that needs to be actioned. Where there has been a further spread of coronavirus in schools, the direct impact has been that pupils or staff members have been asked to self-isolate, which, in and of itself, means that people will be at home rather than using additional facilities. However, we are certainly very open to those sorts of solutions.

Post-primary Transfer Test

4. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Education whether he plans to introduce a single post-primary transfer test. (AQO 654/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department does not provide the transfer tests. It is a matter, ultimately, for the Association for Quality Education (AQE Ltd) and the Post Primary Test Consortium (PPTC), which provides the GL test, to determine the most appropriate way forward for the delivery of the tests, including consideration of a single transfer test option. However, I have great sympathy for the Member's question. If we could reach a point where there is a single set of tests, that would be an advantage.

I understand that some work has gone on between the organisations. There may be a question mark over whether that has been slightly delayed or slowed by COVID. From the point of view of provision, roughly 1,000 pupils each year tend to do both sets of tests. So, there is a subset there. We could spend all day talking about the transfer test, but I do not think that there would be a consensus in this House on the subject. However, at least if the two organisations providing it could work together to provide a single robust test, that would ease the pressures for a lot of our parents.

Mrs Barton: Thank you for your answer. It is in the best interests of children to find a way forward that is inclusive for all children. If a single test were eventually established, do you envisage that that would be cost neutral to parents?

Mr Weir: We are probably going some distance from the question. One of the issues, to some extent, would be that the overall cost would be considerably reduced because the mechanisms for having two sets of tests would not

necessarily be there. Ultimately, there will be some cost, and assuming that those would still be private tests, there would then be a balance to be struck between what would be provided by those schools that are using it to provide for the children and whether there can be a contribution from parents. That is an element of detail that could prove part of that. The more that we can create a situation in which there is no direct financial burden on parents, the more it would be welcomed by everybody.

Mr Lyttle: The Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment is consulting on proposals for an alternative approach to GCSE, AS and A2-level curriculum and assessment for this academic year due to exceptional circumstances. Why does the Education Minister support that, albeit, out of time, consultation for an alternative approach to those examinations, but he is dogmatically opposed to any such consideration of alternatives to requiring 10-year-old children to sit five examinations for post-primary transfer during a global pandemic?

Mr Weir: I admire the Member's ingenuity at being able to engineer the transfer test into the latter part of that question. Academic selection is legally allowable, and it is right that schools have the opportunity to use it. The only robust way that this can actually take place is with tests. Whatever one's view, particularly on the awards during the summer, tests are clearly highly more preferable than having a situation in which there is any form of CCEA-based or assessment-centre-based assessment.

The reality is that there is no methodology at primary-school level through which assessment can take place without tests. I have more sympathy for the position of the SDLP or Sinn Féin, who are abundantly clear on their position, but, at the heart of this, if the Member is saying, "Let us abolish academic selection completely", the logical output of what he is saying is, "Let us end the grammar school system". The Member cannot have his cake and eat it. If he wants to say that, on the one hand, he is pro-grammar but anti-academic selection, that is a matter of intellectual gymnastics that the Member may feel he is able to pull off, but I do not think that he is fooling anybody. While I do not agree with it, I at least admire the much greater openness of the position of those parties that are simply opposed to academic selection. I make that very clear.

Ms Mullan: Minister, you recently announced £5 million for schools to support our young people's mental health and well-being. While this is very welcome, it is at odds with the pressure of academic testing. Is it not time to bring an end to academic selection and stop putting this pressure on our very young children?

Mr Weir: That question is maybe a little bit closer to the centre. I admire the Member's ability to work that in. I believe, first of all, that while there is a right to academic selection, it needs to be respected. There is both strong support for and strong opposition to academic selection, but it needs to be facilitated while it is legal. The next question from the Member's colleague is on the broader issue of the well-being initiative, so I will try to pick up that detail more when Mr McHugh raises it. No, I do not think this is the time, and I am sure the Member would be very surprised if I suddenly said yes.

Mr McNulty: Minister, the transfer test has been postponed until January. Is Christmas cancelled for young people and the families of the children who are affected?

Mr Weir: No, it is not. The position with the dates is as I indicated in my opening response. The dates of the tests are set by AQE and PPTC, so it is their choice as to when to do that. The role of the Department, arising out of the areas of implementation from the Education Authority, is whether or not, from the point at which tests are done, there is sufficient time to complete the processes to ensure that everybody is able to transfer on time. It is clear that, on the basis either of earlier tests in November/December or of later tests in January, the response from the EA is that it can be done in time to ensure that everybody transfers. The choice ultimately lay with the test providers, but it is able to be done within that.

There are mixed arguments about what the best possible date is. I appreciate that some parents have said that their children are ready to do it in November/December and would prefer to do that. Others will say that, actually, given some of the interruptions that there have been, a bit of additional preparation time will be beneficial. In many ways, it is a slightly moot point, because the choice lies with the two organisations that are setting the tests.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Iarraimse ceist ghairid ar Maolíosa McHugh agus freagra gairid uirthi sin. If we can get a quick question and quick answer, we can just about fit it in.

Schools: Well-being Initiatives

Mr McHugh: Go raibh maith agat, ceist uimhir a cúig anois.

Mr Weir: I am making the assumption that that is question No 5.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Yes.

5. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Education for an update on the £5 million allocation to schools for well-being initiatives. (AQO 655/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am not 100% clear. Unfortunately, perhaps, the £5 million figure has actually been used in two different contexts. I presume that the Member is talking about the £5 million that was part of the wider package for the restart. It is anticipated that the £5 million Education Restart well-being project funding will be allocated directly to schools, subject to business case approval. By receiving their own allocation, schools will benefit from having the flexibility to use the money to provide health and well-being support and to draw down support for their pupils and staff. There is also, separately — it was previously mentioned as part of the overall budget — an addition of £5 million in general well-being initiatives. I believe that, with some support from our Health colleagues, we will be able to make that a slightly bigger picture in connection with that, so two streams of money will be made available. One will probably go to particular projects that will support the school sector, and one is likely to be directly allocated to schools for them to decide where they feel it is best to deploy that resource and to use their knowledge on the ground.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Maolíosa. Just a brief supplementary. We will get you in.

Mr McHugh: It is of utmost importance that you take into consideration the emotional health and well-being of students now that they are back in the classroom, so how will CCEA's consultation on the curriculum and exams take into consideration the mental health and well-being of students? In a sense, too, that very much relates to the previous question about the 11-plus. I come from a community where people have long memories. They remember how children did in the 11-plus, but they do not remember how they graduated after it.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Can you give a very brief answer, Minister?

Mr Weir: I think that time is, effectively, gone. On all three points, it is important that there is that level of support. That is why there is separate funding for the engage programme, which will deal with academic catch-up, and it was important that that was not done simply as an exercise in and of itself, but that specific money was directed towards well-being. For all of us, being able to establish the impact on well-being of COVID's interruption to education — even today, there is probably not an absolutely clear picture —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Minister, we have run over a wee bit. That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move to topical questions. Number 4 has been withdrawn.

Craigavon Senior High School: Lurgan Campus

T1. **Mr Beattie** asked the Minister of Education, after stating that he appreciates the pressures that the Minister and his Department are under because of COVID-19 and asking the Minister to forgive him for going back to an important local issue, whether, given that a report from as far back as 2015 identified that there are serious safeguarding and educational output issues at the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School, he can provide an update on where we are in dealing with those issues and the school estate. (AQT 361/17-22)

Mr Weir: Yes, if the Member will give me a minute or so. I have had the opportunity, both when I was Minister previously and in the interim, to visit the Lurgan campus of Craigavon Senior High School. I am entirely aware of some safeguarding issues there and also of the physical state of building.

As the Member will be aware, a development proposal was made which was then, effectively, stopped by way of a court case. That has meant that matters have had to go back to a previous situation. As such, as I understand it, the EA has agreed a range of options. It will update a draft case for change consultation document which reflects the judicial review ruling. That has been completed. EA officers will update the data that is contained in the draft case for change. The EA, in conjunction with the Controlled Schools Support Council, met the principal and board of governors at the end of August with regard to the updated case for change, and will seek approval to rerun the pre-publication consultation on what has been put forward.

I am somewhat constrained in giving an answer because any development proposal will ultimately come back to the Department and to me as the final legal arbiter. Obviously, I am then constrained and cannot make any comment that is either favourable or negative towards any development proposal without potentially prejudicing the process.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Minister for his answer. I absolutely understand the constraints that he is under. However, the Minister will know that working-class families and children in the non-selective education sector in Lurgan, who deserve the same standard of education as those in the selective sector, do not see a two-year post-primary school — the only one in the UK, I must add — as a way to improve those children's educational attainment. Nor will bussing them to Portadown help them. Is the Minister willing, within the next month, to meet parents of children from that school to discuss the issue, free from politicians and the spin that, in some way, it is damaging the Dickson plan?

Mr Weir: I am happy to meet whoever. I cannot comment on any particular aspect of any proposal. If there are solutions, either in Lurgan or the wider Craigavon context, it would be wrong of me to comment on their merits. It is important that all children get the best possible opportunities. The current position with Lurgan has not been helpful in that regard.

I appreciate that there are different views on the issue. There is a need to bring as much certainty as possible to it. I do not have any problem, in principle, with meeting whoever. I would need to check on the propriety of any meeting, because I know that, when a development proposal process is initiated, there is a period when the Minister can meet various individuals and receive representations, for example, and there are periods when the Minister is barred from doing that. Subject to not being barred from having a meeting, I would be more than happy to have one.

Education Restart: Parental Anxiety

T2. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Education, after commending staff and parents for the extra work that they have put in to allow schools to reopen, what his Department is doing to engage with parents who have not yet sent their children back to school either because they, their children or someone else in the family home has an underlying health condition, particularly because, although schools have been open for quite some time, for many people, the anxiety that they felt at the onset of the pandemic has not abated at all. (AQT 362/17-22)

Mr Weir: There is a small range of children that have very specific medical conditions. The EA and ourselves will be working with them to ensure that resources and online learning can be put in place. There are two aspects to this. The level of return to school that we saw maybe showed that, in Northern Ireland, we took advantage of taking that little bit longer to put things in place. For example, what we saw in other jurisdictions that returned to school at an earlier stage, was that they had a large percentage of parents and children staying away.

The figures for Northern Ireland would suggest a willingness of parents for their children to be there. I think I saw the Member's colleague expressing great joy with his own family getting in. I will not comment on whether

he was just keen to get rid of his family or whether he was just keen to see schools resuming. It is undoubtedly the case that if you look at attendance in the first week or two of the school term, the figures are, broadly speaking, very comparable to what they would normally be. That would suggest that overall the number of parents who feel that they have to hold back their children is fairly minimal.

One of the major challenges that is out there is to ensure that parents have the most up-to-date and precise information. Working with the Public Health Agency, we produced a very simple flowchart that provides information for parents on what to do in particular circumstances, and that has been sent out through schools.

Perhaps understandably, one of the issues at the very start of schools resuming was a large volume of calls from parents to the Public Health Agency with concerns, for example, about whether their child needed a test. On the first day, I think in well over 90% of those calls, no test was needed.

It is about trying to ensure that parents have the maximum amount of information and communication.

Ms Sheerin: Thank you for your answer, Minister. Can you give us some assurance to those parents who are concerned and do not think that their child should be returning to school, that there will not be a penalty and that you will deal with each case on a case-by-case basis and treat the parents with sensitivity and flexibility?

Mr Weir: There is a broad duty to educate young people, and I want to see that duty fulfilled. Neither the Department nor I — or anybody else — want to be punitive. It is about a pastoral way of working alongside parents. Clearly, there is a requirement that if a child is registered with a school, that that child should attend, but I think that, given the circumstances, there will be a sympathetic and understanding approach taken. Sometimes, the message to parents will have to be that the safest place for their child is in school, with a few exceptions if there are medical complaints.

We do have to give an indication, particularly to parents, that the risks to children in the pandemic are extremely low. Statistically, there is a greater risk of a child having an accident and injuring themselves, or even dying, at home. That perhaps puts it in context.

I have no desire to be punitive towards parents. It is understandable that some parents will have a strong reaction. As with a number of issues, and judging by the correspondence that I get, there will be a number of parents that will be at opposite ends of the spectrum on some of these issues, while the vast majority are probably relatively silent in the middle.

Schools: Hygiene Levels

T3. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Education, after offering his appreciation for the work of the Minister and his officials in preparing for the return to school, with the processes and procedures that have been put in place, for an assurance that schools are clean and hygienic places for all children and that ongoing cleanliness is maintained. (AQT 363/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Member raises a very valid point. With a lot of things related to COVID, we tend to focus in on some

issues and almost pass by others. The issues around hygiene, good hand sanitisation and ensuring that schools are cleaned, are critical. As part of that, the overall package that the Executive agreed — and I think that there have been indications that it is not the final position — of £42 million support for the restart of schools, included money specifically for additional cleaning, and also in the wider context, for PPE. When people think of PPE, they think of face coverings and gloves, but the vast bulk of the money that is earmarked for PPE is for cleaning materials and hand sanitiser. It is also the case that, through my working alongside the Executive, further support has been made available since that announcement to ensure that, projecting into the future, provision of hand sanitisers is the Department's number-one priority. That has been accepted by the Executive as a whole, and we will see support emerging for that.

We have seen particular incidents happen. There have been occasions on which schools have either been closed for a period or partially closed for a deep clean, and that has been facilitated as well.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his response. Can he give us an assurance that the funding will continue, as it is necessary that proper resources be put in place, that overtime be available and that contract cleaners be available? Can he give an assurance that funding of that will not fall to boards of governors, which are already under pressure to manage their school with limited resources?

Mr Weir: What I will say in response to that is twofold. First, the Executive have agreed an overall package that goes beyond the £42 million. It covers cleaning materials and PPE beyond the period of the situation as is but also meets the assessed needs for the rest of the financial year.

Secondly, on the broader issue of additional overtime and cleaning, within the overall provision, a certain amount has been made available to schools for them to have the flexibility to spend the money themselves to meet additional pressures as they see fit. To some extent, what has been put in place will carry us only so far. At later stages, there will probably be a need for additional support from the Executive, and I will be making that clear when bidding for that money.

It is a little bit of a false dichotomy to say that a particular resource comes from a certain budget, be it the from Department of Education's, the EA's or an individual school's, because, ultimately, the money comes out of the system as a whole. It is therefore wrong of us to draw that level of false division. There is a need for resources to be supplied, and the health and safety of our pupils and staff will be the number-one priority. That is why, when additional money was being sought from the Executive in the past couple of weeks, PPE, including hand sanitiser, soap and other materials, was highest in the ranked order of priority in our bid to the Executive.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Mr Christopher Stalford. We should be able to fit in a quick question and a quick answer.

Arellian Nursery School

T5. **Mr Stalford** asked the Minister of Education whether he will take a direct interest in Arellian Nursery School in South Belfast and ensure that any child who applies for

a place at that school is in the position to get one, given that, every year that Mr Stalford has been a Member of the House, Arellian Nursery School has turned away children, leading to, this year, he and the school's principal seeking a temporary flexibility request for eight additional places, which was refused by the Education Authority on the ludicrous pretext of insufficient demand. (AQT 365/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have perhaps been accused of being more Orwellian than Arellian in my approach to things.

It is probably wrong for me to comment on an individual school without having the information. We will look into the wider situation at the nursery school. Traditionally, a slightly different policy approach has been taken for preschool that has suggested that numbers are a lot tighter. It has also sometimes been the case that, on the broader preschool side of things, there will be a restriction on the numbers that can be in a preschool that is not necessarily the case for primary and post-primary schools, because of restrictions on what numbers can be fitted in safely. As Minister, however, I am certainly happy to look into the situation at the nursery school.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): You have time for a very brief supplementary question.

Mr Stalford: Very briefly, can the Minister outline to the House whether he has any plans to review the criteria that are used for allocating nursery school places, in order to ensure that no parents are discriminated against when applying for a place for their child?

Mr Weir: I do not want to see anybody discriminated against, so, as part of a wider range of things, that will probably be looked at.

As Members can appreciate, particularly as a result of COVID, issues that normally might have been a little ahead in the agenda have probably been backed up to an extent. It is therefore a question of working through a wide range of issues, but I will be keen to look at the level of nursery provision that there will be.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two to allow the Minister and Members to enter the Chamber for the next item of business.

2.45 pm

Finance

RHI Inquiry Recommendations: NICS Implementation

1. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister of Finance what work has been undertaken to action the recommendations relating to the Northern Ireland Civil Service in the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) inquiry report. (AQO 666/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The Executive have accepted in principle the recommendations of the RHI inquiry report and, in line with the NDNA commitment, established a subcommittee to consider the recommendations of the RHI report in full and to oversee their implementation. That subcommittee met for the first time in July.

The subcommittee heard that significant work has already been done in response to the evidence given to the inquiry, including new codes of conduct for Ministers and special advisers. The Executive subcommittee is due to meet again in October and it will bring a full report on the actions taken and proposed for each recommendation to the Assembly before the Christmas recess.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for his answer. In the spirit of openness and transparency, as identified in the RHI report, for which you are the lead Minister, will you publish in full all unclassified emails that refer to the non-order of PPE made by his Department with the Irish Government? The unclassified emails may be of particular relevance to the forthcoming Northern Ireland Audit Office report.

Mr Murphy: I have no difficulty in supplying the Committee with information that it has asked for, and we have supplied it with information that it asked for. I am, of course, happy to comply with any of the guidance and regulations in the ministerial code of conduct or the code for special advisers.

Mr Boylan: Will the Minister give us any further update on the Executive subcommittee?

Mr Murphy: As I said in my initial answer, the subcommittee met in July. It is an Executive subcommittee and is made up of a number of Executive Ministers. Work had already been undertaken in advance of the conclusion of the RHI inquiry. There has been a review of risk management across the Departments by group internal audit and fraud investigation services; a revision of guidance for project management; an initiation of a project delivery profession within the NICS; an NICS people strategy; a review of business case and expenditure approvals; an initiation of reviews into record management policy and the electronic management system; a review of whistle-blowing; the institution of a more senior grade for the role of private secretary; and new practice guidance for private offices. All of that work began in advance of the subcommittee sitting.

Obviously, work was done on the ministerial code and the special advisers code, and that has been published and adopted by the Executive. We will analyse that work and the work that has yet to be completed as per the NDNA commitments and the inquiry recommendations that the Executive have agreed to accept in full and to implement. As I said, the intention is for the subcommittee to sit again in October and to bring out a report before the Christmas recess.

Mr O'Toole: Given what the Minister has just said and given that a new head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service will be appointed in the next few days, what conversations will the Minister and the First Ministers be having with the new appointee about urgently implementing the findings of the RHI inquiry? Minister, you will agree that the public in Northern Ireland have yet to be convinced that we are seeing real structural reform in our Civil Service following the scandal of RHI and other things.

Mr Murphy: If a person is, indeed, appointed in the next couple of days, that person, from what I have seen of the shortlist, will be a permanent secretary, so they will be very much cognisant not only of the outworkings of the RHI Inquiry but the Executive's clear view in accepting the Inquiry's recommendations and undertaking to implement

those recommendations and the work that has been done to date on the various codes.

Of course, there is a wider piece of work, as the Member mentioned, around the reform of the Civil Service, and that is something that will fall to my Department. We have already started that work and we have begun discussions with senior civil servants in that regard. I intend to bring that work forward to complement the findings and outworkings of the RHI Inquiry.

Mr Blair: Flowing from the RHI report, is there in existence a list of targeted recommendations with actions that have deadlines and do those actions have owners who can be identified for progressing them?

Mr Murphy: The RHI report and the outworkings of the inquiry are about restoring confidence and about ensuring that the things that caused the RHI scandal are not done in the way they were before, so that we can ensure that there is a different way of approaching things. There is a huge number of lessons within that, so it is important for public confidence that it is seen that the recommendations from that report are implemented in a timely fashion with urgent actions attached to them.

We have already undertaken and implemented some of the recommendations; some of the work began before the inquiry had even reported. I am not sure whether the Member was on the working group prior to the Executive being reformed, in which the five parties were already looking at some of the issues and making recommendations. A significant amount of work has already taken place but we want to ensure that confidence in the working of this institution is restored. The experience of the RHI debacle has deeply dented confidence in that working, so the recommendations and the actions that flow from the inquiry and from the work being done by the RHI subcommittee need to be done — and be seen to be done — in a way that restores public confidence.

COVID-19: Treasury Funding

2. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Finance how much extra funding has been provided for the people of Northern Ireland by HM Treasury since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. (AQO 667/17-22)

6. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the scale of the additional financial support provided to Northern Ireland by HM Treasury in response to COVID-19. (AQO 671/17-22)

Mr Murphy: With your permission, a LeasCheann Comhairle, I wish to group questions 2 and 6. The Executive has received £2.2 billion of funding from the Treasury as part of its COVID-19 response.

Mr Allister: In addition to that, of course, there was the extensive support for the furlough scheme. The Economy Minister told the House this morning that up to a quarter of a million people benefited from that scheme. When we add in that direct aid, is it a reasonable assumption to conclude that there must have been aid of the order of about £5 billion of extra funding to Northern Ireland since the onset of COVID? Is it the case that £800 million or thereabouts remains unspent at the centre?

Mr Murphy: I cannot attribute the level of funding that the Member does to the employee retention scheme. Of

course, there is also a scheme for self-employed people, from which about 78,000 people benefited. We do not have the exact figures for that. I know that the Member is extrapolating, but the figure that we were allocated for the Executive to dispose of was £2.2 billion. The Member is correct; perhaps not that figure in total but in the region of £600 million is with the Health Department and was allocated as part of its COVID response. We are working with the Health Department to ascertain how that will be spent, because it has to be spent within this financial year.

Obviously, the Health Department is, quite rightly, preparing for the distinct possibility of a second surge of COVID and for what will be required to meet and manage that. It has other challenges to face, then, as a consequence of the COVID experience, in the other health services that it provides. We are working closely with the Department to examine whether it will need all of that money or be able to spend all of it and, if need be, whether it can be surrendered and spent on other Executive priorities.

It is my intention, then, to bring a paper to the Executive on Thursday, which will allocate the bulk of the remaining money that the Member identified. However, some will be held because, as he will know, we have yet to agree as to how we will support some sectors. I understand that there has been some movement on that between the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, the Economy Minister and the Infrastructure Minister. Rather than allocate it, we have decided to hold back a certain amount of money to be able to deal with some of those sectors that have missed out thus far. The bulk of the money resides with the Health Department at the moment, and once we determine whether it will be able to spend all of that, we will know whether that is catered for or whether there will be more returns to the centre for further distribution.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. It has already been said that the Northern Ireland Audit Office announced on 2 September that £2 billion extra had come from Her Majesty's Treasury. That is another benefit of being part of the Union. Has the Finance Minister had further conversations with Her Majesty's Treasury about the furlough scheme being extended in Northern Ireland as the scheme come close to its end and does he have the support of the Finance Ministers in Scotland and Wales for that?

Mr Murphy: Yes. I have had discussions with Treasury about the furlough scheme. I have made no secret of the fact, probably, that I think that it is premature to end the furlough scheme in October. When it was originally envisaged back in April, which is when I think that it came in, people clearly hoped to be well beyond the COVID experience by the end of October, but, quite clearly, given the experience here and in Britain in the last number of weeks, COVID is going to be with us for some time and we may well experience a resurgence. We had figures shared with us today, I think, to say that the number of people who are on the unemployment register has doubled in the last while. I notice that a lot of that has been attributed to young people who are becoming unemployed.

Clearly, to abruptly end the furlough scheme at the end of October is premature, and I made that representation to Treasury on a number of occasions. I wrote on behalf of the Executive a week or so ago to reinforce that view, again on behalf of the whole Executive, and to argue for

an extension to the furlough scheme, and I have spoken on a number of occasions, and will be speaking again in the morning, to the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers. Collectively, we will make that point to Treasury as well.

Mr Nesbitt: Will the Minister oblige me by providing, although maybe not today, in writing a per capita breakdown of COVID support for the people of Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic? Should the data evidence that the people of Northern Ireland are receiving above-average support, would he concede that there are benefits for Northern Ireland being part of the United Kingdom?

Mr Murphy: If the Member's idea of selling the Union is to say that we are and will always be dependent on handouts — those handouts are particularly from a Government that Members on the opposite Benches have accused of betrayal on a number of occasions — putting your eggs in that basket to advance your argument for the Union is rather weak. Of course, we are taxpayers, and we received a share back, as the Government in Britain has distributed COVID response money. I can get him the breakdown that he wishes, but if I was a neutral in this argument, which I am clearly not, the idea that we will get handouts and that we are and will always continue to be dependent is not one that will sell the Union to me.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his answers. Given that we are just over 100 days away from exiting and that there will be an accompanying loss of EU funding for rural development programmes, will the Minister give us any update that he might have from the UK shared prosperity fund (SPF) on the possibility of getting it transferred here?

Mr Murphy: One of the associated frustrations with how Brexit has been handled in London is that we have no clarity yet about the shared prosperity fund. That view is shared by colleagues that I speak to in the Scottish and the Welsh Administrations. We had expected some degree of certainty. The Executive have a very clear view on lost EU funding that the commitment to replace like with like and their desire to be in charge of designing the programmes and distributing the money for them is shared right across the Executive. We continue to press the case on Whitehall, but, as yet, we have had very little clarity on how much the fund might be and how it might be operated.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Question 3 has been withdrawn.

Living Wage

4. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the New Decade, New Approach commitment that the Executive will become a living wage employer. (AQO 669/17-22)

Mr Murphy: When setting public-sector pay policy for 2020-21 at the beginning of this month, I required all public bodies to actively consider how pay awards can be targeted to ensure the payment of the Living Wage Foundation's living wage. My officials will shortly begin to engage with each of the Departments to examine the practical implications for the public sector in taking that forward.

Mr McGuigan: Go raibh maith agat, Minister. Further to your response, Minister, do you agree that where wages and terms and conditions for workers are concerned, the

Executive should be an exemplar of good practice and a model for other employers to follow?

Mr Murphy: My answer is yes we should. This policy is part of an NDNA commitment, which all the Executive parties signed up to. The living wage is, of course, a commitment where the Executive have an obligation to set a standard. The vast majority of civil servants are paid above the living wage but, nonetheless, there are the public bodies, which we can encourage along that route as well.

3.00 pm

As I said, in settling pay policy, I give flexibility for Departments and public bodies to meet this, and I encourage them to meet the living wage foundations: a living wage that is above what might be considered the national living wage.

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Does he agree that, as the furlough scheme comes to an end, workers in certain sectors will be hit harder than others? Will he outline whether any further targeted wage-support schemes, to help workers in these struggling sectors, are planned?

Mr Murphy: As I said in an answer to Mr Humphrey, the continuation of that employee retention scheme, commonly known as the furlough scheme, is one that I have raised with Treasury on many occasions. I argued that it is premature to bring it to an end in October. Of course, there are particular sectors where, we have argued, if the Treasury is not to continue wage support in full, it should certainly look at specific sectors that will continue to struggle in these conditions. Even with a partial reopening of the economy, or an attempt to reopen it as fully as can be, there are sectors that will continue to struggle. We have seen unemployment numbers dramatically increase. That is evidence already, before the end of October, of the impact that there will be.

Of course, I agree with the Member that we need to target that, and we will continue to raise that question with the Treasury. My intention is to have more direct engagement, perhaps over in the Treasury, before the end of the month, if it can be arranged. I will continue to engage with my Scottish and Welsh counterparts; indeed, I will be speaking to them in the morning. We continue to sing off the same hymn sheet about the need for a continuation of that scheme.

Fiscal Council

5. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the appointment and terms of reference of the fiscal council, as outlined in *New Decade, New Approach*. (AQO 670/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My officials began examining the options for establishing a fiscal council earlier this year, but work did not progress as intended, given the need to focus on the immediate COVID-19 response. However, my Department is now actively refocusing on the issue and consideration is being given to what the council's terms of reference might be and how members could be appointed. I will be able to provide a further update once the work has been sufficiently advanced.

Dr Aiken: Bearing in mind that it is eight months since *New Decade, New Approach*, we are having significant issues with getting details of budgets, what is happening with money supplies, what is happening in Departments and the fact that we do not yet have an economic plan — at least one that Members of the Assembly have had sight of — to get us out of COVID, will the Minister expedite the formation of the fiscal council so that not only are we able to, hand in glove, bring in an economic plan to get us out of COVID but be in a position to look at it and monitor it carefully to make sure that it is affordable and deliverable?

Mr Murphy: I agree that we have all lost time as a consequence of COVID. If the Member questions Ministers from all Departments, there will be work that we had all envisaged doing, particularly work related to NDNA commitments, of which the fiscal council is one, that has suffered a time lag because people have been so busy trying to respond to the challenge of COVID. We are picking that up, and will do so at pace. It is important, though, to get it right, to get the right powers and terms of reference for a fiscal council and to appoint the right people to it. We do not wish to delay any further. We want to get this done. It is a commitment that I intend to fulfil, but we need to make sure that it is done correctly.

Of course, among the difficulties, we have been on a cycle of annual budgets. We are now on a cycle that has been interrupted by the response to COVID. We are trying to deal with the additional money that was moved across, trying to spend it quickly, get it out there and make sure that it is properly audited and accounted for. Following the spending review that has begun in Whitehall, I hope to be in a position, in the autumn, to announce multi-annual budgets. Then we will have greater clarity and advance sight of how Departments will spend the money, and that will allow Committees, the Finance Committee and others, to apply the appropriate level of scrutiny to Departments.

Ms Armstrong: I am delighted to hear the Minister say that we are working towards multi-annual budgets. Does he believe that a fiscal council needs to be up and running prior to the introduction of a multi-annual budget?

Mr Murphy: I do not think that the two events are necessarily linked. As I say, we have been told that there will be an autumn statement or an autumn Budget event in London. That could happen as late as November; sometimes these autumn statements have even run into December. We are not in control of that timetable, to be quite honest. Our intention is to get the fiscal council up and working properly, with the right people appointed and the right terms of reference. There is a linkage with the British Government in doing that, because they have a role in it, so that process is not entirely of our making. As I say, we have no control over trying to time that with what emerges from Whitehall in the autumn. If we get the right council in place and give it the right remit, hopefully, the two things will coincide, and they should have roughly the same time frame, but, as I say, we cannot exactly say when either of them will happen.

Ms Dolan: Can the Minister give an update on the fiscal powers commission?

Mr Murphy: Similarly, that is another piece of work that we had undertaken to do when we came into office in January, and it is another piece of work for which, unfortunately, the time frame has slipped, as is the case for work in a lot

of other Departments, given the emergency that we were faced with during the COVID pandemic. Similarly, we are back looking very actively at the fiscal commission, at agreeing its terms of reference, at who might be on that commission and at how they might be appointed. We want to make sure that the fiscal commission can look, as they have done already in Wales and Scotland, at what other tax levers and financial levers the Executive might request to be transferred to here so that we can have much more control over our spending power.

Mr O'Toole: Further to that point, I have two quick questions. First, can he confirm that the fiscal council and the fiscal powers commission will have real economic forecasting powers, given that simply bean counting will not be enough to solve the structural challenges that face this place?

Secondly, what conversations has he had with his counterparts in Scotland, Wales and elsewhere, including inside the Executive, about the appalling powers being taken in the Internal Market Bill to undermine the core tenets of devolution not just in this part of the world but across the UK? What is he doing to stand up, with other Finance Ministers, to what the UK Government are doing to breach the fundamental basis of devolution across these islands?

Mr Murphy: The remits of the fiscal commission and the fiscal council have yet to be decided, but, yes, we want to make sure that both can do the jobs that we expect of them.

On the other matter of the legislation that is going through Westminster, of course, he will know that the Executive are divided on that. We in the Executive have very different views on Brexit in its entirety but in particular on that Bill. I share the concerns that the Member has expressed. It is on the agenda for my discussion tomorrow morning with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers. I know in advance that they share the same concerns that we have about the implications of that Bill for devolution. There will be an opportunity tomorrow for us, Wales and Scotland to agree a position and to make that position together to the British Government.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Question 6 was grouped with question 2 and has been answered.

Arm's-length Bodies: Review Update

7. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the review of arm's-length bodies. (AQO 672/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive agreed to a review of arm's-length bodies (ALBs), which, again, is a commitment in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. That committed us to carrying out a review of their efficiency and effectiveness, with a view to their rationalisation. The number of arm's-length bodies being considered is 116, with a total cost of approximately £11 billion and an estimated staffing complement of 135,000.

We have initiated a two-stage review. The first stage is about gathering background information from Departments on the bodies themselves: the budget; the staffing; the functions; internal and external board members and their remuneration; frequency of meetings etc; details of what the ALB has achieved and when it was subjected to a

review, as well as the conclusion of that review; and where the ALB is located.

The second stage will involve looking at the rationale for the arm's-length body and considering whether the functions that it carries out can be delivered in the Department itself. Does it require political impartiality? Does it have a technical function that would be inappropriate for a Department to carry out? Are there overlaps with other ALBs? Has it outlived its purpose? Should it be abolished? Does it have sufficient transparency to the public about its activities and could that be improved?

That work is progressing well, and it is my intention that it will be brought to the Executive for consideration in the near future. It will include proposals for the rationalisation, efficiency and effectiveness of arm's-length bodies considered in the review.

Mr McHugh: Minister, do you agree that this will provide an opportunity for good governance, increased accountability and democracy and improved service delivery that will reduce unnecessary bureaucracy in arm's-length bodies?

Mr Murphy: I agree with the Member that the purpose of the review was to improve efficiency and effectiveness, and it has already identified emerging themes in the area of governance, including the regulation of boards, relationships with sponsorship officials, accountability to Ministers and regular reviews. We are considering all those issues. The outcome should be better public services delivered more efficiently, more effectively and more transparently. That is the overarching principle, and we want to see that achieved. As I say, work is ongoing and is progressing very well, and it is my intention to bring the report to the Executive in the not too distant future.

Mr Frew: Given the fact that I think we all support the review of arm's-length bodies, can the Minister assure the House that he will review governance and transparency in his own Department, and, indeed, the Department's information management policy so that his Department is completely transparent and accountable and so that scrutiny Committees do not have to threaten court action in order to get information?

Mr Murphy: As I say, the retention of information policy is a Civil Service-wide one; it is not the Department's. It was adopted by the Civil Service some time ago when, possibly, one of the Member's colleagues might have been Minister of Finance. That is the policy that pertains today. It is my view that the Department is transparent and accountable and, of course, responsive to the Committee. It has always been my position in the Department that Committees are entitled to information that they request and that such information should be provided in a efficient and effective manner.

Ms Armstrong: Will the Minister consider extending the review to local government to assess whether additional functions could be added or transferred over.

Mr Murphy: I am afraid that that is not within the remit of this investigation. We do not consider local government to be an arm's-length body, as it has a degree of autonomy. Broadly, responsibility for the management of local government lies with the Department for Communities.

However, the Member makes a fair point. Big changes have been in place for some time in local government, so it is, perhaps, an appropriate time for the Executive to look at the powers that have been transferred to local government to see what has worked and what perhaps has not worked. I am always open to the idea of transferring further powers to local government. Local government has had an opportunity to step up to the plate in response to the pandemic, and I think that it has done so very well. Increased cooperation and collaboration between government and local government is a very good thing.

As I say, ultimately we are about providing better services to the public, and we are both in the same place in that regard. Therefore, the Member's suggestion could be timely. I would certainly support reviewing the powers of local government. However, that is not part of the review of arm's-length bodies.

COVID-19: In-year Monitoring

8. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister of Finance to outline the impact current spending on COVID-19-related matters will have on future in-year monitoring rounds. (AQO 673/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive are rightly considering the impact of COVID-19 as they make allocations, first, in response to the pandemic and then to aid our economic recovery. Alongside that, the Executive have considered all the other pressures faced by Departments in the context of the resources available, and allocations were made in the June monitoring round. In that round, Departments were given extra flexibility to reallocate budgets, and that will again be the case in the October monitoring round. The additional flexibility will assist Ministers to respond dynamically to the impact of COVID-19 in their respective Departments.

Mr Robinson: With the serious financial impact that COVID-19 could have on our finances, is there a possibility that the Minister will have to lobby the Treasury for additional block grant funding before the end of the financial year?

Mr Murphy: In the first case, we will want an assessment of what Departments have spent. In answering an earlier question, I discussed the money that I was able to allocate in response to COVID-19. We have spent a significant amount, and there will be further allocations this Thursday. There is, hopefully, sufficient money in Health to meet the challenges that it faces — perhaps more than a sufficient amount. So we need to look at that.

We need to look at where Department budgets sit, because Departments will not have done the business that they intended to do in the first half of this financial year. We had some returns in June monitoring. We are currently in the exercise of October monitoring, and we will bring a position to the Executive and the Assembly in the next number of weeks. We will see how Departments spend the money that they have. Some will have additional challenges because of COVID; others will have money that they would have spent but will not be able to spend because of the pandemic and the way that things have closed down. In the first instance, we need to look at our resources and see what we have before we decide on further interventions.

3.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That ends the period for listed questions. We move on to 15 minutes of topical questions. Question 8 has been withdrawn.

Review of Arm's-length Bodies

T1. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Finance when the review of arm's-length bodies, which is focusing on efficiencies, effectiveness, governance and transparency, will be completed, given that conversations and discussions that the Public Accounts Committee has had with the Northern Ireland Audit Office have shown that it is an issue that, across government, has huge implications on finance and budgets, involving money that could perhaps be used much more efficiently and effectively. (AQT 371/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There were something like 116 bodies, £11 billion worth of budget and 135,000 staff. The Member rightly asks whether some of that work can be carried out within Departments. There is no formula for the creation of arm's-length bodies. If you look into them, you find completely different times that they were set up. Most of them, I imagine, come from the direct rule era, when there was an attempt to create some veneer of local democratic input into decision making. The question is, post Good Friday Agreement and devolution, whether that is still appropriate. Of course, we need to look at all of that — efficiencies, effectiveness and transparency — and we have had and continue to have conversations with the Comptroller and Auditor General. I had a conversation when we started this exercise to outline our view and to take his feelings on some of these. Like the Member, I was a member of the Public Accounts Committee many times and know the questions that come through it. We are very cognisant of their view of what the outcome needs to be. It is well beyond time that we had a long, hard look at some of the arm's-length bodies and what is required in the future.

Mr Humphrey: Will the efficiency, effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of North/South bodies be included in this work?

Mr Murphy: I would argue that the North/South bodies have probably not been able to get to their full remit for various reasons. Some of us, indeed, have a view that perhaps better, more efficient and more effective North/South bodies should have been created back in 1998-99, but that is another argument. Clearly, they are a joint agreement between this Administration and the Administration in Dublin; they are not singularly a matter for review by this Administration

COVID-19: Local Councils

T2. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on his Department's consideration of, or any work that might be ongoing with the Department for Communities in relation to, the potential financial plight of local councils owing to income deficits that have been caused by the COVID-19 crisis. (AQT 372/17-22)

Mr Murphy: We have a very good working relationship with the Department for Communities, as we do with all Departments. Finance works closely with every Department. We have had many engagements with the Minister and the Department for Communities. I think that we have another meeting scheduled for Thursday morning.

We have already given, I think, an additional £20 million to councils this year for their COVID response. I am on record, in response to a previous question, acknowledging the role that councils have played and how they have stepped up in assisting with the public response to the pandemic and the public service response. I will make an allocation on Thursday from some of the remaining COVID money. There has been a bid with regard to councils, and I hope to make a proposition to the Executive on that.

Mr Blair: Further to that, can the Minister detail any scoping or investigation that is being done on behalf of his Department with the council representative bodies to assess the level of help needed as we move towards another financial year?

Mr Murphy: I had the opportunity, I think, on Friday to address a NILGA delegation and take questions from councillors from all 11 councils. It is hugely important to have that engagement. The closer the working relationship between central government here and local government, the better the public services that we will collectively provide. My Department, through Land and Property Services (LPS) and others, is working with the councils on rates. Engagement is happening on council spend and projecting council spend over the financial year. Yes, I absolutely want officials to continue to work with councils to assess their needs; of course, communities have a role there as well. While bearing in mind the limited pot that we have to go round all Departments, we must make sure that we support them as best we can.

Arts Sector: COVID Support Funding

T3. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Finance what happened to the £33 million COVID support money for the arts. (AQT 373/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As the Member will know, money that comes across as a Barnett consequential is unencumbered; it is not ring-fenced for any particular area. In and around the time that that money came across, we made a £4 million allocation of some resilience money for the arts. As with the bid for the councils and local government, there has been a bid from the Department for Communities to support the arts. I see that very much as economic support as well, because arts venues are very much part of our tourism product and economic product. I am sympathetic to the arguments that were made and intend to bring a proposition on that to the Executive on Thursday.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister. On 31 March, the Minister informed the House of his strategy for coping with the COVID crisis:

“We can be flexible and agile in our response” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 127, p237, col 1].

Further:

“We have allowed people to be agile. That is what the public would expect of us: to be as agile as we can, to be on our toes” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 127, p238, col 1].

What is agile about sitting on £33 million for two and a half months, when the arts sector that it is supposed to protect is crumbling?

Mr Murphy: Over the summer months, we have been endeavouring to get an agreed economic recovery strategy from the Executive. I have said that I want to allocate the remaining money. We have a limited remaining pot of COVID money. The Treasury has made it clear that that is it as far as this financial year is concerned. Of course, we have the money sitting with Health, but, as regards what is at our disposal, that is it. I wanted to make sure that it was allocated against economic recovery proposals that the Executive had endorsed. We did not have those over the summer. We now have those, and I am in a position to make an allocation this week. I will bring a proposal to the Executive on Thursday.

Victims' Payment Scheme: Progress

T4. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Finance what progress has been made in seeking to secure funding for the Troubles-related-incident victims' payment scheme. (AQT 374/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As the Member will know, according to the statement of funding policy from Whitehall, the party that proposes and legislates for the policy carries the cost of the implementation of that policy. That is the Executive's position. The people who have done that are the British Government and the NIO. Now, what they have legislated for and the policy that they have put forward is not what was agreed at Stormont House. It is different from what was agreed at Stormont House, and, therefore, they own it. Acting on behalf of the Executive, it is my clear view — it is a clear argument that I have made to Treasury and the NIO on behalf of the Executive — that they are responsible for paying whatever this costs. As yet, we have no clear figures for what it would cost. The Northern Ireland Office and the British Government are responsible for paying out on the scheme.

Mr T Buchanan: Will the Minister accept that it was totally absurd for his party to seek to block the scheme, resulting in a court case? Will he give the House a commitment that he will now do all that he can in his position to secure the funding for the scheme so that there are no further delays?

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member that that is what I have been trying to do: seeking to secure the funding. We do not know what the funding will be. We do not know what the cost is. The Minister of Justice put out an estimate that it will perhaps be up to £800 million. That is completely different from the estimate that the Northern Ireland Office gave us a number of months back. I have been attempting to secure a commitment from the British Government to live up to their own statement of funding policy. It is part of their rule book. They created the policy and legislated for it and, therefore, own the cost of it. That is what I intend to do. There is an idea that the NIO was trying to steamroller us into accepting responsibility for it. Of course, a Department here has to be designated to carry it forward, but the real argument in relation to who pays for the scheme is still to be accepted by the British Government. That is what I intend to pursue, and that is what the Executive have asked me to pursue.

Building Regulations: Changing Places

T5. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Finance whether he has any plans to make Changing Places mandatory in building regulations. (AQT 375/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am committed to incorporating Changing Places toilets into local building regulations as soon as possible. During the summer, I had the opportunity to meet Christine McClements, who has campaigned tirelessly for changes to building regulations in respect of Changing Places toilets. Following my meeting with Christine, I invited her to be part of the technical working group, and I am delighted that she accepted that invitation. The Department is now working through the necessary changes to make Changing Places toilets a requirement in new buildings that meet the specified criteria. Working with the Building Regulations Advisory Committee, the Department is developing proposals for the mandatory provision of Changing Places toilets.

Mr Boylan: Given his responsibility for the Stormont estate, will the Minister provide Changing Places facilities in the grounds of the estate?

Mr Murphy: I am pleased to say that work is progressing to install a Changing Places toilet near to the Mo Mowlam play park, which is a fantastic facility on this estate. The promotion of Changing Places toilets represents an important step in ensuring dignity and equality for all. I have had an opportunity to speak to Christine and other campaigners, and I am aware that there are Members in the Chamber who have been campaigning on the issue as well. Particularly in relation to play parks, when you see the wonderful facilities, the fact that some children cannot access them or cannot access proper toilet facilities while they access the facility is clearly an equality issue. I am pleased that we will bring that forward in building regulations. We will take our own initiative in the estate we have authority over, and I am doing that right away.

Clear Face Coverings

T6. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Finance whether Enterprise Shared Services in his Department could work, or is working, on delivering a video relay service or on coming up with a way to bulk-buy clear masks for customer-facing areas across the Civil Service, given that one of the outcomes of the COVID pandemic has been the effect that face coverings and the lack of face-to-face meetings have had on people such as her who have a hearing disability. (AQT 376/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I share the Member's difficulty, because I have a hearing difficulty and find it difficult, with the wearing of face coverings, to engage. I also find Zoom meetings difficult at times in terms of trying to hear what people are saying. It is a real challenge for those who have a hearing impairment. I am not certain about what work has been carried out, but I am happy to take her question back to the Department and provide her with a written answer.

Ms Armstrong: I would like to just use my supplementary question to thank the Minister for getting to question 6 in topical questions. [Laughter.]

Health Workers' Strike Pay

T7. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Finance when health workers will receive the money that they are owed, given that, as he will be aware, nine months on, money that was deducted from their pay, following justifiable strike action, has not yet been reimbursed. (AQT 377/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive agreed, as far back as May, I think, to provide £1.6 million to reimburse health workers who had been striking, as they went back in to face the front line of taking on the COVID pandemic. I made that money available to the Department of Health, and it is, of course, a matter for the Health Minister to allocate that money.

Mr Boylan: It is incredible that the health workers have been working on the front line through COVID and the Health Minister is now saying that the matter lies with the Executive. Will the Minister clarify where the matter lies? Is it with him or the Health Minister?

Mr Murphy: The Health Minister has asked further questions of the Executive in relation to what he sees as a repercussive element to this. I am of a clear view, and I think that the Executive, when they endorsed the proposition to make the funding available, viewed the health workers, particularly those heading in to face the COVID pandemic, as a unique set of circumstances worthy of our support that does not apply to any other public sector employment circumstance. Of course, the Health Minister will want to satisfy himself about any questions that he has in this regard, but I am clear as Finance Minister and, I think, the Executive are clear in relation to paying those people.

3.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes topical questions. Members, take your ease while we prepare for the next item of business.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Questions for Urgent Oral Answer

Infrastructure

North/South Electricity Interconnector

Mr Speaker: Mr Cathal Boylan has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister for Infrastructure. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure why she announced her decision to approve planning for the North/South electricity interconnector on social media rather than in the Assembly.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): The Member may not be aware that planning decisions have never been announced in the Assembly in the past. The long-established procedure is that, once the Minister has fully considered the application and taken a decision, it is normal practice for a letter indicating the outcome of that decision to be issued to the Speaker, the Chair of the Committee and all MLAs. That is the process that was followed, and my officials went over and beyond that to give early indications. At 12.10 pm and, again, at 12.15 pm, my official telephoned the Business Office to advise that a letter was coming for immediate issue to all MLAs; at 12.25 pm, my official telephoned the Infrastructure Committee Clerk to advise that a letter was coming; at 12.45 pm, letters were issued from my private office to the Speaker, the Chair of the Committee and to the Business Office, for all MLAs; and, at 1.22 pm, I announced the positive news via social media. As that timeline sets out, the process was correctly followed.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for coming to the House to give a response. The Minister is well aware that this is a major infrastructure project. Numerous members of the community have relayed major concerns about house values and health issues; there have been thousands of objections. How will the Minister reconcile those concerns with her decision? What interventions or options will she provide to address those major concerns? A number of groups in Newry and Armagh are very concerned about the introduction of a 400 kV electricity wire on pylons, as such voltage has never been used in this part of the country before.

Ms Mallon: I acknowledge the concerns of residents and the local community. Interested third parties were given the opportunity to present evidence to the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) and have all issues debated at the public inquiry. The PAC carefully considered and reported on the issues raised but concluded that the various objections raised by third parties had not all been sustained. All issues were addressed in the PAC report. The Department has also independently considered those issues as well as all new representations made since the applications were remitted to the Department in the light

of the Buick judgement, and it considers that a grant of planning permission is the correct decision.

I recognise the strength of feeling in the community and the concerns around the proposal. A development of this nature is such that it cannot be delivered without some impact. However, that has to be balanced against the imperative need for the development. I maintain my position that the need for the development outweighs any potential impacts and that, on balance, planning permission should be granted, subject to appropriate conditions to protect the surrounding environment.

Miss McIlveen: I share Mr Boylan's concerns about the manner in which this was announced. Regardless of the merits or otherwise of the decision, the fundamental issue is that, given the scale and implications of the announcement, it perhaps warranted, at the very least, a written statement. Will the Minister, who has been known to chastise others, give a commitment that any future announcement on this scale will be brought to the Assembly in a timely manner?

Ms Mallon: As I outlined, at 12.25 pm, my official telephoned the Infrastructure Committee Clerk to advise that a letter on the issue was coming. At 12.45 pm, my private office issued a letter to the Speaker, to the Chair of the Committee — her good self — and to the Business Office for all MLAs. There is a long-established process for doing that. My predecessor, Chris Hazzard, took two planning decisions: one to approve a major mixed-use development in Comber, and one to refuse a mixed-use development at Crescent Link in Derry. In both cases, he issued the relevant letters, and no announcement was made in the Assembly. The same process was followed in this instance, and it has been followed by all former Ministers.

Dr Aiken: Can the Minister tell the Assembly whether anyone in her Department had briefed the System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI)/EirGrid or the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment before the Assembly, any MLAs or Committees were informed?

Ms Mallon: The answer is no.

Ms D Kelly: I welcome the Minister coming before the House. I am sure that she shares my concern, but not shock, about the double standards emanating from Sinn Féin, a party whose senior figures are under investigation for alleged breaches of this very House's COVID regulations. Does the Minister share my concerns?

Ms Mallon: I am the Minister for Infrastructure, and part of my responsibilities is to take decisions on strategic planning applications. As I outlined in answer to the original question, processes were correctly followed in this instance. I cannot speak or be held responsible for the actions of any other Minister in the House.

Mr Muir: I welcome the planning decision that was made on the back of the Executive Committee (Functions) Act, which gives the Minister permission to take the decision. Will the Minister outline what implications the lack of devolution for the past three years and the failure to form an Executive have had on the ability to take such decisions?

Ms Mallon: I very much share the Member's frustrations. We could be much further advanced on applications and

policies to improve the lives of our citizens if we had been doing our jobs for the three years that we were suspended. There are planning applications of various levels of interest to all parties. I have no doubt that all would be at a more advanced stage if we had had a functioning Assembly and an Executive.

Ms Bailey: With the environmental impact of the new interconnector, the expense of construction and the recent drop in supply demand by up to 290 megawatts — SONI predicted that that will be the case until about 2029 — is the interconnector still our best option, or could public funds be better spent on greener generation schemes, such as the Camlough hydro-electric pump scheme?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. There is still very much a need for this interconnector. It is of huge strategic importance in not just the area of energy security but in enhancing our ability to maximise our potential from renewable energies. In addition, it will provide an important boost to the construction sector during the construction phase, and, subsequently, we should be able to see an increase in employment opportunities in the area of renewable energy. I think that that has been confirmed by the level of support across all sectors, including the renewable energy sector, following the announcement yesterday.

Mr Frew: How often, when the Department for Infrastructure tweets about planning decisions, does it link the applicant to the tweet? Is the Minister assured, given the issues ongoing with SONI's governance, which is being investigated by the Utility Regulator, that she has been provided with all the relevant information from the applicant and that that information is accurate?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The Member will be aware that I have to give very careful consideration to the planning application that is before me. He will also be aware that this application has undergone a rigorous process and was subject to detailed examination at the public inquiry. I do believe that there has been a rigorous process and that all the statutory processes that are required have been completed.

The departmental tweet was, obviously, tweeted from the press office in my Department. I do not suspect that there is any difficulty with that. I cannot say whether that is always done but I can provide that information to you.

Mr Carroll: Can the Minister confirm whether it was the Executive Committee (Functions) Act that allowed her to announce this decision? If that was the case, are there any further decisions on that scale to be announced by her Department in the coming weeks and months?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The Executive Committee agreed that a Bill be brought forward by accelerated passage before the summer recess to address the implications of the Buick judgement. The Bill received Royal Assent on 21 August. Now that Royal Assent has been received, according to the clear legal advice received by my Department, I, as the Minister, can take planning decisions without referral to the Executive Committee and prior to the updating of the ministerial code.

A number of other applications are being considered. For sound decisions to be reached, we have to ensure that all due processes and statutory processes are completed.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for coming to the House to speak on this important issue. I am devastated today for Safe Electricity Armagh and Tyrone, local communities, campaigners, businesses, farmers and householders. There is going to be a terrible scar across our beautiful countryside in County Armagh.

I am pleased that we are able to meet here today with the lights on. If we were to listen to the arguments presented by SONI, the lights would be off. The interconnector should be underground. EirGrid recently demonstrated that it is laying a cable underground in County Clare and County Meath. Why is that not possible in County Armagh and County Tyrone?

That ugly line of unsightly pylons is going to be unacceptable through our beautiful countryside. We are all too aware that the lack of a coherent energy strategy has held back our economy and Government. This planning application is the result of an energy strategy decades old. Have the Minister and her officials considered the impact of this approval on the new energy strategy, which has still to be consulted on? Does she consider this decision to be premature, and why is the interconnector not being laid underground?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. His passion on this issue is clear, and I know that it reflects a passion felt by many in his community. I can deal only with the planning application that is before me, and this application was for overhead lines.

The new energy strategy is unlikely to be published until late 2021. Decisions on these planning applications must be taken within the prevailing policy and strategic context. Also, the Department for the Economy advised that the need for the second North/South interconnector has not changed. It is still considered a vital piece of energy infrastructure. The call-for-evidence document assumes increased interconnection and makes specific reference to the benefits of the new North/South interconnector in security of supply, facilitation of renewables and downward pressure on costs for consumers.

That is consistent with previous energy policy.

3.45 pm

Mr O'Toole: Notwithstanding the local concerns about this issue, will the Minister confirm that this decision has been widely welcomed by business and industry on both sides of the border, is the most significant piece of strategic all-island infrastructure in generations and is also an important tool in delivering on our climate-change commitments?

Ms Mallon: I agree with the Member. This project is of strategic importance at an international, national and regional level. As I said, it is about improving the security of our energy supply and about improving our ability to maximise our renewable energies and reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, and it is a strategic all-island project. As I said, I recognise local concerns about this issue, but we could see the reaction yesterday right across the island, where people recognised the strategic and economic importance of this project and, as the Member rightly points out, its importance in tackling the climate emergency.

Mr Beggs: Can the Minister quantify the degree to which this project will assist with renewable energy? How can she assure us that generators in Northern Ireland will be on a level playing field when they compete against generators in the Republic of Ireland, where, presently, favouritism is being shown towards new generation in the Dublin area?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. It has been confirmed that it will maximise our potential to draw down and utilise our renewable energy by building capacity and ensuring the free flow and connectivity of energy.

The Member raised other issues. The job for me, as the Minister for Infrastructure, is to give very careful and detailed consideration to the planning application; that is, the planning policy considerations and other material considerations. He may wish to direct his questions to other parties.

Mr Durkan: I fully understand local concerns and objections to this application. Indeed, I heard some of them during my tenure as Environment Minister. I recognise the difficulty in making major decisions such as this.

We have heard today of the huge benefits that this will bring to businesses and the welcome that approval has received from businesses. Will the Minister outline what this approval will mean for ordinary people?

Ms Mallon: It means that ordinary people will have a secure supply of energy for their home, and it means that businesses will have access to a secure supply of energy. We are working against the predicted backdrop of a deficiency in energy supply by 2025, so this is a big strategic project of great importance. That importance is at a high-level economic level and on an all-island level, but it will also have a hugely important impact in people's homes.

Mr Speaker: That concludes this item of business. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

Health

GP Services: Public Accessibility

Mr Speaker: Mrs Pam Cameron has given notice of an urgent oral question to the Minister of Health. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their places. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary question.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health how he plans to meet demand for GP appointments and mitigate obstacles encountered by patients seeking to contact their local doctor or practice during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I want to stress that GP practices are open and they are providing face-to-face appointments for those patients who are assessed, as they require them. I have made sure that all practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to allow them to do so safely. Information from the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) shows figures that indicate that the number of face-to-face contacts have increased from approximately 4,500

contacts per day in mid-May to just over 8,000 contacts per day by mid-August.

Members will be aware that GPs also have a contractual responsibility to provide core services to the registered patients, and the pandemic does not negate that. However, GPs will use their clinical judgement to decide how to best prioritise patients to provide this core service while maintaining patient safety. GP practices are operating a telephone-first triage system, which allows patients to seek medical advice from their GP for routine and urgent problems. Then the GP uses clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be managed over the telephone, or whether a face-to-face appointment is required.

There are measures in place to assist GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. Those patients can then be referred for face-to-face assessment to one of the primary care COVID-19 centres. That ensures that those patients do not attend the GP practice or community pharmacy and that they are seen in an appropriate environment, as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimum disruption. Those COVID-19 centres are seeing the highest number of referrals since early May, and it is increasing.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices in Northern Ireland on 30 July and asked them, if this had not been done recently, that practices should undertake a review of arrangements for patients who were accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times which are appropriate to meet the needs of patients.

Practices were advised to communicate to patients about the practice services that are available, and on how to access them. That is along with the recommendation that these communications make clear that GP practices are open. On 7 September GP leaders from the Health and Social Care Board, the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) and the British Medical Association issued a statement to reassure patients that while they may be seen in a different way, by phone or video link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and to issue prescriptions. Similar communications were also issued to MLAs.

Finally, Members will also be aware that GPs are responsible for the administration of the majority of the flu vaccines that are given during the annual flu programme. Given the importance of this year's vaccine along with the significant extended lists of those groups who are eligible for it, GPs are already making plans, which may include hiring larger venues or arranging additional flu vaccination sessions. As part of that, earlier today I signed off an additional £1 million of funding for general practice.

I want to take this opportunity to relay the message to all those listening: GP practices are open. They may be slightly different at the moment, but if people have symptoms or an unexplained illness or have any reason to be concerned, I encourage them in the first instance to pick up the phone, because GPs are there, and they are there to help.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answer. At the outset, let me be very clear that I absolutely do value the work of our GPs and understand the need to operate with much caution to ensure that GP services remain in place and open.

Minister, my office has been inundated, as I am sure the offices of most MLAs have been, with complaints around access to GPs. We are entering the winter flu season now, and it is unlikely that we are going to avoid a second wave of COVID-19. It is imperative that GPs are seen to be open for business and not for emergency cases only. It may well be a perception, but it is certainly a problem for the EDs and, indeed, for the pharmacists, who feel that they are bearing the brunt of the lack of access to physical or remote primary care.

Does the Minister recognise the very serious concerns, especially in the case of the more vulnerable and very elderly patients that some people are not always as fully capable of communicating their health problems to their GP by telephone and that more availability of face-to-face GP appointments is absolutely necessary to properly diagnose whatever their issue may be?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her comments regarding the pressure that GPs are currently under, as are our primary care providers. I also thank her for bringing this question for urgent oral answer to the Floor of the House, because I think that the specific issue that she raises is that of perception. That was particularly useful when the Royal College and the BMA issued that joint letter and that joint communication at the start of last week to reassure patients that our GP practices are still open.

Regarding the cohort that cannot use or is not comfortable with using telephone triage, it has been made clear that GPs should be open and accessible to those patients who need that face-to-face appointment. I referred to that ever-increasing accessibility to do face-to-face contact in my opening answer. We realise the number of face-to-face contacts that have been had in the past number of months, and that continues to increase, but we want it to be done safely for the GPs and the staff and especially for the patients. We have always been clear and GPs have been clear that those people who need to see a GP face to face will get that face-to-face appointment.

Mr Gildernew: Thank you, Minister, for coming to the House to answer these questions. Like the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee, I am getting constituents with increasing anxiety around access to GPs, and I know that all MLAs are. My colleague Martina Anderson asked in July what steps were being taken. Can the Minister advise what steps are now in place to improve the situation and to deal with the issue of flu vaccinations, given that the winter months are coming in and given distancing requirements?

Mr Swann: I will answer the Health Committee Chair's second question first, and I also covered that in my opening answer. We have been working with the BMA committee of general practitioners and the Royal College of General Practitioners on how we support them in delivering the flu vaccine, because we have always been clear that the uptake of the flu vaccine, especially this year, will be critical. So, we have been working with them on how that can be done. One size will not fit all general practices, so that is why we are making the additional funding available today, both for the supply of equipment that they need and the hiring of additional venues. We will be looking at having drive-through centres and large spaces so that we can ensure that our GP services and our GP practices do not become overcrowded and that social distancing does not become a problem.

Regarding how we address the issue that the Member's party colleague raised and which the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee raised earlier, I think that it is about engagement with the general practitioners, the BMA and all of those representative bodies to reassure them that they have this House's support in ensuring that the delivery of the service is done as safely as possible.

However, we encourage them to make sure that those who need a face-to-face appointment can get it. It is about operating through the electronic changes that we have seen but also making sure that they have the support and the ability to use their facilities and the additional PPE to ensure that anybody who needs a face-to-face appointment gets it.

4.00 pm

As I have said before in the House, the reason that somebody goes to see their GP is not always the real reason for their visit; it is the comment that they make as they turn to go out the door: "By the way, there is one other thing, doctor, that I'd like to ask you about". Our GPs know that, and I do not think that any GPs are deliberately not seeing patients. That is a perception that we must dispel today. Our GPs are there to help us, and they want to help us. That is the nature of their profession.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for his attendance and his answers to questions. It is indeed an increasingly common complaint that we get that people are not getting access to their GP. It creates a lot of frustration and worry, especially among the older members of our community.

You mentioned the COVID centres. Are they having any impact on GPs' ability to deliver their services, or are there mitigations in place to allow them to have cover in their practice while they are out working in the COVID centres? When you say that they are at their busiest since May, for some of those COVID centres, that is a very low workload. Is there any way that they could share the burden that there might be in some GP centres?

Mr Swann: If I remember correctly, when we last discussed this, the Member was one of the people advocating the closure of the COVID centres. We did not do that at that stage, and that has been proven to be the right decision. We are seeing a significant increase in the number of people presenting at COVID centres, so that we can ensure safe access to GP services for people who need access that is not threatened by COVID or potentially COVID-positive patients.

For the week ending 15 September, the COVID centres saw 733 people across Northern Ireland; the week before that, they saw 427. That is nearly a 100% increase in one week. Where we are seeing that most significantly is in areas where we have now put in additional restrictions. The centre in Ballymena, in the week ending 15 September, saw 65 patients; the week before, it saw 20. Those COVID centres are proving to be useful. Our GPs, in general, are supportive of them. There are some GPs who do not see them as being fit for purpose, but that happens in any walk of life or profession. There will always be people who do not see the benefit of a COVID centre. However, according to the information that we get and the guidance that I get from the BMA and the Royal College of General Practitioners, COVID centres are proving useful

because they allow GP practices to stay open for non-COVID patients or non-COVID-symptomatic patients.

Ms Bradshaw: At the all-party group on cancer, this afternoon, one of your departmental officials advised that there had been a 17.5% reduction in red-flag referrals from GP surgeries. Will you put in place some temporary, short-term measures to reverse that and get people into the system?

Mr Swann: I have not yet had a read-out from that all-party group, but the departmental official attending that group today was, I think, the Chief Nursing Officer. Any information from an all-party group gets fed back in.

As regards red-flag referrals from GPs, one of the things that I was always adamant about, even at the height of the pandemic, was that anybody who needed to be seen should go to the GP to make sure that they were referred into the system. One thing that we have seen through the pandemic is a far better and closer working relationship between primary care and secondary care. I want that to be maintained so that, when we look at how referrals are made, there is the personal understanding and the personal contact that we had lost, over time, in the health service. The GP would not know the consultant, and there would be no direct line of contact. That has largely broken down in the past number of months and is something that we can build on to improve our service.

Mr Allister: I am afraid that I do not share the Minister's confidence that all is as well as he says with the GP service. We have all had cases of people despairing of being able to see their GP. One case from my office comes to mind: a lady who had been waiting for weeks to see her GP. She contacted my office: she should not have to contact an MLA to get to see her GP. She saw her GP the next morning. The symptoms detected meant that she was rushed to treatment for cancer at the City Hospital. What sort of a harvest of cancer cases will we have post COVID? That is a real concern, and the impediment to ready access to GPs contributes to it.

Mr Swann: If the Member does not think that I share those concerns, he is mistaken. That is why I am trying to get all the parts of the health service up and operational in a safe way.

The constituent whom the Member referred to should not have had to wait that number of weeks to see a GP; that is what I am saying here today. Our guidance to GPs, who operate as independent contractors to the service, is clear: see as many people as you can face to face. If someone needs to be seen face to face, they should be. That is why the triage system and that personal contact is there. As I said, I do not believe that there is one GP out there who is doing anything intentionally to deny a patient access to the medical services that they provide and that the patients need.

Mr Chambers: I attended a meeting at lunchtime with some representatives of GPs. They certainly appear to be working harder than ever. I got the impression that morale remains high, and their professional dedication continues to shine through. I am sure that the Minister recognises the sterling work being carried out by that sector of the health service. Does he agree that COVID centres take pressure off GP practices, rather than imposing additional unacceptable work on them?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his acknowledgement of the work that GPs do. I think that they recognise that it is not perfect out there at this minute in time. Many of them are not doing what they want to do in regard to getting face-to-face contact with every patient who presents to each practice. I gave answers to Colin McGrath regarding numbers. They almost doubled from the week ending 8 September to the week ending 15 September. That shows the service that those COVID centres provide. A very specific cohort of people who come through the triage system are identified as having COVID symptoms and sent there. The fact that 733 people were triaged through our primary care service to those COVID centres in one week — almost double the number for the previous week — shows that they provide a service that keeps the rest of the GP practices open to the people who present with non-COVID symptoms.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Minister, for responding to the House. As a follow-up to your comments to Mr Allister, I do not think that this is about intent or what GPs will or will not do; it is about capacity. You spoke of the triage system in a number of your responses. Chance would be a fine thing: I hear daily reports of constituents taking up to a week to get through on the phone. When they get through, they are told that the appointment slots have been entirely filled, and then they are referred to A&E. In effect, we are creating a bottleneck in other services, whether it be A&E, pharmacy or other local provision. I appreciate what the Minister said and recognise the challenges that everyone faces in respect of the response to COVID-19, but how is the Minister ensuring that GP surgeries fulfil their contractual responsibilities rather than passing those services on elsewhere and creating pressure that we may need to bring you back to the House to discuss at another time?

Mr Swann: The Member refers to our urgent and emergency care procedure and how the review of that goes hand in hand with how primary care interacts with and supports secondary care. As I said, we need to break down those silos and ensure that that is embedded in our health service.

In accessing GP services, continually having to phone is not good enough. GPs know that. It is about the time that is now being taken up by receptionists triaging as well. There is work going on to further enhance that through GP provision. That is being worked on with the royal college and the British Medical Association to ensure that what we do is in step with what our GP services want. There is no point in us as a Department delivering a service that is non-deliverable in our GP practices. One thing that every Member will realise and acknowledge is that GPs' personal understanding of their patients is paramount as regards how they are guided and treated in the first instance.

Mr Givan: I thank my colleague Pam Cameron for asking this timely question. Access, as Members have commented, is an issue, but there is also an issue that, I know, the Minister will be cognisant of, which is that constituents of mine who, because of the messages that have been communicated around protecting the NHS and ensuring capacity, believe that, when they have a problem that, they feel, they can manage themselves, are not presenting themselves to the GP. It is critical that, when messaging goes out on every measure that is taken to contain COVID-19, there is also a message that people

must come forward and that their good intentions will lead to very poor outcomes and, for some, that will be fatal.

Mr Swann: I appreciate the Member's comments. They follow on from the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee. They also follow on from the clear message that the Chief Medical Officer and I gave at the daily briefings that, if you need to see a GP or to attend hospital, please do it. We do not want a backlog of cases building up in our health service, especially in primary care. That is why the statement that came out at the start of last week from the British Medical Association, the Health and Social Care Board and the Royal College of GPs made it clear to the general public that it was not me saying it. This was the representative bodies of general practitioners saying, "We are open for business. Please come and see us if you need to".

Ms Flynn: Does the Minister have any plans to expand the number of COVID-19 specialist centres? If that is the case, how does he intend to staff them given the pressures that GPs are under?

Mr Swann: I have no intention of expanding the current number. We have 10 working across Northern Ireland at this minute in time. The number of people attending those is increasing, and they have been set up with local GP support through local GP federations. It is about making sure that there is buy-in and support from GPs in the local area for the COVID centres that are already working and that the triaging of patients going to those COVID centres is appropriate and proportionate to the people who need it, as I said, to make sure that anyone who has COVID symptoms does not enter a GP practice alongside non-COVID or non-COVID-symptomatic patients.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for coming here today. I had to attend my doctor's surgery — McVerry and McEvoy in Newry — during the pandemic at a heightened time of lockdown, and, whilst the modus operandi of GP surgeries has been completely disrupted, I found it to be very efficient and effective. Thankfully, I did not even have to see a doctor; I was just triaged by a nurse. However, some people have contacted my office and are concerned by the fact that they have not been consulting their doctor. They have been sharing their medical conditions with people who are not their doctor, which makes them uncomfortable. Others have contacted me about delays in accessing their GPs. Those have not necessarily been specifically in Newry and Armagh, but how can you give those people assurances about what to expect going forward?

Mr Swann: I am glad that the Member had the experience that he had. It is replicated by many people across Northern Ireland in the support that GPs have been able to provide. The structure of general practice has been changing over the years, with those multi-professional teams and the change in roles of those who work in GP practices. As the Member indicated from his own experience, it is not always necessary to see the GP. There may be somebody else in the multidisciplinary team, should it be a nurse, a physiotherapist or a pharmacist, depending on where the GP practice is located. It is not always necessary to talk to the GP when you phone the surgery, but we need to make sure that patients who contact their GPs are triaged and signposted to the right individual to provide the level of care that they need.

4.15 pm

Ms Kimmins: Thank you, Minister, for coming this afternoon to clarify a number of issues that we are all getting at the minute. It highlights the vital service that GP practices provide and what the implications for other services would be without them, as one Member rightly pointed out regarding A&E. You mentioned a need for additional PPE, and I know that the BMA has expressed concerns about a potential second wave. Are you content that the systems are in place for PPE and contact tracing in the event of a second wave?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. PPE is one of the things that her party colleague the Minister of Finance and I have been able to work very closely on, even looking to local manufacture of PPE so that we are not reliant solely on overseas provision. One of the things that we have continued to do as a Department is to make sure that we have a stock of PPE. When we entered this pandemic back at the start of the year, our normal running procedure was to have four weeks' supply. We are now up to 12 weeks' supply, and that is where we continue to maintain that. Recently I signed off a business case for three additional warehouses so that we can ensure that we have that storage and stockpile of PPE.

The supply chains that we were able to put into place for our GPs through the Business Services Organisation proved effective. They were difficult and bumpy at the start, but when we got to being able to deliver to them, we were getting to them and meeting their needs. Those continued supply lines are there, and the PPE is there, so it is a piece of work that we continue to do. Should we get into that second phase — I still think that we can prevent it if we come together and work together as a people across Northern Ireland with our health service — those supply chains and those reassurances are there.

Mr Speaker: That concludes this item of business. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

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

Private Members' Business

Mental Health Crisis Support

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of collaborative and well-resourced services that support those in mental health crisis across Northern Ireland; notes with concern a COVID-19 survey conducted by the stress, trauma and related conditions (STARC) laboratory at Queen's University Belfast, which found that one third of people locally met the criteria for depression; highlights the success of the multi-agency triage team (MATT) partnership between the health and social care sector, the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service in providing on-the-spot mental health support to people in emotional crisis; and calls on the Minister of Health to commit urgently to the expansion and funding of this project to all health and social care trusts. — [Mr Easton.]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next Member on my list was Karen Mullan, but she does not appear to be here. I will call her once she arrives.

Mr Nesbitt: I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board and of the Ards Suicide Awareness Group. Some time ago, I was alerted to the fact that Mondays represent particular challenges for the staff in the emergency departments of our acute hospitals. Apparently there are well-rehearsed reasons for that. It gave me cause to ask whether I could spend a Monday night as an observer in the emergency department of the Ulster Hospital at Dundonald. What I saw was endless demand, whether it was 10.00 pm, midnight, 2.00 am or 4.00 am — endless demand met by unceasing professionalism, care and courtesy.

While we were discussing trends, I made the mistake of saying that the big issue was people who presented with alcohol on board. The staff — the professionals — almost scoffed at me. They said, "We have been dealing with drunks since the day and hour the health service opened its doors. The real issue today is patients with mental health issues". Even the physical structure of the emergency department at the Ulster Hospital has only one side room that is set aside for mental health patients, so, when the second mental health patient arrives, as they inevitably do, it is a huge challenge. That is not a matter for the Health Minister here in the Chamber; it is a matter, of course, for the senior management team of the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. I want to speak in praise of that management team because, of course, when the multi-agency triage team was being formulated in experimental mode, the trust was first in to say that it wanted to take part in what we now know is an incredibly successful initiative, which deserves to be rolled out.

I also had the pleasure to engage with the senior PSNI officer who was tasked with its input into creating the MATT. I was actually halfway up a ladder putting up one of my election posters on a lamppost in the centre of Ards when he pulled over to chat to me. I thought, "I am going to get arrested for some sort of breach of public decency and taste here". He was full of enthusiasm for

his role in tackling mental health. What he said was that, of course, the typical, traditional police reaction was not suitable. Take, for example, Shaftsbury Square late on a Friday night, when people are pouring out of the pubs. Somebody is misbehaving. The typical or standard police reaction would have been to put them in the back of a squad car, take them round to Musgrave Street and maybe make them spend a night in a holding cell. However, if the underlying reason for their behaviour was mental health and well-being issues, a police cell was probably the last place where you would want them to spend the night. In fact, he said, "You know, if the person had a broken leg, we would not take them to a police cell, so why make the distinction between physical health and mental health?"

The multi-agency triage team gets it right because in that team are individuals who, in combination, have all the experience, knowledge and skills to deal with people with mental health issues. That multi-agency approach must include the voluntary and community sector. The Ards Suicide Awareness Group has done great work; civic-minded people coming together, going into schools, going into retail outlets, talking to taxi drivers. Just before lockdown, we were engaged with Hospitality Ulster to try to get training for bar staff because they are in a good position to know when regulars are not themselves. With a bit of training — you do not become a counsellor — you know the right questions to ask and how, perhaps, to signpost them to professionals for help.

What I would like to see is not just multi-agency and multidisciplinary approaches: we need a multi-departmental approach from the Executive. I am delighted to see that the Minister has encouraged very much the green shoots of multi-departmental work in that regard, because it is not all about the Health Minister and his Department; this is an issue to be faced by every Department. I welcome the Health Minister to the House and look forward to what he has to say. I look forward to his response, and I congratulate him for his fine work to date on the issue of mental health and well-being.

Ms Mullan: I apologise, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, for arriving a wee bit late. I thank the Members who tabled this important motion. I support the call for collaboration and properly resourced mental health services that include crisis intervention across all the trust areas.

To effectively support mental health and wider emotional well-being, and address the rising levels of mental health issues, we must get serious about cross-departmental working and collaboration, as has been highlighted by other Members. Someone who experiences mental ill-health does not do so in a silo. In our approach to supporting them, we should not operate in a silo either. As my party's education spokesperson, I am thinking particularly of children and young people and the role that the education system and the Department of Education have the potential to play. The partnership process of developing an emotional health and well-being framework for children and young people by Education, Health, the Public Health Agency, the Health Social Care Board and the Education Authority is an example of the joined-up working that we need to see from now on when dealing with those issues.

Minister, I ask that, when you are reviewing existing crisis intervention services, such as MATT, the Derry

crisis service pilot be part of that review and form part of the recommendations going forward. I want to highlight and recognise the contribution and work of the agencies involved in this project. Partnership working is not always easy but it can have great results. One key partner that maybe does not get full recognition is the community and its needs. Behind every person who is in a state of despair or crisis, there is a reason or reasons and there is also a community that needs support.

In conclusion, I fully support the motion. I welcome also the Adjournment debate on Derry's crisis intervention service. The next step must be a joined-up approach to provide an equity of mental health and emotional support services across all trusts, with the inclusion of a fully funded crisis intervention service.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Chris Lyttle is next on my list but he is not in his place. Ms Bradshaw, were you intending to contribute? No. That is OK. Mr Gerry Carroll.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Members for bringing this important motion to the House. Quite rightly, we have been focusing on tackling one pandemic, COVID-19, but time, energy and resources must be made available to discuss the pandemic of suicide and mental ill-health that has been with us for many years.

Recently, people have asked me why the same focus and resources that have been put into COVID-19 have not been invested in tackling mental health. I do not think that it is an either/or, but I think that it is a fair point for people to raise. Like my colleague Colin McGrath, I welcome the establishment of the mental health champion position and I wish her well in her new role. Whilst the Minister has prioritised and put a focus on mental health with the creation of the role, the question of whether enough is being done needs to be asked. Are enough resources being put in to tackling mental health problems?

Although the Department spends roughly £10 million per year on suicide prevention, we have to say that nowhere near enough is being spent. With that in mind, if we really are to have a zero-suicide strategy, we are spending too little on prevention.

We know that around 200,000 people here — about one fifth of the adult population — will have a mental health problem at some point in their life. Minding Your Head has stated that 57% of the people it surveyed are worried and stressed about COVID-19. On top of that, we have seen a 50% increase in significant stress for people who are working with those who have had COVID-19. The people who are front and centre in tackling this crisis have seen their stress levels increase because of the work that they have been doing and the pressure that they have been under.

It is no accident that my constituency of West Belfast and the neighbouring constituency of North Belfast are consistently the areas with the highest rates of suicide and self-harm. I say no accident because it is precisely these areas, and others across the North, that suffer the highest levels of poverty, deprivation and inequality. Despite general political talk about moving forward and a new Northern Ireland, these communities and their residents have been left behind, ignored and fundamentally failed. That is not to say that middle-class or wealthy individuals cannot be affected by mental health problems — of course they can — but the problems are more acute,

concentrated and higher in areas with high poverty levels. In fact, worryingly, the suicide rate is around 70% higher in deprived areas as compared to non-deprived areas. That is a shocking and worrying statistic. We know, I think it might have been —.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he welcome the fact that, as was mentioned earlier, the Protect Life 2 strategy states that one of its key aims is to ensure that the appropriate services are available for the most deprived constituencies, exactly like the ones that he mentioned? That aim was not in the original Protect Life strategy but has been included in Protect Life 2.

4.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Carroll, you have an additional minute, but please do not use it, because Ms Sugden is looking very anxious over there.

Mr Carroll: OK. I will do my best to answer and finish my comments. I agree with the Member. She knows all too well about people in west Belfast who have cried out for services but have not got them, so I agree with her on the need for that strategy.

For men under 50, suicide is a leading cause of death. To follow on from Órlaithí's point, too often I have heard, as, I am sure, she has as well, of people who have been told to reach out and ask for help. They have done so, but the help has not been there or else they have been told to wait a few months for services or treatment. Imagine people who do not feel valued or who have low self-esteem taking the important and difficult step of reaching out to their GP or whomever, only to be told, "Wait. We will come to you when we can". Too many people are failed by an underfunded system.

To conclude, the furlough scheme is due to come to an end in the next few weeks. We have to ascertain how that will impact on people's anxiety, insecurity and mental health problems. The motion rightly talks about the need for a collaborative approach, but I think that the Economy Minister and the Finance Minister have as important a role to play as the Health Minister does.

I will leave the final words to a writer from the US, Mike Davis, who says about coronavirus and mental health:

"Indeed the combined effects of fear, confinement, income loss and the potential destruction of family savings augur a mental-health crisis on an even larger scale than the pandemic itself. This isn't simply collateral damage but rather an integral and extremely dangerous part of the health threat that has so far been neglected. Consider solidarity an essential vaccine."

Ms Sugden: I support the motion. The reality is that many people across Northern Ireland, disproportionately so compared with other regions, are suffering from poor mental health now. What has led to that cannot be undone. Support, as described by others in the debate, is therefore entirely necessary. That having been said, in parallel with that support, we should have a wider policy vision of how we address our mental health issue: upstream, long before it becomes a crisis for the individual, their family, society and public services.

Like many issues in Northern Ireland, we tend to treat the symptoms rather than understand and address the issue.

We spend a lot of public money at the most expensive part of the process: fixing what is broken. Even if we succeed in fixing, there remains a weakness and usually more cost. Surely it therefore makes sense to strengthen so that things are less likely to break.

In talking about the issue, I do not mean to be crude about money. Of course we should spend it where it helps, especially if it saves or improves a life. That is the job of all of us. How many lives could we save and how many could we improve if mental health did not become an issue, however?

I appreciate the Minister taking the lead on the issue and welcome his interventions in his time in office. The Minister of Health cannot tackle the issue alone, however. He needs support from his Executive colleagues in Justice, Education, Communities and even AERA. Mental health in Northern Ireland is its own pandemic. A vaccination will not fix it. Washing hands and socially distancing will not prevent it. If anything, that might even be making it worse, because, as humans, we are tactile, social beings who want to feel loved and touched, and preventing that is having an impact. I am not criticising the public health response to COVID-19. It was and is necessary in order to save lives. I do, however, worry about the consequences of what the public have had to endure, the sacrifices that they have made and, most of all, the lasting mental health effects.

I am not surprised at the findings of the Queen's report. Every day in my constituency, I see and hear the anxiety, depression and fear that exists because of the pandemic. I see people angry and frustrated, which in itself is an outworking of poor mental health. That is even more reason that we need to get a grip on the problem by tackling the issue at source.

I believe that that source is trauma. I find it extraordinary that we, as a post-conflict society, have not addressed the inevitable trauma arising from 30 years of conflict. It is not just those who directly experienced the conflict who are traumatised. It is the couple who strode through Coleraine, where a day later there was an explosion in the very spot where they had walked. It is nurses, paramedics and the girl on the bus.

The body keeps the score: it absolutely does. I am quoting the title of a book by Bessel van der Kolk. Please forgive my pronunciation. It recognises the impact of trauma on both body and mind and how it leads to mental health and addiction issues. From personal experiences and my previous role, I do not doubt that this is the case. Trauma perpetuates a cycle that often manifests into a mental health addiction or domestic abuse issue that then traumatises others, who then take on their own mental health burden and so on. We must break the cycle, and the most effective way of doing that is tackling the abuse.

Trauma is a fact of life. We in Northern Ireland know that more than most. A generation and, sadly, subsequent generations because of intergenerational trauma, are living with the painful aftermath of the conflict. There are over 30,000 victims of domestic abuse a year and there are children raised in alcohol and drug-addicted homes. Are we really surprised that we have a mental health issue?

Poor public services also add to that problem: women not being supported after a traumatic birth, communities that are given no aspirations so drugs and paramilitary

gangs seem like a better option. I feel that the Executive are keeping a lid on it until the next election. I have heard nothing about a Programme for Government, nothing about outcomes-based accountability and nothing about cross-departmental strategies. I find that disappointing. I hope I am wrong. I hope that Ministers are setting a direction that truly encourages better governance and are not simply going along with how we have always done it. The increasing mental health figures and the statistics of those who have taken their own life show that is not working. How we have always done it is not working.

Minister, there is no point emptying the sink if we do not turn off the tap. I appreciate the motion, and I appreciate your efforts so far. However, I encourage you to lead with a wider vision alongside the good work that is only scratching the surface of what we need.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you. I call the Minister for Health, Mr Robin Swann, to respond and he will have 15 minutes.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I thank the Members for proposing this motion that provides us with an opportunity to consider the importance of the mental health crisis service. The STARC study illustrates the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having. The study is well named because the statistics quoted from the report by the Member who moved the motion and the contributions from many Members of the House are stark. They need to be because the House needs to listen to what is being said. I need to hear what is being said, and the Executive need to react to what is being said, and also to pick up on Ms Sugden's closing points.

How we tackle our mental health situation in Northern Ireland is about a whole-Executive approach, a whole-Assembly approach and a whole-society approach. The pandemic continues to have an adverse effect on our population's mental health and emotional well-being. Now is the best time to discuss how to optimise outcomes and the use of resources.

Since taking up the post of Minister for Health, I have been very clear that mental health is a priority for me. To underline that commitment, I recently published the 'Mental Health Action Plan' that aims to kick-start the transformation of mental health services, and includes the commitment to create a new mental health strategy. At one of my first meetings of the Health Committee, Ms Flynn asked how we would tackle mental health alongside the pandemic. I gave her the commitment that mental health remained a priority through the pandemic. I hope my actions have proved that I have kept that commitment and continue to make those steps.

I have appointed Professor Siobhan O'Neill as the interim mental health champion and, just so Mr McGrath is not accused of misleading the House, her office has 5 full-time members of staff. She has her own budget and an ability to spend the moneys in it. Therefore, she is not there acting on her own. The first member of staff was appointed last week, and there is an ongoing recruitment process. She stands alone, she is not controlled and her spend is not controlled.

The mental health champion's office is financed and supported by every Executive Minister equally, and that is a commitment and dedication to where we are with mental health. As I have said before to the House, the Executive,

as a whole, has really taken on the challenge of mental health. A subcommittee has been established on mental health, well-being, resilience and suicide prevention.

I do not mean to talk out of school about my Executive colleagues, but the first meeting of that subgroup was one of the most human engagements that I have seen at the Executive. There was understanding, compassion and a desire to do more on the part of every Minister who was present at that meeting. The commitment is there and although there are many other things on the agenda, the fact that the subcommittee continues to meet and engage with other societal representative groups is a testimony to that commitment.

Our mental health services exist to provide care and treatment for those who suffer from mental distress and they cover a wide spectrum of services, from early intervention in primary care to compulsory admission to a mental health inpatient facility. Whilst those services are wide-ranging, it is right that we now discuss crisis services. They exist to provide treatment for some of the most vulnerable patients at a very difficult time in their lives.

However, before I go any further, I want to take this opportunity to thank all those who are dedicated to supporting those who suffer from a mental health crisis — the staff in the health and social care system, the staff in the independent system, the community and voluntary sector and the many people who volunteer to help those who need help and their families as well. Many Members who contributed to the debate mentioned that sector. Those people are vital to our response because of the work that they do and the commitment and knowledge that they have. I want to thank them on behalf of the entire House.

The motion calls on us to recognise:

“the importance of collaborative and well-resourced services that support those in mental health crisis”.

I could not agree more. If we get crisis services right, we can provide timely and good help and support to those who need it, when they need it. That will not only provide better outcomes but will allow the already stretched mental health system to work more effectively. It is accepted, and has been noted by many, that the COVID-19 pandemic will have a negative impact on our population's mental well-being. Indeed, the STARC survey outlines concerning outcomes with evidence of high levels of anxiety and depression amongst the respondents.

Since the start of the pandemic, I have ensured that there is a strong response to the mental health needs of the population. A dedicated COVID-19 mental health response plan was included in the mental health action plan that was published on 19 May. The response plan outlines the mental health response to the pandemic and provides specific actions such as the public health messaging, which includes a dedicated website for mental health support and advice; an online apps library to help and support self-help; the roll-out of psychological first-aid training; free online stress control classes, which have been available since May and will continue to be available until the end of this year; bereavement guidance; and a workforce framework and dedicated psychological helplines for our front-line staff. The impact of the pandemic on the mental health of the population will,

undoubtedly, create increased demand for mental health services, including our crisis services.

Currently, all trusts have arrangements in place to provide an urgent mental health response within a targeted two-hour time frame to adults who present in crisis in emergency departments and to referrals from a patient's GP. Nevertheless, Mr Nesbitt was right; the emergency department is not the right place for many of those individuals to be presenting.

Similar services are also available to children and young people. One Member asked what more we could do to work with schools. As regards collaborative working with the Minister of Education, we have recently approved an additional £1.5 million of Department of Health funding for mental health in schools, and that piece of work is now progressing with the Department of Education. When a young person presents in crisis outside normal hours, all the trusts have arrangements in place to respond if necessary and the young person may be admitted to the regional inpatient unit at Beechcroft. Those urgent mental health response services remained available throughout the pandemic.

However, we must acknowledge that our crisis services are not always configured as well as they could be. That is why we are continually looking for improvements. The multi-agency triage team pilot commenced its service on 6 July 2018.

It was a collaborative project that involved two police officers, a community mental health practitioner and a paramedic working together to respond to people aged 18 and over who were experiencing a mental health crisis and had accessed the 999 or the 101 system. The pilot was initially established as a two-year initiative in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust; however, following positive feedback from service users and MATT staff, the service was extended to cover Belfast Health and Social Care Trust in August 2019.

4.45 pm

MATT aims to assist in the de-escalation of crisis with signposting to appropriate services and to reduce presentations at accident and emergency departments. Its key objectives are to reduce attendance at emergency departments (EDs) for those who present with self-harm or suicidal intention; to provide prevention and early intervention approaches to reduce numbers of attendances at EDs resulting in fewer people requiring secondary mental health care services; to reduce the allocation of Card Before You Leave appointments; to free up urgent appointments in mental health assessment centres; to provide the appropriate signposting and support to enable access to services for clients; to reduce the number of detentions under article 130 of the Mental Health Order; and to improve the journey of service users and their family through the emotional crisis.

MATT is considered a positive alternative to the usual way of responding to an individual's experience of a mental health crisis. MATT has positive support from mental health staff, and it has already been very positively received by service users. They felt that they were treated well, they found the response to be calmer, and the avoidance of having to attend an ED was a much better outcome. I understand that immediate access to

mental health professionals has been of great benefit to those service users and that they feel that appropriate decisions are being made for their personal onward care. The success of the service has been in part due to collaboration between the trusts and the three service providers and to a willingness to learn from all involved. However, it is worth reflecting that the evaluation also identifies areas that require further examination, such as remote access and the compatibility of IT systems and the fact that the staff operating the system have been doing so on an overtime basis in addition to their substantive roles. An addition to the location of the MATT may not be the most appropriate, as it can be accessed only when a police officer is available. Those are the kinds of issues that are expected to be brought to the fore in a pilot. That is one reason why it is important, before we extend MATT, to evaluate what is good, what can be done better and what has not worked.

I am sure that Members will acknowledge — many have — that improving mental health is a cross-cutting issue that will require collaborative work across all our Departments and that the MATT service clearly provides benefits for the PSNI, the health and social care sector and, indeed, wider society. Whilst I am supportive of MATT and value the great work that is being done, it is important that the development of the crisis response service is part of an integrated element of the wider mental health system. The mental health action plan is intended to kick-start the transformation of our mental health services by building on the good work that has already been done and by preparing the ground for the new mental health strategy that is in the making.

In my Department's mental health action plan I have included an action that specifically looks at the configuration of crisis services. Specifically, action 8.2 is included to provide a "Better MH [*Mental Health*] crisis response" and aims to reduce the number of people who attend emergency departments in a mental health crisis. The action specifically seeks to evaluate alternatives to the emergency department for people in mental health crisis, to evaluate the roll-out of the multi-agency triage team, to consider the interactions between different crisis response services such as MATT, the home crisis teams, emergency departments, 999, the police, primary care multidisciplinary teams and similar. It also seeks to further develop the liaison between mental health services across all our trusts. Through that, I am committed to a further roll-out of the multi-agency triage teams, but it has to be done in an integrated way as part of the wider development of our mental health crisis response. The MATT cannot exist in isolation and must be supported by effective integration with emergency departments, statutory mental health services, primary care, the police and the community and voluntary sector.

My officials are working to finalise the details of the review of crisis services, and I expect that work to commence in the coming weeks. As in all mental health policy work, I am committed to co-production, and the review team will include at least one person with lived experience, at least one crisis professional and at least one representative of the community and voluntary sector. A first report is expected in December, with a final report by the end of March 2021. That report will provide a clear map of crisis services across the health and social care system and the community and voluntary sector. It will include an

evaluation of best practice and of what works, including user experience and professionals' views, and clear options for the future of crisis services. That will provide the way forward for crisis services and ensure that those in crisis will receive the help and support they need in a timely manner. It will also provide a strategic approach to the further roll-out of multi-agency triage teams.

As I have said many times, mental health is one of my top priorities. I am honoured to be in a position where I can drive strategic change and improve mental health services and crisis services in particular. However, as many have said, it will take a collaborative approach across the entirety of the Executive. At this minute in time, I am content that we have that support. I am therefore happy to support the motion and thankful to the Members who tabled it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Pam Cameron will conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion.

Mrs Cameron: Last week, we marked World Suicide Prevention Day. It was, once again, a reminder of how mental health remains a major challenge for society. When we consider the prevalence of suicide in our community, we see that it is a battle that, at times, I fear we are losing. When, almost on a daily basis, my office is contacted about the latest life lost in my constituency, my heart sinks. What greater priority can we have as legislators than to protect life from the youngest to the oldest, from the womb to the grave? Better mental health must become a greater priority. We pay much lip service to that, but we need to see actions that back up the words. In Northern Ireland, one in five adults will suffer poor mental health at some point in their life. My fear— I believe that it is well grounded in reality — is that that prevalence will only increase because of the impact of COVID-19. That is why I welcome the motion. It represents a call to action, and it is action that, we know, works, that helps those who need help and, ultimately, saves lives. It is not a stand-alone solution but a piece in a jigsaw that we need the Department to set out and piece together to create an overall picture of how our mental health pandemic will be defeated.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you, like me, regard all our first responders as heroes, and that is right. It is not an easy job, but, in the multi-agency triage team, we really have examples of heroes. They are mental health practitioners and paramedics, working alongside police officers, assessing and responding to calls made either to the police or the ambulance control room using the 999 or 101 numbers. In many parts of Northern Ireland, a MATT team is leading the crisis intervention response to the human impact on our mental health pandemic in Northern Ireland. I thank every member of staff for their contribution to date in increasingly challenging times. Saying, "Thank you" does not go far enough. Staff deserve to have the confidence that they will have the right funding and resource support to promote better outcomes and, ultimately, save lives.

What do we want to see? We want the workforce consolidated, the service expanded and the funding arrangements placed on a sustainable and solid footing. We want the fair and equitable roll-out of the MATT project, in order to benefit all communities and households. There cannot be a postcode lockout to this life-saving service. I urge the Minister to look favourably on this, and I know that his commitment to tackling mental health issues in Northern Ireland is clear. Let us

build up a suite of measures to tackle this that includes MATT lifeline services, de-escalation pilots in Belfast and Londonderry and resilience and well-being programmes across our schools and educational establishments, using our community and voluntary sectors to dovetail with such programmes to continue to help those who engage with MATT, to keep that intervention going beyond that first point of crisis. Enough homes have been destroyed by poor mental health, enough lives broken and, sadly, too many lost. Let us all take the steps necessary to stop that. The motion highlights just one worthy example. I am pleased that all Members from across the Chamber today have supported the motion on mental health crisis support tabled by my colleagues Alex Easton and Paula Bradley. It is clear that the subject is very much recognised, and it is good to keep speaking up to ensure that the issue never becomes taboo again.

I now turn to Members' comments. Alex Easton, who proposed the motion, spoke in detail about the COVID-19 survey conducted by the stress, trauma and related conditions research laboratory at Queen's University and the statistics uncovered about the impact on mental health in Northern Ireland during this trying time, the most notable of which was that one third of people met the criteria for depression. He mentioned that it was interesting that media reporting had a role in impacting on mental health and referred to the recommendations, including those on drafting clear media guidelines and a public health campaign. Alex also touched on the negativity and commentary around the discussion of a potential vaccine and on the amount of misinformation that is out there. He spoke about MATT and about the success and value of the pilot, which has not been fully rolled out to date. He spoke about the benefit of reducing the impact on the resource of the agencies involved, namely the health and social care sector, the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, which have been providing on-the-spot mental health support to people in emotional crisis. He also spoke about the future of MATT being unclear and about the vital and critical intervention provided by the multi-agency service. He ultimately asked the Minister to commit urgently to funding for that project and to expanding it to all trust areas.

Órlaithí Flynn spoke next. She said that mental health was universally accepted as an area of concern. She talked about the need for more than just positive mental health slogans. She said that there is a need for parity of esteem with physical health and for agencies to work together. Órlaithí is the chairperson of the APG on suicide prevention, which is supportive and encouraging of the MATT model. She spoke about the lived experience of individuals and recognised that many mental health groups offer help in the community. She stated that there was a need for more funding and progress on the suicide strategy.

Colin McGrath was next. He spoke about the debate as an incredibly important discussion of an issue that we are all affected by, and he said that we should give consideration to our mental health. He referred to the most recent survey that showed that deprived areas are more at risk. He welcomed the appointment of Siobhán O'Neill to the post of Mental Health Champion and spoke of the need for staffing resource to support her work. We welcome the clarification from the Minister on that subject. He spoke favourably of local mental health groups and talked about

his experience as a youth worker in the past. He also referred to his questioning of the reduction in the money being spent by the education system on counselling over the last number of years.

Alan Chambers said that one in four would suffer poor mental health and said that it affects all walks of life — how true is that? He spoke of the mental health impact on physical health and vice versa. Of course, he spoke of his party's commitment to make mental health a key priority. He mentioned the appointment of the Interim Mental Health Champion and the production of the mental health action plan. He said that, despite the progress that has been made, nothing could have prepared us for COVID-19 and that there was never a more important time to avoid ED attendances. He said that it was good to talk and that no one should feel shame in talking about their mental health or see that as a sign of weakness.

Kellie Armstrong thanked Alex Easton for his personal contribution to the debate by talking about his own mental health. She also mentioned loneliness and being detached from social contact and how damaging that is. She spoke of how one fifth of those surveyed showed symptoms of PTSD and reiterated that COVID restrictions should not remain for a day longer than is necessary, and I certainly agree with that. She said that MATT seems to have been a clear success and had no hesitation in recommending the roll-out of MATT across the trusts.

Joanne Bunting, as a member of the Policing Board, spoke about the impact of mental health on policing. She said that many shifts were spent in the corridors of hospitals supporting those in crisis or in search operations for those who had gone missing. She said that the partnership approach addressed numerous problems, and she commended voluntary workers for their efforts in the same area in the community. Joanne highlighted that last Thursday was World Suicide Prevention Day and welcomed the appointment of Siobhán O'Neill. She said that she was nervous about seeing the results of the scoping exercise that is being undertaken. She called for a short-term intervention in Belfast to face the current level of crisis.

5.00 pm

Colm Gildernew thanked those who tabled the motion. He was impressed by the genuine empathy shown by Members across the Chamber. He spoke from his knowledge, and from his role in the Health Committee, about the long record of underfunding for mental health. He also spoke about the work of the Committee and, in the light of the demands that the pandemic had made on the Committee's time, the desire to return to the subject urgently. Colm also raised the issue of broadband availability, especially given the reliance on remote technology at present.

Cara Hunter spoke about the distress when dealing with constituents who require services, and we can all relate to that. She spoke about her time in council and about the good work of local voluntary groups, such as Extern. She also said that long-term funding is vital for those groups to continue. Cara is also heading up, as chair, a new all-party group on addiction and dual diagnosis, another vital area of concern that has the full support of all parties in the Building. She asked the Minister to keep mental health at the top of his agenda, and I am sure that he will do that.

I will not get through all Members' contributions, so I will not try. Mike Nesbitt, Karen Mullan, Gerry Carroll and Claire Sugden also spoke, and there was some very good commentary from across the Chamber. We welcome the support that has been given to the motion and thank the Minister for his response to it and for his understanding of the issues. Hopefully, we will see, in the very near future, a full roll-out of the MATT project, which has been so successful.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of collaborative and well-resourced services that support those in mental health crisis across Northern Ireland; notes with concern a COVID-19 survey conducted by the stress, trauma and related conditions (STARC) laboratory at Queen's University Belfast, which found that one third of people locally met the criteria for depression; highlights the success of the multi-agency triage team (MATT) partnership between the health and social care sector, the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service in providing on-the-spot mental health support to people in emotional crisis; and calls on the Minister of Health to commit urgently to the expansion and funding of this project to all health and social care trusts.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask the House to take its ease for a few moments. The next item on the agenda is the Adjournment debate.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Speaker.]

Adjournment

Funding for the Crisis Intervention Service in Londonderry

Mr Speaker: In conjunction with the Business Committee, I have given leave to Gary Middleton to raise the matter of funding for the crisis intervention service in his constituency. The proposer will have 15 minutes.

Mr Middleton: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Members will be glad to know that I do not intend to take the full 15 minutes.

It is timely that we discuss this Adjournment topic, following on as it does from the issue that we just debated; it ties in very nicely. Five years ago, I made my maiden speech in the Chamber on the issue of suicide prevention in my constituency. We are back this evening debating the community crisis intervention service (CCIS) and the need for long-term funding. A lot has changed in the past five years. Unfortunately, in many cases, that changes have not been for the better.

My constituency of Foyle continues to see some of the highest rates of self-harm, with elevated numbers of individuals engaging in suicidal behaviour at the bridges and the river. Statistics point to an increase in incidents. In 2016, there were 309 incidents and, in 2018, there were 898. These incidents involve real people — human beings — within our constituency; they are not just statistics. Recent figures point to a similar shocking trend. Whilst there are many great organisations and charities out there providing vital services, these devastating figures make the case for the need to do things differently. Far too many lives have been lost and families devastated. One life lost is one too many.

In 2019, the crisis intervention service was developed. It was developed to complement the Western Trust's 24-hour crisis response service at Altnagelvin and to help address the high rates of suicidal behaviour in the Western Trust area, which are amongst the highest in Northern Ireland. The service was initially run as a pilot scheme. However, it has been extended on several occasions for a few months at a time. I welcome the latest extension of the service until March 2021, and I thank the Minister for listening to the concerns of us all in the north-west. However, it is unacceptable that a fight has to be put up, time and time again, to have this service funded at a basic level.

The crisis intervention service in Londonderry, its employees, volunteers and, most significantly, the service users deserve better. Last-minute funding decisions add further to the stress and concern of those involved. The service was due to end in two weeks' time, with the funding extension announced just last week. That uncertainty causes serious issues for the job retention of the skilled professionals involved and also places undue pressure on those who have to work on the front line to help our most vulnerable. Again, the extension is very welcome. However, we must look at a long-term sustainable funding model going forward.

The benefits of the crisis intervention service are well evidenced in the evaluation report conducted by Ulster University. One service user said:

“I do not know what would have happened if the crisis intervention service had not been there for me because all I say is that I just wanted to jump in the river. You never know an impulse. I have been dealt a bad hand in so many ways, and it is time to cash in my chips. That is the way I look at it, and that is how I justify it to myself.”

This service is a vital lifeline to so many people in our city. The evaluation report recommended that the service should be maintained, and that is in no doubt. The opening hours and the publicity and procedures need to be reviewed. The service operates from Thursday at 8.00 pm until Sunday at 8.00 am, and we know that that is not sufficient. The issues that many of those people face do not stop or start at those times. They exist all the time, and there should be a service to reflect that.

The evaluation report also referenced that progress was needed on partnership between referral agencies. I pay tribute to many organisations in my constituency — Foyle Search and Rescue, the PSNI and many others — that do an incredible job in helping those in need. There are many other recommendations in the evaluation report that are relevant but they all point to the fact that there needs to be a crisis intervention service in the area.

There is also an economic response, conducted by Professor Siobhan O’Neill and Dr Edel Ennis, that clearly makes the economic case for the service. For example, the savings that the service makes to other agencies, emergency departments and the emergency services. However, this argument should not be an economic one. As I have said before, one life lost is one too many. The value of life is precious.

When announcing the three-month extension in June, the Minister stated:

“The service has shown positive benefits for those clients who are in crisis and I sincerely hope that funding is secured to enable the service to continue.

“It is incumbent on the Council who commission the service to secure a sustainable funding solution going forward. I encourage all stakeholders to use this additional period as an opportunity to have those conversations and engage extensively with Extern to identify lasting funding options.”

I, and those who represent the Foyle constituency at all levels, believe that the Department of Health should fund this vital service. We all agree on the significance of the Protect Life 2 strategy, yet, time and time again, this service is on life support. We do not need further reports and strategies. We need funding and we need support. The Minister had said that he encouraged all stakeholders to use the additional period as an opportunity to have those conversations and engage to identify lasting funding options. It has been disappointing that the Western Trust and Public Health Agency (PHA) have not been engaging with the crisis intervention steering group. I would be grateful if the Minister would ensure that there is representation at these steering group meetings. The

Department of Health should give a view on the evaluation report and its findings.

As we go forward, the challenges in our society are becoming greater. Experts have warned that the COVID-19 pandemic and any economic consequences or job losses may lead to an increase in suicidal behaviour and death by suicide. Initial data based on police records of incidents at the River Foyle show an increase in suicide behaviour. This may be seen as the tip of the iceberg since the majority of suicides occur in the person’s home. People are avoiding presenting themselves to emergency departments, which means that, at the current time, people in suicidal despair would particularly benefit from having an additional, alternative place of support to go to. As we continue to live with the virus and face the possibility of a second wave, the service should be maintained as an essential component of the efforts to reduce the mental health impact.

I appreciate that the Minister has championed mental health services, so this is not a criticism of the Minister. I know that the Minister has so much on his plate. We support him in that role and wish him well. We will support him in the efforts that need to be made, whether it is a bid to the Executive as a whole or whatever. However, I plead that we are not standing here again in March 2021 making the same arguments for the same service, which we should not have to make the case for. I urge the Minister to take these comments on board, and I thank him for attending the debate. I urge everyone to, please, make their views known.

Ms Anderson: I thank Gary Middleton for bringing this Adjournment debate. From 1998 to 2018, 5,087 people took their own lives in the North; the Member knows that and the Minister knows that. That means that more people died in those years than died during the 40 years of conflict. Like the rest of the North, Derry has endured a mental health and suicide epidemic. This scourge has ravaged the people of Derry. It shakes our communities to the core and tears families apart. Yet, a key life-saving service like the community crisis intervention service limps on month after month, receiving breadcrumbs from the Department of Health’s table. Whilst the funding is welcome, the service got just enough money in June to last until the end of this month. It is now getting just enough money to survive until March. No service can function properly with such financial uncertainty.

I cannot recount the number of stories that I have read or heard over the years of a passing jogger, motorist or local taxi driver stopping on the Foyle Bridge to bring a vulnerable person, who is standing physically and mentally on the brink, back to safety. Unfortunately, I also know stories of those who have jumped; of those whose lives have become so dark, who can see no glimmer of hope, and who want nothing more than to end their suffering by jumping into the inky abyss below. Bodies missing for days. Foyle Search and Rescue, a fantastic organisation in Derry, scouring the river in search of a body, while desperate families organise search parties along the riverbank to bring their mummy, daddy, brother, sister, aunt, uncle, cousin or friend home. The people who have taken their life are not numbers or statistics.

They were voices crying out for help and it is our duty, and especially your duty now, Minister, to ensure that their cries do not fall on deaf ears.

5.15 pm

That is why Derry needs a community crisis intervention service. Many young people, and particularly young men, have not experienced the peace dividend of a bright and new beginning and have encountered the same lack of educational attainment, the same lack of employment prospects and the same substance abuse that has plagued our community and society for over 20 years. It is they who are on the brink and who the community crisis intervention service helps. It literally saves lives by intervening and supporting those who suffer alone, by providing timely, non-clinical and community responses to those in crisis, and by giving advice to those trying to cope with stress, anxiety and depression.

The suicide rates that Derry experiences are undoubtedly compounded by poverty, social deprivation and a lack of opportunity. Suicide rates are higher in areas that are the most deprived, and whilst Derry has come a long way over the last 20 years, we know that we have much further to travel. We need to ensure that financial resources are allocated to Derry city and district, based on objective need. Part of that is ensuring the continued and long-term funding of the community crisis intervention service way beyond March 2021 because we have never needed it more.

Minister, I appeal to you this evening to not allow a key service to be stripped away from Derry. Commit to the long-term investment in the community crisis intervention service, and please do the decent thing, the thing that I believe and know that you want to do, and ensure that your Department commits to it, and send that signal out to the people of Derry this evening.

Mr Durkan: I think Gary Middleton for tabling the motion. As the Minister will hear this afternoon, and as he already knows, there is unanimous and strong political support for Derry's community crisis intervention service, and with very good reason. Often in this Chamber, and more so than outside in the real world, we see or hear division over the daftest of issues, and sometimes over fundamental political ideology, but suicide prevention and saving lives should and does unite us all.

This critical, life-saving service is something that our city — Derry, Londonderry, whatever you want to call it, though I just call it home — was crying out for. It was and is very badly needed.

The council led the way. They had to drag the Western Trust and the Department of Health to the table. We even had to get a significant contribution from Foyle Search and Rescue, a tremendous local charity, to make ends meet.

It was only after my intervention, I have to say, in identifying underspend in the Belfast de-escalation service, and getting it redirected it to Derry, that Foyle Search and Rescue could be reimbursed their £20,000, which they have now used doing what they do best: saving lives and helping families in their darkest hours.

The service has been a success. Do not just take my word for it — the Minister will have read the evaluation. It has saved lives, and like Gary, I have heard directly from people who say that they would not be here today had it not been for the community crisis intervention service. It has been a success despite uncertainty over its future, its staff being uncertain about their futures, and lurching from one funding crisis to another. That is not the way to run any

service but it is definitely not the way to run a service of this nature. The dark cloud or spectre of closure hanging over it is not just bad for the morale and retention of the diligent, dedicated staff, it is bad for the collective mental well-being of our city. I take this opportunity to place on record my appreciation and respect for those Extern staff.

Derry City and Strabane District Council did not embark on this project for the craic. The evaluation makes for stark, sore reading. The rates of suicide and self-harm in the north-west are shocking; they are scandalous. It is so sad. My thoughts are with all of those families who have been devastated by suicide, and with the individuals who battle with demons every day. I commend the council on its efforts to get this up and running. It had to do it, because no one else was going to, but, now, I cannot help but feel that the project is suffering because it was council-led and that someone somewhere in the Department of Health is saying, "That wasn't my idea, so I don't like it". If that is the case, tell us what you do not like. Help to support and shape the service; do not starve it. We need to protect life, not egos.

I thank all of those involved in the gruelling work of suicide prevention in the statutory and community sectors. I know many of the individuals in the trust and the Department who work flat out round the clock, under huge constraints and stress, to tackle ever-increasing and evermore complex cases, but there is clearly a systemic issue. It is still evident in the mental health budget, and in how difficult individuals find it to access the support that they need, when they need it. Other community-based initiatives should be embraced, not feared and rejected. It is about complementarity, not competition.

My recent proposal for a north-west suicide prevention task force has been dismissed as it would undermine work currently being done. I do not want to undermine it, but underline it, because the sad reality is that too many people believe that nothing is being done.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Durkan: The project clearly falls under the remit of the Department of Health, which will, obviously, support, and has called for, funding from other sources. Although it is clearly Minister Swann's responsibility to lead on it, the Executive also have a responsibility. We have had Ministers tripping over themselves to give their commitment, or talk about their commitment, to mental health. Talk is cheap. Life is precious, and saving lives is precious. The retention of the long-term funding of the project is good value for money. It needs to be done, Minister; please, do it.

Mr Speaker: It was remiss of me not to advise Members that they have five minutes in which to speak.

Ms Mullan: I also thank Gary Middleton for tabling today's Adjournment debate on Derry's community crisis intervention service, particularly following this afternoon's motion. I also thank the Minister for being here for both debates.

This is one issue that unites the three parties here that represent the people of Foyle. The Minister and his Department have received many pieces of correspondence and questions from us and others across our city. Minister, we are all aware of the massive pressures on your Department in relation to the COVID

pandemic — in fact, the pressures were there before COVID — but it is very disappointing when I, and others, write to you to ask to meet and discuss crisis intervention in Derry, but those requests are not accommodated. It is also disappointing to have questions not answered by their deadline, and to read in the newspapers of additional funding, without the provision of any detail to any MLA who is here tonight.

I welcome the extension of the funding, as did my colleague across the Chamber, but, as was said, that is not a way to provide vital services. Our job in the Assembly and Committees is to scrutinise while working with Ministers and Departments to deliver first-class services for all of our constituents, but, in the case of crisis intervention in Derry, that has been lacking. There is a big enough crisis in my city with mental health without a crisis every six months over finding funding for this vital service.

Minister, I know how much you care, and I heard your commitment here today. That has been further demonstrated by the very welcome appointment of Professor Siobhán O'Neill as the interim mental health champion. It is good to hear from you today about the resources that are attached to that office.

The people of Derry have been expecting announcements and action on the future of crisis intervention and wider mental health services, given that mental health is a priority of New Decade, New Approach and across the Executive. When someone reaches out for help and support, they must have access to it. My party supports the appropriate funding of access to crisis services.

The Protect Life 2 strategy identifies the need for an out-of-hours crisis de-escalation service. The Derry model has been providing that for nearly two years as a pilot, yet there was no budget allocation in the strategy for 2020-21.

Earlier today, the Assembly debated a motion on the expansion of the MATT partnership across all trusts. Minister, I ask again that, when reviewing the existing model, the Derry crisis intervention pilot be part of that review and form part of the recommendations for going forward. I further ask, Minister, that you and your officials work with us and all our stakeholders as to what those services will look like for Derry.

Before I conclude, I pay tribute, as other Members have done this evening, to those involved in delivering this service: Extern, Foyle Search and Rescue, the council, the PSNI, the Western Health and Social Care Trust and the members of the steering group, because, without them, we would not have had a local service for the past two years, a service that has saved and is saving lives.

Finally, a Cheann Comhairle, the current cost of Derry's community crisis intervention service is £130,000 a year. That is small change in comparison with the overall health budget, so it is more than value for money for the service and support that it provides. Like other Members here this evening, Minister, I urge you to provide the required long-term funding to ensure that this life-saving service continues.

Mr Gildernew: I welcome the opportunity to return to the important issue of the cross-cutting support needed for crisis intervention services that we discussed earlier and wish to update Members on the Committee's consideration of the matter. I thank the Member for securing the debate.

At the Committee for Health's meeting on 18 June 2020, it considered correspondence from Extern and the Derry and Strabane Policing and Community Safety Partnership regarding the prospective closure of the crisis intervention service. The Committee welcomed the Minister's statement of 16 June announcing an extension of funding for the service. However, the Committee noted that the extension was short-term only and wrote to the Department to ask whether any consideration had been given to longer-term funding for the service. The Minister advised of the further three-month funding package granted and made the case for a multi-agency funding approach, given the benefits to the PSNI from the service.

The Committee also requested details on the planned reconfiguration of mental health crisis services as described in action 8.2 of the mental health action plan, including information on the time frame and any scoring system to be used in the review.

We were informed that the Chief Medical Officer was leading on the issue and that the proposed time frame was between September and December of this year, with the caveat that, because of the pandemic, it may require an extension. The Minister also advised that the review would look at the wider context of crisis support in mental health and consider all available evidence, in addition to evaluating existing services. The issue is closely connected to ongoing challenges at EDs and the review of urgent and emergency care, and the Committee understands that the review will also aim to identify improvements that will reduce the number of people attending emergency departments as a result of a mental health crisis.

As I said earlier, the Committee will no doubt keep the matter under review as part of our wider scrutiny of transformation and rebuilding services.

During this debate and the earlier one, something struck me. If you have a broken leg, people will come across the street to talk to you, to comfort you and to offer support and advice, whereas if you have a mental health problem, people will often avoid raising the issue or discussing it.

The other thing about the broken leg is that you can go and get something done about it when it happens and when you are in pain. That same access to mental health services when you really need them does not exist. Until we create a network of services across the North, we will not be treating mental health issues in parity with physical health.

5.30 pm

Mr Chambers: The Ulster Unionist Party has long recognised the need to develop and support innovative approaches to help people in times of emotional crisis. The community crisis intervention service has, undoubtedly, saved lives. It is not just its emphasis on a community response but that it works from 8.00 pm on Thursday to 8.00 am on Sunday, when some support organisations may not be there for people.

The service is a safety net, providing a short-term solution to an immediate crisis. That is why I was pleased that Robin Swann personally intervened not once but twice to secure the service. The first intervention was in June this year when he provided £32,000 as a breathing space for the council to reach a longer-term funding solution. At

the time, it was made clear that it would have been useful for funding discussions to involve other Departments and the policing and community safety partnership, given the benefit of the service to the PSNI. Regrettably, nothing came to fruition, so, once again, the Minister intervened. This time, it was not for just three months but for six. Whilst other Departments and statutory bodies often talk a good talk, it is regrettable that no one other than Minister Swann was able to offer even a partial contribution to the service.

If other statutory bodies are serious about that service continuing on a sustainable basis, they need to step up to the plate. They need to dig deep into their pockets and help to create a long-term funding package and a model that is available for even longer operating hours.

I wish this invaluable service well.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you to the Member for bringing this debate. It is not my constituency, although, as a former resident of Eglinton, it was once, so I speak as not just my party's health spokesperson but as someone who has a natural sympathy for the area.

The case for the retention of the service and placing it on long-term funding has been made. Indeed, the clear case exists for not just retention but extension. Funding sources may need to be wider than the Department of Health but, as we heard in the earlier debate, it is essential that we do not see money allocated to these services as just money spent but money saved. Such services are classic examples of the type of early intervention that the entire process of transforming our health and social care system is all about. By allocating funding to such services in the longer term, we should recognise that by intervening early — and, therefore, effectively — we can turn lives around. There is, surely, nothing more important.

I have spoken to my party's councillors in the area, and I emphasise the point raised in the earlier debate that crisis intervention should be much more an innate part of the overall mental health service, and, indeed, the health and social care system generally. Crisis intervention can be a fundamental part of primary care, providing a direct link for the police, ambulance and fire services rather than having to direct people to an already busy emergency department at Altnagelvin or elsewhere. That type of early intervention would see the most appropriate care provided immediately, with adequate follow-ups within a few days. That is the most effective channel to help people in need without the need for referrals, other than in the most extreme cases.

To re-emphasise two key points, the service cannot survive by having to chase after a pot of funding every few months. It needs a longer-term footing. Secondly, if we could provide longer-term funding, it could become a true anchor for the service and for improving mental health across the area, and that is potentially a model for elsewhere in this country.

I express my thanks to everyone who has been involved in the service to date and wish them well for the future.

Ms Hunter: I thank Gary for bringing this important debate to the Chamber. Although I am not an elected representative for Foyle, my constituents avail themselves of Extern services, so I am delighted to be here today to speak on the issue. In my time serving as a councillor on Derry City and Strabane District Council, I was greatly impressed by the work of CCIS and its commitment to

those struggling with mental ill health. It is providing vital services to the local community, serving people from the outskirts of Strabane right through to Derry city and constituents from Claudy.

In the midst of a global health pandemic and as discussed in the mental health crisis debate earlier, the need for on-the-spot mental health support is painfully apparent. We fear and have extreme concern regarding what the north-west would look like without access to a service like this, a community-based programme with a listening ear that is available out of hours and is on the doorstep. If we cannot afford to fund this life-saving service, what kind of message are we sending to the wider public?

I have spoken at length with staff at CCIS. You can tell the impact that this service has had on reducing suicidal behaviour in the wider council area. I urge the Minister and other Executive colleagues to please consider a long-term, ring-fenced funding strategy for this critical suicide prevention service.

Mr Carroll: Mr Speaker, as you know, I am not a Member from the constituency or a Derry man, but it is important to be here and speak in support of this service and other services like it across the North. Too often, services like this spend too much time chasing funding when they should be doing what they are best at, which is supporting people with mental health issues. People have expressed to me that the crisis intervention service in Derry is a vital amenity for the city and for the north-west. I believe them and will take their word for it. It has saved lives, as Members have emphasised tonight.

On World Suicide Prevention Day, the Minister announced another £60,000 of funding to keep the service going until March. That funding has been broadly welcomed because it is a service that nobody in Derry wants to lose. However, the treatment of the service is not good enough. People who depend on the service cannot be sure that it will be there next year or the year after, workers cannot be sure whether they will have a job and no one can make long-term plans to tackle mental ill health on that basis.

Like my constituency, Derry and the north-west suffer disproportionately from the legacy of deprivation and disinvestment, and the implementation of Tory welfare reforms has had a vicious negative impact on the most vulnerable and on low-paid workers in all communities here. Absolute poverty has increased, and these factors drive a tremendous mental health challenge for people in Derry and beyond. For those reasons, by not sourcing core funding for the crisis intervention service, I believe that the Executive are sending the wrong message to Derry and the north-west. A service that I am more familiar with, Compass Counselling, which is based on the Shankill, also required council intervention to save that fundamental and important mental health service. That pattern happens too often.

As we have heard already, New Decade, New Approach makes a series of commitments to develop Derry and the north-west. What message does it send to people in Derry and the north-west when they are forced to organise an all-out effort every couple of months to keep the doors of this vital service open? Hundreds of millions of pounds have been wasted on the likes of the renewable heat incentive scheme, and funding of £30,000 or £60,000 for the crisis intervention service requires a big effort,

investment and action by Derry and Strabane council and others to demand it. For me, that sends out the wrong message. The people of Derry will tell you that. They told me that prior to this debate. They will tell you that nothing has changed and that the new Stormont is the old Stormont when it comes to Derry and the north-west; promises but little delivery.

People in Derry are fed up with the half a loaf treatment, and the mental health crisis is one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century. The health pandemic, as we heard earlier, and its social and economic aftershocks will make it even more challenging. For this reason, the Minister and the Executive need to use this opportunity to identify core, long-term funding for Derry's crisis intervention service and make it part of the mental health action plan. The job of the Executive is to help people not to abandon them and generate cynicism and hopelessness.

Derry needs a new deal. Let us send a message that we are serious about delivering this by making it a priority to establish core funding for this essential service.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I thank Mr Middleton for proposing this Adjournment topic. I think that it works well and ties in well with the earlier debate on mental health crisis support. It is a testimony to the dedication of the Members who have stayed for the Adjournment debate because I know that, during other sessions, it was an achievement to get the constituency MLAs to stay. Therefore, I thank all the Members from across all the parties and other constituencies who have stayed tonight to join in and support the representatives from Foyle in the Adjournment debate.

The debate provides us, again, with a welcome opportunity to discuss the funding for the community crisis intervention service in Londonderry. I will repeat some of the commentary from the earlier debate because, since taking up the post of Minister of Health, I have made it very clear that mental health is a priority for me and my Department. I noted Mr Durkan's comments earlier about ego. I hope that that was not directed at me or anywhere near me. Therefore, I want to clarify that approach because it is not how I work, and it is definitely not how I work with regard to mental health.

For far too long people have struggled to access the appropriate mental health services when they need them. For far too long suicide has cast a shadow over our communities and it has robbed us of too many lives. So, it is important to note that suicide prevention is not a single issue; in particular, it links with drugs, alcohol and, as Mr Carroll said, deprivation. Those links are widely acknowledged through experience, research and best practice.

Protect Life 2 focuses on suicide prevention as a societal issue. It seeks to ensure collaborative cross-departmental engagement — I think that that was referenced by Ms Flynn in the previous debate — to address the risk factors for suicide and self-harm, as well as engagement across wider society. Suicide prevention requires work across a range of settings and services because the combined knowledge, expertise and resources of all our Departments and the differing sectors is essential to reduce the suicide rate.

Londonderry's crisis intervention service was commissioned, as many Members have said, by Derry City and Strabane District Council and it is delivered solely by Extern. The service began in January 2019 and it provides a timely and non-clinical community response to individuals who are experiencing an emotional or a situational crisis, and that has been indicated today. The service was initially piloted for one year and was due to end in December 2019, and that was extended until June 2020. The service was allocated £27,000 of transformational slippage funding in March 2020. I agreed to provide a one-off injection of just over £32,000 of funding to Derry City and Strabane District Council to allow for a breathing space for the council to extend the service for a further three months, which is to the end of this month, to try and reach a funding solution with stakeholders. That work is ongoing and it is going in a positive direction. I agreed last week, as has been referenced, to allocate a further £60,000 to enable the service to continue until the end of March 2021, while that work is ongoing. I know that the service wrote to a number of Departments, but Health was the only one that responded financially to allow that piece of work to continue.

A separate funding arrangement is being explored for the service thereafter by the council and Extern.

I felt it important to maintain the service to allow them to do that piece of work, and that is why I provided the funding until the end of March 2020 until the crisis service review work is completed, because this piece of work is included in that review and also in the context of COVID-19 and the impact that it undoubtedly has on mental health.

5.45 pm

The Health Committee Chair referred to action 8.2 in the mental health action plan. In the debate earlier, I referred to the specific steps that that involves. One of those is to consider the interaction between different crisis response services, such as MATs, the home crisis teams, emergency departments, 999, the police, primary care and the multidisciplinary teams. All of that work is part of how we do this to make sure we serve the people across Northern Ireland in the best way possible.

I have not just read the evaluations. I visited the service earlier this year and talked to the people who deliver it, and I was impressed by the work undertaken by the service to help those most in need. I was particularly impressed by the dedication and commitment of those individuals, because this service is person-centred, and we must all recognise that anyone can find themselves in need of such a service.

Extern have advised me that over 475 people have received time-critical and immediate intervention since the initiative commenced, and I have no doubt that this has saved lives. Some of those people have been brought to the service by Foyle Search and Rescue, some have been brought by the PSNI and others have availed themselves of accessibility and been brought by family and friends. Service users have consistently benefited from the non-clinical approach that is taken because often a busy hospital or emergency department environment is not helpful for someone in crisis. The therapeutic environment of the crisis intervention service is much more appropriate. The majority of clients have not required any further

services directly after attending the crisis intervention service, and I think that that point in particular underlines its effective working.

Whilst the benefits of this service have been, above all, for the clients themselves, there are also significant benefits for PSNI colleagues, who have a place of safety where they can take someone in crisis. The service evaluations, as referred to on a number of occasions, clearly show that police officers feel that the service allows them to treat clients more effectively and allows them to carry on with other duties as they are confident the person is safe.

The demands that mental health crises place on police forces have been very clear for some time, and I therefore think that there is a strong argument for the justice sector to consider contributing to funding such initiatives going forward because reducing the devastating impact of suicide and self-harm in Northern Ireland requires, as many Members have said, collaboration across all sectors of society and can only be achieved by working together across all government Departments and with stakeholders from all sections of society. That includes local councils, and I commend Derry and Strabane District Council for the proactive work that it has undertaken to commission this service.

Members will be aware that on 19 May I published my Department's mental health action plan. Policy work on developing proposals for crisis intervention services is now being taken forward through the mental health action plan. There is a specific action in that plan to develop proposals for crisis intervention services. It is expected that the review into mental health intervention services will be completed by March 2021. It will take into account the evaluation of the Derry crisis intervention services as well as similar pilots that operate in Belfast and the multi-agency triage team.

The review is expected to make recommendations for the future delivery of crisis intervention services and also enhance coordination of a range of associated programmes, including mental health crisis services, the Towards Zero Suicide programme, Lifeline and the multi-agency triage team, because decisions on future delivery of crisis services will be taken by the Department once that work is completed.

I am also committed to delivering a new mental health strategy by July next year. That strategy was already needed before the pandemic, but the need for a new comprehensive strategic direction and funding plan has now never been greater.

As I have said many times, mental health is one of my top priorities. I am honoured to be in this position, where I can drive strategic change and improvement to mental health services and improve the psychological well-being and mental resilience of the population. I trust that the allocation of £60,000 will allow Extern and Derry City and Strabane District Council to ensure continuity for the service and to contribute to suicide prevention, which is vital in these challenging times for those who are most vulnerable. I thank the Member for bringing this Adjournment debate topic.

Adjourned at 5.50 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 21 September 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Before we move to the first item of business on the Order Paper, I would like to make a couple of remarks. First, and in particular, I want to wish Christopher Stalford well. As many Members will know, he is still in hospital after taking ill again last week. On behalf of the Assembly, I want to send our best wishes to Christopher and his family. Secondly, I have spoken to Daniel McCrossan this morning, who is in isolation having tested positive for COVID-19. I want to commend Daniel for the robust self-isolation measures that he has taken. Again, on behalf of the Assembly, I send our best wishes to Daniel and his family in the time ahead.

Matter of the Day

David Cook

Mr Speaker: Mrs Naomi Long has been given leave to make a statement on the death of Mr David Cook, which fulfils the criteria that are set out in Standing Order 24. If further Members wish to be called, they should do so by rising in their place and continuing to do so. All Members who are called will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take any points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Before I call Mrs Long, I want to say that I knew David personally very well and worked with him on Belfast City Council. Many people will know that the years when we were both on the city council in the 80's and onwards were, at times, marked by very toxic circumstances. David was a man who was always very measured, civil, polite and easy to work with. We may not always have agreed politically, but that is irrelevant. I want to pass on my personal condolences to David Cook's family.

Mrs Long: Thank you for your words about David, Mr Speaker. I am, obviously, very sad but also honoured to pay tribute to an Alliance Party founding member, David Cook, who passed away peacefully on Saturday evening after a brief illness. Having previously suffered a stroke, he, sadly, contracted COVID-19.

On occasions such as this, I am reminded that it is because of the vision and courage of people like David Cook and all those who came together to form the Alliance Party that I am standing here today in the Chamber and that people have the option of voting for a different kind of political representation, committed to the creation of one community, united but diverse and inclusive. We are proud of their hard work, their desire to see a better way forward for Northern Ireland and their determination to make it happen. We are committed to continuing that work for a new generation.

David not only was a leader within Alliance as a member of our first executive and later as deputy leader from 1980 to 1984 but broke the mould in City Hall when he became the first non-unionist to be elected Lord Mayor in 1978. He served south Belfast faithfully on Belfast City Council from 1973 until 1985 and then at the ill-fated Northern Ireland Assembly from 1982 to 1986. He was also a committed European and stood as a European parliamentary candidate in 1984.

In more recent years, he continued his interest in Alliance and was a regular at party conferences and dinners over

the years. His loss in this our fiftieth year is all the more poignant as we never got to celebrate that anniversary together as a result of COVID-19, to which he ultimately and tragically succumbed.

He also continued with his work in community projects, because that was what led him into politics and that was what he continued to do in his retirement from politics.

My thoughts and those of the Alliance family are very much with his wife, Fionnuala, today, his sons Barbary, John, Patrick, Julius and Dominic, his granddaughters Romy and Imogen, his sisters Alison and Nora, and the wider family circle as they mourn his passing.

David was a beacon of liberalism during very dark times, and he was a trailblazer for equality, respect and fairness when all three were in short supply. He offered the hope of change when hope was scarce, and for that we will always be grateful. He was also a gentleman, well liked by those who met him and dearly loved by those who knew him, not least for his warm wit and his sense of humour. He will be very sadly missed by us all.

Mr Newton: I rise to speak on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party and to extend my sympathy and that of the party to David Cook's wife, Fionnuala, and to the wider family circle.

As you mentioned, Mr Speaker, David Cook served on Belfast City Council. I did not have the opportunity to serve at a time when David was a public representative. He represented south Belfast in the Cromac ward, as it was known at that time. In my time, anything that I heard about David Cook was always extremely positive. He came into public service at a time when it was much more difficult and dangerous than perhaps it is today. He brought to civic life his particular skills, not only his personality but his legal mind, and applied those to problems.

We are all the sadder in society for the loss of David Cook, not only in the political realm but in the community realm where he concentrated his efforts after his retirement from politics.

I will finish as I started by extending the sympathies of the Democratic Unionist Party to our colleagues in the Alliance Party and to the family circle.

Mr O'Dowd: Mr Speaker, in line with your opening remarks about Christopher and Daniel, I also wish them a speedy recovery.

I pass on my deepest sympathies on behalf of Sinn Féin to David Cook's family, to his wife, Fionnuala, and to the Alliance family. I knew David through meeting him at various events and through his community work. I always found him, as you said, to be a gentleman. He was someone who was prepared to listen, who engaged in a respectful manner, and who, in my opinion, was always in a listening mode. It is easy to have a conversation with someone and to nod your head, but with David, you could say, "There is somebody who is taking on my point of view. We are taking on each other's point of view. We may not always agree". That tribute has to be paid to him.

I met David's wife, Fionnuala, on several occasions, and, I have to say, they were a lovely couple, always very welcoming and very warm. I offer the family my deepest sympathies. It is another reminder, as if we need one, of the dangers that COVID-19 presents to our communities

and another tragic loss for a family as a result of this terrible disease. I pass on my sympathies and the sympathies of my party to all concerned.

Mr O'Toole: Mr Speaker, I, too, associate myself and my party with the remarks that you made about my constituency colleague Christopher Stalford and, indeed, my party colleague Daniel.

As others have, the SDLP would like to pass on its sincere condolences to David Cook's family, his wife, Fionnuala, the broader family and indeed our Alliance Party colleagues. David Cook was clearly someone who represented the very best of our politics and our society. He was someone who cared immensely about finding, building and expanding the common ground in a conflicted society.

On Twitter, Naomi Long talked about a painting of David Cook from his term as Belfast Lord Mayor. I remember my first trip to City Hall as a schoolboy. At some point, after seeing these very grand portraits, I saw a more modern, bright, colourful painting by Neil Shawcross. I did not know who David Cook was then and I did not know who Neil Shawcross was, but, in many ways, that painting stood for a lot of what David Cook seemed to stand for: bold, progressive, modern politics. His loss will clearly be felt by the Alliance family and by people in south Belfast. In a sense, he was a predecessor of mine as an Assembly Member for the constituency.

It is a deeply sad day for David's family, but, hopefully, they and the Alliance family will look on at the warm words being said about him today in the Northern Ireland Assembly and be consoled that his legacy is a very proud and important one.

Mrs Barton: First, I send my party's best wishes Christopher and Daniel and wish them both a full recovery.

On behalf of the party, I extend our condolences to Mr Cook's family and his wife on their recent bereavement. While I did not know Mr Cook, I understand that he was a great community person, great company and a gentleman. Although in politics we do have our differences, I think that, at this time particularly, we should put those differences aside.

I also express our greatest sympathies to the Alliance Party.

Mr Dickson: I will open my remarks by asking the Assembly to think about Christopher Stalford and Daniel McCrossan in the circumstances in which they find themselves.

I rise to add a personal tribute to the remembrance of David Cook and to send my sympathies to Fionnuala and the wider circle. I came into elected politics in 1977. David was already an elected representative by that stage. I have fond memories of David and Fionnuala; not only were they key for me in listening to the sort of speeches that they made at party meetings and conferences but they were there for young branches starting up in the Alliance Party. They were always there to help us canvass, pointing us in the right direction and encouraging us in those days. That is what it was all about. It was the encouragement that David and Fionnuala gave to all of us in respect of the party.

I also had a professional relationship with David Cook. He was a solicitor in Sheldon and Stewart when I was working as a conciliation officer in the Labour Relations Agency. We could have been canvassing or at party meetings at the weekend, but, on a Monday, I had to deal with him on a professional basis. He was very professional in his work as a solicitor. He worked very hard for his clients, and I remember those meetings with fondness, but we always had a good chat afterwards as to what had been going on at the weekend.

I just want to add my personal and deep felt condolences to Fionnuala and the family at this very sad time.

Mr Speaker: OK, Members. Thank you. That brings that matter to a close. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

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

12.15 pm

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, the next item of business is a motion regarding Committee membership. As with similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion, and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr John O'Dowd be appointed as a member of the Committee on Procedures. — [Ms Ennis.]

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Plenary Meeting

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Speaker has received notice from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that the deputy First Minister wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in the light of social distancing being observed by parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members still have to ensure that their name is on the speakers' list if they wish to be called for a question. They can do so by rising in their place or by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly.

I remind Members to be concise in asking a question: it is an opportunity to ask questions, not to make speeches. This is not an opportunity for debate, and long introductions to questions will not be allowed.

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): In compliance with section 52C(2) of the 1998 Act, I wish to make the following statement on the 24th plenary meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC), which was held in Dublin Castle on 31 July 2020. The Irish Government were led by the Taoiseach, Micheál Martin TD, who chaired the meeting. The Executive were led by First Minister, Arlene Foster, and by myself. All Executive Ministers, with the exception of the Minister of Justice, attended the meeting. The First Minister has agreed that I can make this report on our behalf.

Ministers welcomed the resumption of meetings of the Council. The meeting provided the new Irish Government and the new Executive with the opportunity to meet formally for the first time and to exchange views on a wide range of issues of mutual interest and concern. Ministers received a report from the joint secretaries on the work of the NSMC since 2016, including work undertaken across the NSMC sectors. They noted that three meetings of the Council, including one institutional meeting, had taken place since the last plenary meeting in November 2016.

The Council noted that the work of the North/South bodies has continued to make a significant contribution to communities, society and the economy of both jurisdictions. It also expressed appreciation to the boards and staff of those bodies for their work since 2016.

The Council also welcomed the mutually beneficial cooperation that is taken forward between Ministers and their Departments across the areas of cooperation. Ministers noted the ongoing work of the north-west strategic growth partnership and the continued engagement of senior officials in both Administrations with regional stakeholders regarding the direction, and priorities, for the north-west region.

With regard to coronavirus, the Council was briefed by the Chief Medical Officers, Dr Ronan Glynn and Dr Michael McBride, on the current public health situation and on ongoing cooperation on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Ministers extended their condolences to all those who have lost loved ones as a result of the pandemic. They also expressed their appreciation to all those who have played a part in the COVID-19 response, in particular health and social care workers, who have

shown extraordinary courage and dedication in their work on the front line.

The Council noted that senior representatives of the Executive and the Irish Government, along with their Chief Medical Officers, met at the NSMC secretariat offices in Armagh on 14 March to review the situation regarding the COVID-19 virus and how best to address the outbreak. At that meeting, Ministers affirmed that everything possible would be done in coordination and cooperation between the Irish Government and the Executive and with the active involvement of the health administrations in both jurisdictions to tackle the outbreak. Senior representatives of both Administrations have continued to meet regularly to discuss the ongoing COVID-19 response. The Council noted the memorandum of understanding on public health cooperation on the COVID-19 response agreed between the Departments of Health, North and South, on 7 April. The Council welcomed the close and productive cooperation that has taken place between Health Ministers, Chief Medical Officers and health administrations, North and South, to deliver an effective public health response. Ministers agreed that an early meeting of the Council in the health sector should review ongoing cooperation in responding to the pandemic.

The Council also noted the impact of the pandemic on society and on the economy, North and South, and the measures put in place by both Administrations to support communities and businesses affected by the crisis and to assist with economic recovery. Ministers agreed that the upcoming meetings of the Council in relevant sectors will consider how North/South approaches can contribute to the promotion of economic and social recovery.

Ministers noted the continued commitment of the Irish Government and the Executive to work through the North/South Ministerial Council to help deliver projects that will benefit people across the island, including through investment in infrastructure that will support cooperation and unlock the full potential of the economies of both jurisdictions. The Council welcomed the progress made to date in progressing commitments identified in section E of the Fresh Start Agreement relating to infrastructure and support cooperation and noted the new and renewed commitments set out in 'New Decade, New Approach' and the associated Irish Government commitments.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I thank the Ministers for today's statement. I will gently push this: this is our third week back, and we have had very light amounts of work from the Executive. The statement probably could have been made two weeks ago, but I am thankful that it has been made today.

In the statement, you referenced the appointments to the board of Tourism Ireland and the fact that there are vacancies on some of the other boards as well. Given that the North/South Ministerial Council can cover areas including health, the environment, agriculture and transport and with Brexit approaching in a matter of a few weeks, will the Council undertake to do all that it can to fill those vacancies? Is it possible to get in writing information on what the vacancies are at this stage?

Mrs O'Neill: This is the first opportunity that we have had to come to the Chamber. I accept that it is preferable that, after an NSMC meeting, we come quickly to the Chamber,

because it is still current and we are able to discuss things, so we take that on board.

On the appointments, you are right: the Council approved the appointment of four directors of Tourism Ireland with effect from 31 July 2020 to 30 July 2025. The members appointed were Ruth Andrews, Joe Dolan, Stephen McNally and Mary Mulvey. They were nominated by the Irish Government. Obviously, there are outstanding board appointments — 10 in total — from the Executive, and we need to move speedily to nominate people. There will be a lot of sectoral meetings happening over the next weeks and months, and they will provide plenty of opportunity to get all those positions filled as quickly as possible.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members will note that there are considerable numbers wishing to ask questions. I remind Members that some leeway is given to the Committee Chair, but I ask others to be more concise.

Mr Robinson: Does the deputy First Minister accept that Great Britain is our largest market and that avoiding friction in trade east-west should be the Executive's key priority in the ongoing negotiations?

Mrs O'Neill: I say to the Member that is in all our interests to minimise disruption to trade. We want to see frictionless trade North/South and east-west. We as a people are being used as a pawn in the middle of the Brexit debate right now, and that is not a good place for us to be. Our people need certainty. Our businesses need certainty. We will work to make sure that that happens. That is one of the issues that we discussed at the NSMC, and, no doubt, we will have to keep coming back to it. We need an outcome that serves the people here well.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members to make sure that they speak into an adjacent microphone for the benefit of Hansard and other Members.

Mr Sheehan: Was there any discussion of scoping out the possibility of a high-speed rail link between Belfast and Dublin?

Mrs O'Neill: It was something that we discussed. Improving connectivity between Belfast and Dublin is key in delivering opportunities for better connecting the island of Ireland and enhancing our respective economies. Our rail network, whilst relatively small, presents a unique opportunity. In line with that and the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach', officials in the Department for Infrastructure have begun early discussions with their counterparts in the South regarding the process for developing a feasibility study of a potential high-speed rail connection between Belfast, Dublin and Cork. I know that our colleagues in the north-west would include Derry in that. That work is ongoing, and Nichola Mallon, the Minister for Infrastructure, intends to engage with Minister Ryan to discuss the improvement of the transport links — both rail and road — between Belfast and Dublin. An NSMC transport sectoral meeting is scheduled to take place in early October where this and other matters will be discussed, following which Minister Mallon report to the Assembly.

Mr Nesbitt: I trust that the deputy First Minister will agree that a seven-week delay in reporting to the Chamber is not consistent with the spirit of the New Decade, New Approach commitment to transparency and accountability.

My question is about the commitment to an early meeting of the Council in health sector mode. Can the Minister tell us when that took place and what was the outcome?

Mrs O'Neill: I concur with the Member, as I did with the Chair of the Committee, that it is important that we turn the statements around quickly and bring reports to the House. The Assembly has been sitting for only two weeks, so, obviously, there has been a bit of a delay, but I take on board what the Member has said.

There is a health sectoral meeting planned for 2 October, which is only a short time away. I believe that that meeting will take place virtually, given the restrictions. Given where we are across these islands with the rise in COVID and what we are witnessing, it is really important that that meeting happens as quickly as possible so that we can share our information and work together where we can.

Ms Bradshaw: The ambition for the all-island memorandum of understanding was that there be greater cooperation and alignment across the island. However, the nature of restrictions reimposed in Belfast versus Dublin is different, the statistical analysis presented by the Chief Medical Officers is different and the communications are different. Can you provide some examples of where the memorandum of understanding is working or has worked?

Mrs O'Neill: The signing of the memorandum of understanding was crucially important in our fightback with regard to COVID-19. As we know, the virus does not recognise borders and does not stop somewhere because there is a different jurisdiction. The work that we have done across the island — sharing data and modelling and the work with the app to make sure that, no matter where you travel on the island, the app works — is all crucial, but we could do an awful lot more. I hope that, at the sectoral meeting on 2 October, the two Health Ministers and the Chief Medical Officers, in response to the current situation with COVID, will bring forward additionality to the memorandum of understanding and what else we can do to work together to get through the winter months, which, we all readily acknowledge, will be very challenging.

Mr Clarke: Will the deputy First Minister give her assessment of the action taken by the Taoiseach and the Irish Government in response to some of the Ministers and their colleagues breaking health guidelines?

Mrs O'Neill: That is a matter for the Taoiseach and the Dáil.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, can you give us an outline of how EU-related matters of interest to the North and the whole island of Ireland will be taken forward by the North/South Ministerial Council?

Mrs O'Neill: At the plenary meeting in Dublin, the Council had a useful discussion around the implications of the British Government's withdrawal from the EU. There was a recognition that the jurisdictions had a common interest in minimising disruption to trade and economic activity on the island. The North/South Ministerial Council provides a useful forum for the consideration of such matters, and Ministers will continue to engage on the implications of the withdrawal from the EU, both at NSMC sectoral meetings and bilaterally, where appropriate, and we will consider EU exit again at the next plenary.

Officials from both jurisdictions will also continue with their ongoing engagement.

12.30 pm

You will also be aware that the Joint Committee established by the withdrawal agreement will keep under constant review the extent to which the implementation and application of the protocol maintains the necessary conditions for North/South cooperation and that the specialised committee will examine proposals concerning the implementation and application of the protocol from the NSMC. Should matters be identified that Ministers believe merit consideration by the specialised committee, the NSMC provides a mechanism to enable that.

Ms P Bradley: Can the deputy First Minister give us any update on the progress of the Ulster canal?

Mrs O'Neill: Some progress has been made. Back in 2007, as you know, Waterways Ireland was given NSMC approval to explore the potential to restore the Ulster canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones. Phase 1 of the restoration, from Upper Lough Erne to Castle Saunderson, is now complete; preliminary work on phase 2, from Clones to Clonfad, has now commenced; and phase 3, when complete in the future, will connect Castle Saunderson with Clonfad and complete the restoration of the Ulster canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones. I welcome the progress that had been made and the commitment from the Irish Government to completing the third phase. The project will deliver social and economic benefits and will absolutely improve citizens' lives.

Ms Anderson: I thank the joint First Minister for that statement and ask her for an indication as to what focus the North/South Ministerial Council will have on the north-west development fund in any future funding arrangements.

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks for the question. The current north-west development fund is still running, with funding approved until 2022. This includes a six-month extension of the funding period to take account of the COVID pressures and their implications for projects. The total investment committed by the Executive is approximately £2.15 million. This commitment is match funded by the Irish Government, as agreed in the Fresh Start Agreement in 2015. The north-west development fund has delivered a number of successful projects. Some examples are: developing economic growth through trade and investment missions; developing the physical environment by contributing to the INTERREG greenways project; and, through north-west sports development, strengthening community cohesion and well-being. The Irish Government indicated in New Decade, New Approach that they were committed in principle to providing further funding to the north-west development fund in collaboration with the Executive. The north-west regional development group recently wrote to us seeking a continuation of the fund beyond the current arrangements, and the First Minister and I are considering this request, which will require engagement with the Irish Government.

Mr O'Toole: Deputy First Minister, there has been a lot of chatter in the last few weeks about what is and is not in the Good Friday Agreement. Do you recognise that paragraph 17 of strand two of the agreement says that the North/South Ministerial Council should:

“consider the European Union dimension of relevant matters, including the implementation of EU policies

and programmes and proposals under consideration in the EU”?

To that end, can you be more specific about exactly what the North/South Ministerial Council is doing in relation to the implementation of the protocol and the protection of this entire island and why we are waiting until December to have a plenary session of the North/South Ministerial Council, after the deadline for *[Inaudible]* —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has asked his question.

Mrs O'Neill: As I said in my introductory remarks, this issue was discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council plenary session. That is not the only forum in which to discuss it, but it certainly is a forum in which to discuss it. If we happen to need other meetings outside the plenary format, we will not be shy in asking for them, particularly given the volatility of the situation that we find ourselves in right now. We want to see an outcome that works for people here. We want to see certainty and the minimisation of any disruption to trade. Those things are all crucially important, but we are clearly in politically volatile times with Brexit and what that means, and we hope that there is an outcome through the Joint Committee. I am happy to keep the Member updated on any discussions that we have on a North/South basis with regard to Brexit.

Mrs Barton: Deputy First Minister, in your statement, you affirmed that everything possible would be done in coordination and cooperation between the Northern Ireland Executive and the Government of the Republic of Ireland to tackle the latest outbreak of COVID. I represent a border constituency, and it is often the situation that neighbours from either side of the border find themselves going on the same holiday abroad together. When they return, those living in the Fermanagh/Tyrone area have to self-isolate for two weeks. If this is violated, they suffer the full rigour of the law, while those living in the Cavan/Monaghan area are free to socialise and mix and even come to Enniskillen.

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

Mrs Barton: They can even come to Enniskillen to socialise. What discussions have there been about cooperation and coordination on issues that could result in the spread of COVID or endanger people?

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks. The Member does represent a border constituency and understands the challenges. She understands very well that the virus does not stop just because you move from one constituency to another or from one jurisdiction to another. That is why North/South cooperation on the issue of COVID is absolutely vital if we are going to be successful. I welcome the fact that there has been ongoing engagement at Chief Medical Officer level and at ministerial level, but, as we face into the winter months, we need to seriously ramp that up and work collectively across the island. We live on a very small island, and changes and differences in approach confuse the public, particularly in border constituencies. I think that we have to have an eagle eye to all of that and all the restrictions that are in place and work in tandem as best we can.

Mr Buckley: Is the deputy First Minister still committed to an extraordinary British-Irish Council meeting, and who

does she believe or consider has been most reluctant to see one take place thus far?

Mrs O'Neill: I am very strongly on the record in saying that we need to have a British-Irish Council meeting, and we have asked for that and pushed for it on a number of occasions, even as recently as the weekend, when we had a call with Scotland, Wales and Michael Gove and again mentioned it there. I think that it is important that we have these meetings on a North/South and east-west basis. I am committed to all aspects of the Good Friday Agreement and all its institutions, so I think that that meeting should happen as a matter of urgency.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for making the statement today, and I note the cooperation between the Chief Medical Officers, going right back to 14 March. In the light of the fact that we are seeing very worrying increases in the spread of the virus from Dublin to Derry, that we are also seeing the unequal impact that that is having on working-class communities from Ballymun to Ballymena and that we are seeing postcodes affected here in the North that run along the border, to what extent is there effective cooperation between the Executive and the Government in Dublin in relation to COVID-19?

Mrs O'Neill: As I said, I think that the extent of the ongoing discussion has been happening from the very outset of COVID, but I do think that it is time for us to renew our efforts and our focus, given what we are facing in the weeks and months ahead. You rightly point out border communities, for example Strabane and Lifford, and you can see the pattern of the virus spreading. Those are all worrying developments, so now more than ever I think that we need to be very coherent and joined-up in our approach and continue, through the vehicle of the North/South Ministerial Council sectoral meetings and on an ongoing basis, that regular engagement if we are going to be successful across this island in driving down transmission rates and trying to see our population get to the other side of this coronavirus.

Mr Dickson: Deputy First Minister, Brexit looms large as the UK approaches the endgame. Can the First Minister and deputy First Minister assure the House that they jointly share the best interests of people and businesses, given the often conflicting views of their respective parties?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not think that it is any secret to the Member that the First Minister and I have different outlooks on Brexit, but we have a commonality on the matter of protecting our people, and we want to see the minimisation of any disruption. I hope that a political outcome is achieved here over the next number of weeks, and I will use my best endeavours to play my part in all of that.

Ms Rogan: Give the rise in positive cases of COVID-19 in recent days and the challenges that the two Governments face together, can the Minister confirm when the next health sectoral meeting will be?

Mrs O'Neill: The next meeting will take place on 2 October. That is very timely given where we are at with the virus' spread. We in the Executive will have big decisions to take on how we manage our way through this crisis, so I think that that meeting on 2 October, only a number of days away, will be really useful and timely.

Mr McNulty: I thank the deputy First Minister for coming here and making a statement. Minister, given what

previous Members who have spoken said about the increasing numbers of COVID cases from Dublin to Derry, do you agree that we should adopt a Fortress Ireland approach, with heightened collaboration, North and South, to ensure that we battle this virus effectively together?

Mrs O'Neill: We live on a very small island with a small population; we are one epidemiological unit, and I think that our best defence against this virus is actually to fight it in an all-island way. Just as we have that Fortress Ireland approach when it comes to animal and plant health, I think that it is obviously important that we apply that also to our people.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, what discussions have you had about higher education in the North/South Ministerial Council? As you are very well aware, New Decade, New Approach includes a commitment for the Northern Ireland Executive to deliver the expansion of Magee to up to 10,000 students, and the Irish Government have made a commitment to support capital investment for the same expansion. It is important that both Governments jointly progress this policy and project.

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you to the Member for the question. There will be a sectoral meeting — I think that it is at the very start of November — at which this will get a lot of discussion. The Executive, as you know, have reaffirmed their commitment, which was set out in New Decade, New Approach, to establish the graduate entry medical school on the Magee campus. That commitment is also absolutely in recognition of the fact that this is a transformative project for the North and the north-west region, both for the economic recovery and the wider social benefits that will come with it. The objective is to progress the project to secure a sustainable outcome in the fastest feasible time frame, with the aim of the first intake of 70 students in September 2020-21. This is a complex project, no doubt, involving a number of Departments and external agencies. The Executive Office is working with the Health, Economy and Finance Departments to prepare further advice to the Executive on the issues that need to be addressed to secure sustainability.

The inclusive futures fund will provide some £15 million of funding for three years to provide the platform for the school's long-term success. The Executive have also provided an assurance that they will provide funding for the project going forward, so it is a good news story for the north-west.

Mr Beattie: I have heard a lot of people say that COVID does not respect borders, and I absolutely agree with that: it does not respect borders. Considering the free movement of people on this island and off this island, on the rest of the British Isles, surely the Minister should be arguing for an all-islands approach — as in a British Isles approach — to deal with COVID-19.

Mrs O'Neill: I am on the record as saying that we should approach this in a very joined-up way, so I believe that we need an all-island approach. I actually think that we should have an all-islands approach, particularly when it comes to things like travel. There are differences right across the islands and that is very confusing for the public in trying to work out where exactly they take their lead from. So, there is merit in all those things, and I am happy to work across these islands to battle COVID-19. It is about people first in the middle of all of this. It has to be about getting people

through the pandemic and about us showing political leadership to get them through.

Mr Allister: In discussing COVID, did the Council discuss the undermining of the public messaging? In that regard, as a token of her sincerity, did she apologise for attending the Storey funeral? Even now, does she yet apologise for attending the Storey funeral?

Mrs O'Neill: The North/South Ministerial Council did not discuss that.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her statement. The statement references the ongoing work of the north-west strategic growth partnership and indicates some cooperation to unlock the full potential of the economies of both jurisdictions. Therefore, I ask her specifically, has there been any discussion about the N2/A5 project and the Narrow Water bridge?

Mrs O'Neill: We talked about both those issues. The A5, for example, will greatly enhance the connectivity of the north-west, so it is a project that we all want to see finalised. It will reduce journey times and it will improve journey time reliability, road safety and all of that. In New Decade, New Approach, the Irish Government reaffirmed their £75 million funding commitment up to 2022 for the A5.

Following the quashing of the decision to proceed with the scheme in November 2018, the Department for Infrastructure is progressing the necessary work to enable a fresh decision to be taken. I understand that the commissioner's report on the public local inquiry into the 'Environmental Statement Addendum 2019' and related matters has been forwarded to the Department for Infrastructure, so we expect to see some progress being made there.

12.45 pm

In terms of Narrow Water bridge, again, we are absolutely committed to progressing that project, which has very strong local support, to link the communities on both sides of Carlingford lough and to take full advantage of the tourism potential. Again, I understand that Minister Mallon visited the project recently and that the work on updating the economic appraisal of options continues in the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. So, I hope that we will be able to see some progress being made there also.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, considerable time remains for this section, so if any Member wishes to ask a further question to the deputy First Minister, I ask them to indicate by rising in their place.

Mr McNulty: Minister, was the plight of frontier, cross-border workers raised at the North/South Ministerial Council? As per EU law, as I have been advised by various Ministers, North and South, the responsibility for assisting those people lies with the Minister for Communities. Will you confirm that and confirm whether you have made requests to the Minister for assistance for people who have been left behind or fallen through the gaps in the net of COVID support throughout the pandemic?

Mrs O'Neill: I can confirm that, yes, I have raised that issue on numerous occasions and I have written to the Irish Government on the issue. I think that it is a disgrace that those workers have been left behind. There needs to

be a resolution. It is in the hands of the Irish Government to find that resolution and to make sure that those workers receive the payment to which they are entitled.

Ms McLaughlin: Minister, thank you for your reply to my previous question, but it was not a reply to the question that I asked. I asked what conversations had taken place in the North/South Ministerial Council in relation to the further expansion of the Magee campus to 10,000 students, not about the medical school — that is a separate issue. The question is about the further expansion, the commitment made in the 'New Decade New Approach' document and the commitments made by the Irish Government for capital expenditure and investment in that expansion. So, could you answer that question, please?

Mrs O'Neill: I am sorry if I misunderstood your question. The issue was not discussed in detail at the NSMC because, obviously, we had a wide agenda, but there are, as I said, a number of sectoral meetings coming up, and that issue will get a much more detailed hearing. A meeting is due to take place on 6 November, so, hopefully, that will be an opportunity for a fulsome discussion on the issue.

We are committed to the full expansion of Magee. We have made that very clear, and it is a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach'. We will just have to work very hard collectively in actually trying to deliver it.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for letting us all in again. Deputy First Minister, in relation to what we discussed earlier, will you use the North/South Ministerial Council to advance one particular question? All here want to see maximum access for Northern Ireland businesses North/South but also, critically, east-west. Can she advocate, via the North/South Ministerial Council, that businesses here be given access to EU trade deals? That is implicit in the Northern Ireland protocol, and, with goodwill, it should be possible to agree it in Brussels with, hopefully, goodwill from London.

Mrs O'Neill: Yes. I am happy to take that up and to raise it at the next meeting. I think that, in an ongoing way with our colleagues in Dublin, we use that forum as a way of trying to advance such things, although, outside of that, there are obviously other opportunities, and I am happy to take that up.

Mr Allister: The Minister said that undermining the public message in respect of COVID was not discussed at the meeting. Since then, of course, we had the scandal of the golf dinner in Dublin. Does the Minister think that those who attended that and apologised were right to apologise, and, if they were right, why has she not apologised?

Mrs O'Neill: Again, the issue was not discussed at the NSMC.

Mr Lunn: Just to develop the discussion on Narrow Water, Minister, I know that it would have considerable infrastructural effect on the area, but do you agree that the tourism potential will be immense if we join up the Cooley peninsula and Carlingford with the Mourne? Considerable money was spent in the past on tourism development in the Mourne. It seems a pity that this scheme cannot be progressed quickly. It has been going on for about 10 years.

Mrs O'Neill: You are absolutely right. It has been going on for so long, and then people start to lose heart and think that it will not be delivered. We have a restored Assembly

and Executive, and we have the NSMC now meeting. I intend to pursue this project because we cannot overstate the tourism potential that it will have for the area. I think that it is immense. It is in all our interests to try to get the project delivered as quickly as possible, given that it has been so long in the making.

Mr Buckley: Given what we have heard today about COVID-19 being no respecter of borders, which I fully agree with, and the fact that some of our sporting organisations operate on a cross-border theme, particularly the GAA, does the deputy First Minister have any comments in relation to what has appeared to be a breach of COVID regulations with the mass pitch invasion at Dungannon's GAA game?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that questions are meant to be about the ministerial statement. I invite the Minister to respond if she wishes to do so.

Mrs O'Neill: It is not related to the NSMC.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you very much for letting us back in, Deputy Speaker. My question relates to the forthcoming health meeting. As MLAs, we have many emails in our in-boxes around waiting lists and delays because of the reconfiguration from COVID. To what degree will you look at an all-island approach to getting those waiting lists down and sharing capacity?

Mrs O'Neill: The detail of that would fall to the Health Minister, so the Member may wish to take that up with him, but there are opportunities for us to work across this island. Our waiting lists were already in a dire situation before COVID, and a lot of things have been put on hold as we try to respond to the pandemic, but we have to find ways to make sure that we look after people's health outside of the COVID situation.

For those people who have been waiting for a long time, I am quite sure that there are avenues for us to be able to work across the island to provide people with the opportunity to get the medical attention that they will require. There will be a need for us all to work really hard to address the waiting lists because we know that they are dire. They were dire before COVID, and they will be in an even worse state on the other side of it.

Ms Anderson: Thank you for letting us in again, Deputy Speaker. Minister, will you elaborate more on your statement when you talked about the all-Ireland economic recovery and what way that was dealt with at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting? Will there be a sectoral meeting on that or did the meeting go into any great detail?

Mrs O'Neill: The meeting itself had an understanding of the current situation that we find ourselves in, dealing with a global pandemic, how we are going to build on the other side of that, how we are going to build the economy, how we are going to look after society as a whole. There will be more opportunities to advance the economic recovery work through the sectoral meeting, which I am assuming — I do not have a date in front of me — is coming up shortly. We have to have a serious conversation about the type of society that we want to build on the other side of this. The economic recovery will be very difficult and very challenging, so we need to think outside the box and work collectively across this island.

Mr Nesbitt: Is the Minister aware of why the Justice Minister was absent? Were justice issues discussed?

Mrs O'Neill: No, I cannot remember why the Justice Minister was not available to attend, but there were no issues discussed that fell within her remit that we were not able to deal with.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That concludes questions on the ministerial statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

Committee Business

Pension Schemes Bill: Extension of Committee Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. Members should resume their seats when they have finished tidying.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I beg to move

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 29 January 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Pension Schemes Bill [NIA Bill 07/17-22].

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I call the Chairperson of the Committee for Communities to open the debate on the motion.

Ms P Bradley: As the House will be aware, the Pensions Schemes Bill passed its Second Stage on 7 July 2020, and it was then referred to the Committee for Communities for its Committee Stage. At its last meeting prior to the summer recess on 8 July, the Committee agreed to issue its call for evidence, which went out on 5 August.

Without going into the detail of the Bill, it is worth advising Members that it seeks to introduce a regulatory regime in Northern Ireland for a form of occupational pension schemes called master trusts, in order to address a legislative gap. A similar provision was made for England, Scotland and Wales in the Pension Schemes Act 2017. Following the summer recess, the Committee began its consideration of the Bill, but it still has to undertake a number of tasks.

The Bill is key to ensuring the full regulation of master trusts that operate in Northern Ireland. Therefore, it is essential that the Committee carries out robust scrutiny of the Bill, which contains 45 clauses and three schedules. That means that it needs to extend the Committee Stage.

At its first formal meeting after summer recess on 9 September, the Committee agreed to request an extension to the Committee Stage until 29 January 2021. That will allow the Committee for Communities to complete its scrutiny as fully as it can and within an achievable time frame. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): No other Member has indicated that they wish to speak on the motion. I will, therefore, put the Question.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 29 January 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Pension Schemes Bill [NIA Bill 07/17-22].

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

Private Members' Business

Honouring the EU Withdrawal Agreement Protocol

Ms Anderson: I beg to move

That this Assembly acknowledges that the majority of citizens voted to reject Brexit; recognises that the departure from the EU gives rise to substantial political and economic challenges for our society; further recognises that while the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland is imperfect, it guarantees that, whatever the circumstances, there will be no hard border on the island and will protect the Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions, North/South cooperation and the all-island economy; believes it would be entirely unacceptable if the British Government sought to abandon these safeguards and mitigations, as this would amount to a serious betrayal of an existing international treaty; and calls on the British Government to honour their commitments, and to ensure, now, the rigorous and full implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, prioritise peace and stability, and work to secure a future economic partnership with their EU colleagues now and in the weeks ahead.

1.00 pm

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

Ms Anderson: There is no doubt that Brexit is an unmitigated disaster. How the British Government treated the Brexit withdrawal agreement and the protocol is no different from any other agreement that they have ever made. Sinn Féin warned the EU not to trust the British Government, and, true to form, after agreeing the withdrawal agreement and the protocol, the British Government immediately reinterpreted it, misinterpreted it, transcribed it incorrectly into domestic law and simply denied it.

EU laws, policies and funding touch on almost every aspect of our daily lives. There are, in fact, 115 areas of EU law that engage the Executive's and the Assembly's competency. As the motion states, it is unacceptable that the British Government would seek to abandon the safeguards and mitigations that are in the withdrawal agreement and the protocol. Brexiteers such as Geoffrey Cox have described what Britain has done with its Internal Market Bill as "unconscionable". The Lord Chief Justice, Declan Morgan, stated that Britain's Brexit plan Bill undermines the rule of law domestically. Scotland's most senior law officer resigned over Britain's Internal Market Bill. Angela Merkel says that Britain has joined the "ranks of despots". All of that speaks volumes.

Even hardened Brexiteers must know that Brexit gives rise to political and economic challenges and that it is damaging, reckless and wrong. The Good Friday Agreement is facing an attack on all fronts. The British Government have eroded the authority of this Assembly —

for example, by overriding our budgetary role — and can do so without so much as a nod to the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, or the wider Executive.

The British Government have also sidelined North/South cooperation. The environment, for instance, is a Good Friday Agreement area of cooperation, but Brexiteers rejected the need for a level playing field that would ensure that EU environmental protections were aligned across the island. Environmental standards in Derry would have remained the same as those in Buncrana, and anyone with a titter of wit knows and understands that pollution does not know any border. The Good Friday Government states that the British and Irish Governments must:

“discuss, consult and use best endeavours to reach agreement on co-operation on matters of mutual interest”,

which include EU matters, yet no consultation or discussion took place between the British and Irish Governments, because the British Government completely ignored the role of the Irish Government as a co-guarantor of the agreement.

The British Government are driving a horse and cart through strands one, two and three of the Good Friday Agreement. As Sinn Féin said in 2016 about the Good Friday Agreement, and many others have repeated it, “Britannia waived the rules”. The protocol in the withdrawal agreement was not perfect. It was an ugly compromise, but it mitigated the worst impacts of Brexit. It prevented a harder border on the island of Ireland, protected the all-Ireland economy and upheld the Good Friday Agreement in all of its parts.

We have heard lots of comments about where our biggest market is. The fact is that the North’s economy is dominated by SMEs, 80% of which trade across Ireland. Here are examples of the breathtaking scale of the damage done to lives and livelihoods by this Brexit mess. One quarter of the milk produced in the North is processed in the South. Chickens in their thousands produced in the South are processed in the North. Some 10,000 pigs come to the North from the South every week.

The production of Guinness necessitates approximately 13,000 crossings in Ireland every year, and, every day, almost 7,000 goods vehicles travel the A1 dual carriageway between Belfast and Dublin. Coca-Cola employs 522 people in Lisburn, and its produce is sold throughout Ireland. Any delays on the island of Ireland, as a result of Brexit, will cost €100 for every lorry, many of which cross the border every day. Bombardier, which is one of the North’s largest employers, engages more than 60 suppliers in the South of Ireland. Food, beverages etc account for 49% of the all-Ireland manufacturing trade. Some 10% of the North’s GDP comes from the EU, so that would mean that £3.5 million of European funding was gone.

Sinn Féin’s position on east-west trade is clear: it must be as frictionless as possible but let us nail the nonsense about not tolerating a border in the Irish Sea. Have you lot been asleep? For many decades, there has been a border in the Irish Sea. Animals and animal produce, food and fertiliser, amongst many other things, have been checked at the border for many years, so that new-found offence does not wash with thinking people. Unfortunately, Brexit will intensify those checks, but we tried to warn Brexiteers

that there would never be a good Brexit and that there would be consequences. A lot of focus has rightly been put on trade, goods and farmers in the North losing over £2 billion of European funding payments, while many groups that are losing EU social funds look on in despair and increasing alarm.

Let us not forget another big erosion caused by Brexit: your hard-won rights. Sometimes, we do not know what we have until it is gone. Last week, the Human Rights Commission and the Equality Commission addressed the Executive Office Committee. Both commissions live in hope that the British Government will honour article 2 of the protocol to the withdrawal agreement, which states that there will be no diminution of our rights. Hopes and wishes are for Christmas: British duplicity, on the other hand, is, unfortunately, real and worrying. British Ministers have already expressed an interest in lighting a bonfire under hard-won rights; in fact, they started that fire when Brexit enabled them to bin the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights, which prevents discrimination, including disability discrimination, and recognises the rights of people with disabilities to benefit from measures designed to ensure their independence and integration. Given that the North has the lowest level of human rights protections, the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights was important for us here. The DUP will not agree to a single equality Bill or to a bill of rights, so do not believe them when they tell us that those rights will be sorted. Maternity leave, workers’ rights, consumer rights, equality pay and much more are under threat, and the British Government have already declared their intention to commence a full-frontal attack on rights when they scrap the European Convention on Human Rights.

The Sinn Féin motion calls for the full implementation of the Irish protocol, as agreed. That is in the best interests of all citizens across the island, and I urge parties to recognise that. Sinn Féin also calls on the Dublin Government, the EU and the international community to, again, stand firm in defence of the Irish peace process and in opposition to the increasingly reckless actions of the British Government led by Boris Johnson. The EU Council told us that there is a democratic way back into the EU, and that if, through a democratic process the country is reunited, the whole of Ireland will be in the EU. Those having that sensible, rational and legitimate conversation about constitutional change and how best to share this island in the future are the reasonable people in the room. We are the people who will work to defend the Good Friday Agreement, the all-Ireland economy —

Mr Allister: So says a bomber.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Ms Anderson: — and the peace process from Britain’s reckless Brexit agenda.

There is not an MP in Westminster stopping Boris or Brexit, but you, the people, through a democratic process, can stop him and his Cabinet from imposing all this madness on all of us.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member draw her remarks to a close?

Ms Anderson: Go raibh míle maith agaibh. Thank you.

Mr Givan: The Member who introduced the Sinn Féin motion has the reputation of speaking with such grace and

poise. She told the former British Prime Minister in the European Parliament to:

“stick it where the sun doesn't shine”.

Then we are the ones who are unreasonable because of the position that we take. I have to say to Sinn Féin: if you are going to introduce such controversial motions, have them proposed by somebody who we may take a little bit more seriously than the Member for Foyle.

The motion reveals what it is all about for Sinn Féin. It is all about the North/South; it is all about the all-island agenda and the reunification of this island that the Member spoke of. Nowhere in the motion does it mention east-west. That does not exist in the motion that Sinn Féin have brought. It talks about:

“North/South cooperation and the all-island economy;”

Then, of course, it repeats the debate about Brexit and the “citizens”, undefined of where, who rejected Brexit. Let us not repeat that it was a United Kingdom-wide referendum. Let us not go over the ground that constituencies, including my own, voted to leave the European Union. The people of Northern Ireland do not want to go over that debate; we are now dealing with the outworkings of it, whether you agreed or not.

The motion talks about the protocol being “imperfect”. There is an understatement. Of course it is imperfect, but ignore the consequences because it delivers the objective that Sinn Féin, the SDLP, and the Alliance Party, which supported the protocol, want to achieve.

When we hear from the Alliance Party, it will be interesting to hear about that. The Alliance Party has joined with Sinn Féin and the SDLP at every opportunity when it has come to the European Union and Brexit, and have always gone against the unionist people's position.

Before the Internal Market Bill was even published —.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will not give way. Members were jumping up and down with Matters of the Day, before they knew what was in the Bill. Such is the interest that they have when it comes to the detail of how we work out this protocol and minimise its impact.

The protocol and the barriers that it creates to trade undermines our ability to have the unfettered trade that has been often talked about by not just the United Kingdom but by the European Union. However, when you see that in reality, there is not unfettered access because the protocol is an instrument to punish the people here in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom. It is an instrument being exploited by the European Union and our predatory neighbour, the Irish Republic, when it comes to commercial activities that are going to flow as the outworking of it.

Those Members in the SDLP, Sinn Féin and the Alliance Party dismiss it. It is no surprise that the Alliance Party dismisses it again, given the position that it has held. The implications on trade should not be diminished by anybody in the House.

Mr Middleton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for giving way. Would the Member agree that it is a ludicrous position that some MPs, including the MP for Foyle, Colum Eastwood, are actively campaigning against trade deals with the US, given the significant economic challenges that exist within our constituency?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Givan: Therein, I think, the public will see that not only do we need to agree to the position of the parties opposite when it comes to this, but if you dare go against it, they say, “we will lobby in the United States and seek to punish the people by not having a trade agreement”.

Is it not absurd that if you do not get their politically ideological-driven position, you will then penalise the people of Northern Ireland? You will seek to damage our economy, will lobby in the States to try to prevent a trade deal from taking place and then you go on to say that this threatens peace and stability. In Westminster, the Member for Foyle went on to talk about violence.

You will use not only political arguments, and want to use economic leverage, but you follow it up with threats of violence to achieve what you want to achieve. That is implicit when you talk about peace and stability if we do not do what you want. Where is the threat coming from to peace and stability? Where is the violence going to come from?

You use it implicitly to imply, “Do as we say because somewhere out there could be a problem that could then inflict something that damages our peace and stability”.

So, whenever I look at the motion, I think that there is no other position that any unionist, certainly, could take but to reject it. Indeed, that is the position that should be taken by those who actually care about the people of Northern Ireland. That is because 65% of purchases come from Great Britain — that is £13.3 billion of purchases — and you want to put up trade barriers, have customs declarations, regulatory burdens and increased costs. Our consumers then pay the price. Then, 53% of external sales from Northern Ireland go into Great Britain, which is £2.3 billion of sales.

The Member for Foyle who moved the motion talked about 80% of SMEs trading on an all-island basis — 90% of SMEs trade with Great Britain, but there is no concern for the implications that there could be for the costs of their business. The motion is politically and ideologically driven in order to advance the only issue that Sinn Féin cares about with Brexit, and that is the reunification of Ireland. Everyone should reject it, but Alliance will still vote with Sinn Féin —

1.15 pm

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

Mr Givan: — and its bedfellows in the SDLP.

Mr O'Toole: I will try to lower the temperature after some tub-thumping there.

It is difficult to take seriously the suggestions from anyone in the DUP that they care about the fettering of trade or trade barriers when this entire process has been driven by Brexit, which, at its core and at first principles,

is about increasing trade barriers on the continent of Europe between the United Kingdom and the EU. It is very difficult to be lectured by people like Mr Givan, who were triumphant enthusiasts for Brexit, which will probably mean the biggest increase in trade barriers in the modern era and certainly since the Second World War. It is a remarkably ironic statement; Alanis Morissette could not have written Mr Givan's speech any better, given the level of irony in it.

My party and I support the motion. I agree with the sentiment in it, which is that no one should be in any doubt that the protocol is an imperfect document. Let us be absolutely clear: I am sure that, five years ago, my party, others in the Chamber and I would not have selected the protocol as a framework for Northern Ireland, this island or commerce across these islands. We would not, but we are presented with a position where successive United Kingdom Governments, reaching their zenith under Boris Johnson and the ideologues around him, have decided that they want to break from the European Union in the sharpest, most dramatic way possible. That presents people in Northern Ireland with a dilemma. It is the same dilemma that was there in 2016. I sometimes talk about this in the Chamber. I used to be a civil servant, and I worked in Number 10 Downing Street before the referendum in 2016 and subsequent to it. I have since left. A large part of the reason for that is a deep and abiding frustration with the recklessness towards Northern Ireland, including to not only our post-conflict society but to our economy and people. It has been deeply frustrating, and, unfortunately, it has got only worse. I

Is the protocol perfect? No, it absolutely is not. Let me first be really clear about what the protocol is. It is a limited set of protections against the creation of a hard border, largely for goods, on the island of Ireland, so Northern Ireland will remain in the single market for goods and subject to the European Union's customs code. Effectively, that means that Northern Ireland will be in the EU customs union. But it does not mean that there will not be a hardening of the border in a whole range of other areas.

There are certain Members on the opposite Benches who probably quite gleefully like the idea of divergence between the two jurisdictions on this island. They will get it, unfortunately, in many areas, because there will be divergence in the services economy. It will be more difficult for people who are involved in services to do business across the border on the island of Ireland. If that is what you sought from Brexit, well done, because you are going to get it. We are going to have divergent regimes for immigration, and that is going to throw up all sorts of challenges. There are innumerable other areas for which there will be a hardened border on the island of Ireland, but specifically for goods, we have protection from a hardening of the border, and there are certain other protections as a result of the protocol. So, yes, we absolutely need to see those protections delivered upon.

It is also the case that the protections in the Ireland/Northern Ireland protocol were agreed by the British Government less than a year ago. It is important for people to reflect on what it means for the reputation of the United Kingdom Government when a Minister stands at the Dispatch Box and says, "The UK is going to breach international law". There are some people here who perhaps have long-standing reasons to distrust what is

said at a Dispatch Box in the House of Commons. There are others who do not. Nobody here should take lightly the idea that a British Government are gleefully walking away from their obligations under international law. Even if it is a stunt — a negotiating tactic to escalate tensions — we in this part of the world should be deeply angry at being used to escalate tensions in a negotiation between the UK and the EU.

The UK Government have, throughout the process — even before these institutions returned — called for the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly to have their say. We had our say in June, but they did not listen. We asked for an extension to the transition period. I do not know how any right-thinking person, in the context of a pandemic, would not want the transition period to be extended. I reiterate that call today, but we have not heard a single acknowledgement of it from the British Government. Let us hope that, if we pass this motion today and a further private Members' motion that we are bringing tomorrow on the Internal Market Bill, finally, the —

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

Mr O'Toole: — Westminster Government will listen. We need the protocol to be delivered, not because it is an ideal situation, but because it is a base level of protection. I urge Members opposite to think hard about the kind of society that they want to live in and how we move our economy forward in a way that serves everyone in our society.

Dr Aiken: The Ulster Unionist Party will not support this one-sided motion.

It should come as no surprise to Members that neither Boris Johnson nor the European Union seem to have the interests of the people of Northern Ireland at heart. Anybody who has kept a close eye on the current negotiations between the United Kingdom and the European Union will have heard numerous pronouncements about putting the people of Northern Ireland and the Belfast Agreement to the fore, and they will wonder whether some people will bother to read that document. Some of them should consider the implications of putting a border down the middle of the Irish Sea for the whole of Northern Ireland and these islands.

In my previous role as chief executive of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce, I was fully cognisant of the importance of the €1 billion, or £1 billion — there is not a lot of difference today — of trade that went back and forth across the Irish Sea every single week. That trade — North/South and east-west — is a circular trade. The very implication of putting a border down the Irish Sea, which many people seem to profess to do without realising the implications on trade for everybody, including businesses across these islands, has to be considered.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Dr Aiken: No, not just at the moment. I will give way in a moment.

The key question for us, as Members of the Assembly, is this: what does it mean for the people of Northern Ireland when we look at issues in the future such as state aid rules, the role of the European Court of Justice, and how the Assembly will legislate for issues that apply directly to the people of Northern Ireland whilst at the same time dealing with the considerable number of issues that will be

brought about by North/South and east-west borders being built?

The really significant issue that we have to deal with is the fact that time is running out. Come 1 January, we could be in a position where, despite what Simon Coveney says, food coming from the rest of our nation is deemed to be unacceptable. We have heard Michel Barnier and Simon Coveney say that that is a ridiculous statement. However, when given the opportunity in the Joint Committee to say that that will not be the case, guess what? They said nothing.

For the people of Northern Ireland — for our electorate, and for the consumers we all are — we need to get some degree of clarity about what is going on. That should be the issue in front of the House. That should be the issue for all of us. That is the question that we should be asking. We should be asking Boris Johnson. I am no friend of his. There are lots of questions to be asked of the political parties in the House that decided on 3 October last year that tariff and regulation boundaries down the middle of the Irish Sea were a good idea. The question facing us is about what is going to happen on 1 January. That is something that we, as an Assembly, should be concentrating on; we should not be looking at motions like this, which do not really ask specific questions. I must admit that I found it really surprising that the Member for Foyle mentioned checks on fertilisers going back and forth across the border. Anybody who is even remotely aware of what the circumstances were would know that, of course, there had to be checks on fertiliser because most of it was not being used for the appropriate purpose.

I do not think that anybody would believe that this motion is balanced. We need to be asking questions both of the United Kingdom Government and the European Union. We should all be asking those questions together. We should be doing that in such a manner that raises the appropriate issues for the people of Northern Ireland, namely what is going to happen to us on 1 January 2021?

Mr Dickson: I support the motion. The turbulent issue of Brexit overhangs our future. The protocol that was agreed less than a year ago and is now international law is, as Members have heard from around the Chamber today, an imperfect solution to the border issue for Northern Ireland, but it is a response to the potential barriers that a hard Brexit could construct. As a basic structure to protect the institutions which maintain our economic, political and social lives, it does have merit. It is an insurance policy, although clearly the original backstop, negotiated by a previous Prime Minister, was a better deal for Northern Ireland with fewer barriers and incorporated the whole of the United Kingdom in the single customs market. However, nothing is ever settled when it comes to Brexit or this Prime Minister.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: No, you are fine thanks. Sorry; apologies. I was in a different zone. I will give way.

Mr O'Toole: I am really very grateful to the Member for giving way. This is a point that I did not get to make. Would he acknowledge that a large part of the reason why Theresa May's backstop, which would have largely avoided a border in the Irish Sea, did not pass was the kind interventions of the party opposite, the Democratic Unionist Party, which refused to support it and so, in many

ways, they are the creators of the border in the Irish Sea that they now rail against?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Dickson: Apologies again. Yes, of course I wholeheartedly agree. The amateur dramatics of the DUP in the last Parliament are clear for all to see.

Nothing is ever settled when it comes to Brexit or this Prime Minister. We now have an Internal Market Bill, which basically empowers the Government to override elements of an international treaty signed only months ago. This must be of profound concern to Members of Parliament who have been invited to participate, and have participated, in votes which break the law. It has also shamed the United Kingdom Government around the world. Let us be clear about that: the United Kingdom Government have been shamed by its Prime Minister and by its Cabinet.

It is hard to discern what this Government are doing or trying to achieve. Even if this is just a simple negotiating tactic, it undermines the United Kingdom's international reputation and the ability to strike further trade deals. Indeed, they have apparently lauded a trade deal with Japan, not a word of it different from what had already existed between Japan and the European Union.

The United Kingdom was admired as a member of the European Union for its influence, often by smaller member states for which the United Kingdom was often a reasoned voice. What sort of future will the United Kingdom have if it cannot and will not keep its word? Who would you deal with? Is this the global Britain that we want to be part of? One of the key prizes of Brexit is supposed to be the US trade deal; Mr Givan and others made reference to it. However, not just representatives of the House in America but democratic and republican senators have made it clear that they are concerned and disturbed by its effect on the Good Friday Agreement and the harm that it would cause.

There is also a clear risk to British/Irish relations, which have, it must be acknowledged, reached a high point over the last number of years. The cooperation and mutual respect between the United Kingdom and Ireland has been a key building block of the peace process and in building trust between both parts of this island.

1.30 pm

A general election was won on the deal that included the protocol, but now we are told that we have to default on it and that no deal would be a good outcome. What a massive failure of politics it would be if we have no deal, an indication of a Government who do not know what they are doing and a blatant act of self-harm by a Prime Minister who does not care, exactly at a time when we need someone who is competent.

Brexit also brings friction. We need to mitigate that and protect the Good Friday Agreement. The United Kingdom seems determined to self-isolate from the world's biggest trading blocs and deny Northern Ireland the safety net that the withdrawal agreement included. Locally, we need our Ministers to get on with their job and implement the elements of the protocol. I fear that not only is time running out for Northern Ireland and its Ministers to get the job done but we will be in the business of further destroying

livelihoods and businesses. Business needs certainty. It needs rules and a future in which trade barriers are low and not increasing.

The protocol is not perfect, but the apparent alternative is much worse. We need to get on with implementing it. It is in the United Kingdom Government's power to reach a deal with the EU that ensures that goods and services can flow and trade freely through these islands. We should build bridges, not borders.

Mr Middleton: The key line for me in the motion, which we will vote against, says "whatever the circumstances". That, in itself, nails the real motive for the motion. Whatever the circumstances — no matter how bad it is for Northern Ireland; no matter what effect it has on businesses or the constituents whom we represent — we must support the protocol.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: No, I will not.

That is a completely unacceptable position for anybody to take. Of course, it is no surprise that Sinn Féin would take that position, because it takes that position on a united Ireland: it does not matter if communities are divided or our businesses would be decimated, whatever the circumstances, we should support it. Again, that is an unacceptable position. I raised it with the EU ambassador when he came to Londonderry on Friday. I made the point that not one unionist party or, for that matter, not one unionist in this country supports the protocol. It is disastrous for the United Kingdom and for business, and it is important that they hear that message.

My colleague touched on this: for some parties in the Chamber, their priority is ensuring that connections with Dublin and the EU are retained, but, again, whatever the circumstances, they want us to support the protocol. Our MP for Foyle, Colum Eastwood, and other MPs were tripping over themselves to get on to the air waves to support the position taken by some US politicians on a US/UK trade deal. A constituency like mine of Foyle is devastated not only by the COVID pandemic but by years of issues and lack of infrastructure and investment, yet political parties are actively encouraging no US/UK trade deal. That is a crazy position to take. I ask Members to reflect on that. Members who go through the Lobby today are making it clear that, whatever the circumstances, they want to support the protocol. I ask Members to reflect on that.

As for the issues with the protocol, our party has been clear that we do not support it. At every opportunity, our Ministers, MPs and MLAs have actively campaigned to address some of its flaws, of which there are many. There are key concerns around the protocol. One that has been touched on and, again, was raised with the EU ambassador is the GB to NI trade tariffs and the risk there, with the fact that the EU was using Northern Ireland as leverage and risking a food blockade on Northern Ireland. The paperwork, the regulatory checks, the issues for our fisheries, VAT and state aid — all those issues are very much a concern to local businesses.

Much has been made of the Good Friday Agreement — the Belfast Agreement. The Belfast Agreement contains one substantive mention of the Republic of Ireland border, and that relates to demilitarisation, which has already

happened. I know of no one who is calling for the army to rebuild those installations on the border. The Belfast Agreement, however, was about respecting —

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: Yes, go ahead.

Dr Aiken: Is the Member aware that one of the people from the United States who have been calling for these arrangements, Representative Peter King, not only said that he supports the breaking of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) but wants walls and reinforcement of the border with Mexico and, I understand, Canada as well? How can that case be quoted as an example?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for his intervention. That points out the hypocrisy. I take all those comments with a pinch of salt, because there are question marks over the motives of all the individuals who have commented.

Those who will support the motion, whatever the circumstances, need to explain to our communities — our business community and our citizens — how making it easier for business to trade with its biggest market within the United Kingdom is a breach of the Belfast Agreement.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: Yes, go ahead.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member agree that, far from anyone talking about extra measures on the border, the then Prime Minister of the Irish Republic, who is the current Deputy Prime Minister of the Irish Republic, said that he could deploy his army on the border with Northern Ireland?

Mr Middleton: That was crazy. I agree with the Member; he is absolutely right.

In closing, I urge Members in the Chamber today to listen to the business community — *[Interruption.]* They laugh, but the people who are laughing are actually laughing at the business community, which is being —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Mr Middleton: — decimated through the current pandemic and with potential borders going up in the Irish Sea. Those are the people to whom they will have to be answerable, and I urge Members to reflect on the fact that, whatever —

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

Mr Middleton: — the circumstances, they should not support the motion.

Mr McHugh: At the outset, I have to say that, if self-interest requires a U-turn, Boris Johnson is capable of that. We all know that, and Members on the other Benches know that only too well. He has U-turned on them many times, and, yet and all, like the obedient lapdog, they still lick his toes and wait for the crumbs off his table.

The EU withdrawal agreement protocol was a compromise, and built within that compromise is an arbitration system to allow the parties to deal with any disputes that may arise over certain issues. Many Members have touched on

that but have not explained that, through that arbitration system, in the event of there being disputes on particular products or the likes of it, it could have been worked out between the parties that signed up to the agreement. However, by introducing his Internal Market Bill, Johnson is totally undermining the protocol. The protocol defends not only the interests of the people of the Six Counties but the Good Friday Agreement. It has been stoutly defended by member states of the EU and, more significantly, by the United States of America, guarantors of the Good Friday Agreement.

Let us not kid ourselves: the Internal Market Bill is about Boris Johnson and England and what is best for them. If truth be told, it is about fisheries to a lesser degree but, more significantly, about state aid, as the leader of the unionist party said, and the rules governing state aid to industry. It also gives the Tory Government the power to impose rules and regulations on the Assembly that can undermine our agriculture industry, particularly by compelling the Assembly to accept lower environmental, food safety and animal welfare standards. Boris Johnson, to whom we all listened recently, hides behind the defence of the Good Friday Agreement. He did not mention it when signing up to the protocol, but the European Union negotiators always had the Good Friday Agreement uppermost in their sights and its defence as the central plank from day one. Johnson went so far as to suggest — some people here have nearly touched on the same issue — that we in the North of Ireland might even be starved by the European Union, which would limit the import of food products to this island. It is ironic that a representative of the class and party who oversaw the starvation of millions of our people in the 19th century whilst exporting food from Ireland is telling us that the European Union will do the same because of limitations on the importation of food to this island. How ironic. I ask you: whom do you trust? Michel Barnier, chief negotiator for the European Union —

Some Members: No.

Mr McHugh: Ursula von der Leyen, head of the European Commission —

Some Members: No.

Mr McHugh: Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House of Representatives —

Some Members: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order.

Mr McHugh: — and many of our politicians from all parties in the North of Ireland and throughout the Republic of Ireland. Whom do you trust when it comes to defending our interests and our rights? Do you trust Boris Johnson, who shows no respect for this agreement and no respect for international treaties? Some Members were shouting “No”, but the Lord Chief Justice, Declan Morgan, stated:

“International law is grounded on trust and confidence between nations”.

When that is totally ignored, it seeps down and corrupts even our domestic law as well. Johnson is incapable of identifying with the age-old proverb of Na Fianna, “De réir mo bhriathair”, which means “According to my word”. A more direct English translation into a cornerstone of the business community is, “My word is my bond”. We must

be seen to oppose this departure in every way through the motion proposed by Ms Anderson.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McHugh: It is a departure from basic law and from respect for law within nations and between nations. We must be much more principled in every respect in how we deal with our affairs.

Mr Catney: Like many in the Chamber, I was shocked and appalled when the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland admitted that the Internal Market Bill broke international law. For me, it showed that the current Tory Government could not care less about the Good Friday Agreement or the people of Northern Ireland.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Catney: Absolutely.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member very much for giving way. When talking about the breaching of international law, the most disappointing thing about the United Kingdom Government planning to do so is that it would take them down to the same level as the European Union and exactly the same level as the United States. The United Kingdom has a much higher standard to adhere to.

Mr Catney: I do not know whether I can agree with everything that you said, but I will tell you this: I am not a lawbreaker, and I would not like to think that you were either in some of the posts that you held before.

I have spoken many times of the need to protect the all-island economy, North/South and east-west. I have used the examples before, but a hard border on this island would have such a profound economic impact that I have to use every ounce of my breath to highlight the issue until someone, somewhere listens. Our whiskey industry is entirely integrated, with County Antrim producing single malt for the entire island and bottling whiskeys for distillers in the Republic. In my constituency, Coca-Cola, which was mentioned earlier, bottles produce — syrup — that comes up from County Mayo, in the Republic, to Lisburn. The products are made in Lisburn, packaged and distributed throughout the whole island of Ireland. That is the unique business arrangement that that company has for this island. Those are just two large examples. Countless small and medium-sized enterprises that rely on products, services and buyers from across this island have no idea what is to come at the end of the year.

1.45 pm

The impact is not felt just by current businesses; it is also preventing new businesses from opening. There is a unique craft whisky industry booming on the island, and this is becoming one of the most significant times for the product. Many distillers have opened in the North, but the uncertainty of Brexit has severely impacted on their money and trade. The UK Government tearing up international agreements on a whim only adds to that uncertainty, and I hear every day of more and more businesses that are giving up on the place that I call home and the place that I love: Northern Ireland. That is fundamentally wrong.

If we do not fight now, the situation will become terminal. Let us be clear, our people are the ones who will suffer from the protectionism and the policies of the Tory

Government. I do not know if any Members got the opportunity to watch some of the events from culture night that were online at the weekend. The participants highlighted the strong artistic and cultural traditions that there are across the island, from Derry to Cork. John Hume understood that cultural connection, Martin McGuinness understood that cultural connection and the Reverend Ian Paisley understood that cultural connection. The Tory Government will never understand it; they will never understand the all-island make-up of our economy and our health and energy sectors. They do not even understand where the border is. In the face of Tory ignorance, it is on us to protest that failure of our citizens. I urge all Members to support the motion.

Mr McGuigan: I welcome the motion tabled by my colleagues and the opportunity to speak on a subject that is vital to my constituents in North Antrim, to many businesses big and small across the North and the all-island economy, to the hard-fought and hard-won gains of the Good Friday Agreement and to peace and stability on the island.

There is no good Brexit for the people of Ireland, which is why the majority of people in the North voted against it. Nobody wanted then, nor do they want now, barriers to trade or the movement of goods or people. That is why Sinn Féin did not support Brexit. All of the potential issues that are being discussed today, even some that are being discussed by the DUP and the Ulster Unionist Party, emanate from Brexit.

I hear Members on the other side of the House talking about the consequences of Brexit; a Brexit that they supported. Brexit is the problem. The Irish protocol is designed to mitigate against the worst impacts of Brexit on citizens, businesses and communities in the North. It should not need to be pointed out, but the protocol was an agreement that was reached between the EU and the current British Government. Yet, last week, we had the Internal Market Bill tabled by that same British Government to thwart an agreement and the commitments that they made.

Am I surprised that a British Government would make a deal, sign an agreement and then try to undo it or circumvent it in a way that breaks international law to suit its own narrow political interests? Am I surprised that the British Government would display little knowledge, and in some cases no knowledge, of the impact of their decisions on the people of this island? Am I surprised that, even when they are aware of the implications of their actions because they have been made clear to them, they care little about the impact of their decisions on the people on the island of Ireland, even when we are talking about something as important as the Good Friday Agreement and the peace process? You will not be surprised to hear that I am not surprised by anything that is done by this particular British Government.

It is important, though, that the Assembly, which is representative of the people and interests of the North, has its voice heard and registered. The Internal Market Bill and its implications for the Irish protocol are totally unacceptable. Indeed, they are very dangerous. There can be no damage to the Good Friday Agreement and no hardening of the border on the island of Ireland. We in Ireland cannot be collateral damage to a British Tory

Brexit. If Brexit is to proceed, the Irish protocol must be implemented.

I sit on the Assembly's Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, and on a weekly basis we discuss the potential negative impacts of Brexit and the uncertainty for our business community. There will be 25,000 front-line farming families affected. Obviously, a large percentage of the North's exports goes east but a far greater number of businesses — mainly small and medium enterprises — export largely or solely to the South. Fifty per cent more businesses here sell to the South than export to Britain. The vast majority of that trade is, as I said, carried out by SMEs, which are the backbone of our economy.

Eighty per cent of microbusinesses and 70% of small businesses export solely to the South. The agri-food sector, which is hugely important to the Northern economy, is no different. While east-west trading is undeniably hugely important, the production of the goods that we export is inextricably integrated North and South. Annually, over 400,000 pigs are exported from the South to the North for processing and the same number of lambs are exported North/South. Over 800 million litres of milk are exported to the North to be processed and then exported from the South. East-west trade, as I have said, is vital but in order for us to even produce the goods that are exported east, North/South trade must be seamless.

In the Agriculture Committee, we are told that 200 lorries a day come across the water to stock our shelves. Whilst that is obviously vital, anywhere from 6,000 to 12,000 heavy and light goods vehicles cross the border every day. In our Committee deliberations, we have also shared the concerns of those in the environmental sector about the impact on current EU legislation and on environmental protection. Regardless of political allegiances, we are an island nation with our own unique environment. Living on an island, it would be completely and utterly ridiculous for us to have different environmental standards and practices North and South. Birds and fish, rivers and hedgerows and the very air that we breathe are not bound by borders.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close?

Mr McGuigan: The EU has some of the highest environmental standards in the world and without binding standards of the same or higher levels, we risk a race to the bottom for environmental standards and protections.

Mr Stewart: I support my party colleague, Steve Aiken, who has already spoken in the debate, in saying that we will not be supporting the motion. I am pro-business and pro-Union and it is for those two fundamental reasons that I did not support Brexit. We firmly believe that it would not only, potentially, have an impact on the Union but would have massive consequences for business and trade. As democrats, we accepted the result when it came but it is barriers that are the biggest restrictions on trade. The protocol puts in place very difficult circumstances in which businesses will be able to trade east-west.

The motion refers to trade North/South and, obviously, that is important; there is no doubt that there is an all-island economy. However, fundamentally, Northern Ireland's biggest market is east-west, given its relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom. Any impediments to that would be deeply regrettable and would have a deep impact on existing businesses here. I know of one business in my

constituency that reckons that it will cost it up to £1 million a year to implement some of the measures, red tape and bureaucracy that will be required just to have the protocol in place. That will be deeply damaging. I do not want to see any barriers in place but we do not want paperwork to be introduced that will prevent companies from doing the business that goes across every day. My party colleague mentioned the £1 billion in trade each week. Any impediments to that will be deeply damaging to our economy. It is regrettable, then, that that is not mentioned anywhere in the motion.

I also fear that, more and more, we will see in adverts and on TV that products that are sold online and elsewhere will not be available in Northern Ireland because so many companies here and across the United Kingdom will not want to do the paperwork or pay the additional costs that will be required to bring in those products, further diminishing Northern Ireland's economic impact. It is regrettable that that is not included in the wording of the motion. We have also talked about the impact on the potential for state aid and the impact of the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in relation to any additional legislative burden that would be borne here by businesses and on their ability to trade.

The motion calls for the protection of the Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions so that it is not diminished. That is somewhat ironic, given that it was just a couple of months ago that the Sinn Féin MP for Mid Ulster said in relation to the Good Friday Agreement that nationalists had been sold a pup. I am trying to figure out whether Sinn Féin supports the Good Friday Agreement or whether it is, as the Francie Molloy MP said, a pup that had been sold to the nationalist community. My party supported the Good Friday Agreement in all its parts —.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Stewart: I am pushed for time, but I will give way briefly.

Mr Dickson: On the subject of being sold a pup, does the Member agree that the Prime Minister sold the nation a pup when it came to the protocol and winning his election?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Stewart: Indeed. Thank you for that intervention.

The Ulster Unionist Party supported the Good Friday Agreement throughout. When I spoke to my party colleague Reg Empey about this recently, he highlighted Sinn Féin's role in the agreement and said that it did not participate in any negotiations on strand one issues and, in fact, did not even endorse it at the end. It feels as if Sinn Féin found the protection of the agreement and all its entities quite recently and conveniently, as it did the relationship with the European Union, which is, again, a recent marriage of convenience.

I acknowledge the fact that some parties here have been dedicated and supported the European Union throughout. I refer to the SDLP, which was consistent in its message, for which I give it credit. However, Sinn Féin's continuous support and idolisation of the European Union in all its forms seems to have come quite late to the party.

From a unionist point of view, the Good Friday Agreement is clear:

“the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, freely exercised and legitimate, is to maintain the Union and, accordingly, that Northern Ireland's status as part of the United Kingdom reflects and relies upon that wish; and that it would be wrong to make any change in the status of Northern Ireland save with the consent of a majority of its people”.

Quite how a border of any type in the Irish Sea is compatible with the Good Friday Agreement in that respect is, quite frankly, beyond me.

The Belfast Agreement removed articles 2 and 3 and enshrined the principle of consent, meaning that the Northern Ireland people, and they alone, would decide their future. Surely any impediment to trade in either direction, North/South, which is identified in the motion, or east-west, is a clear breach of the agreement. How can there be an argument against that? It cannot simply be a claim that barriers between Northern Ireland and the Republic are a breach of the agreement but any restriction on trade barriers going east-west is not. The two cannot be mutually exclusive. It does not seem to stack up.

With regard to the economic impacts, Northern Ireland's biggest market is Great Britain. Any impediments to that would be deeply damaging to trade here. The focus should be on getting to 1 January and constructively trying to carve out together a workable solution so that we can protect our businesses.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, Question Time is due to commence at 2.00 pm, and I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, and the next Member scheduled to make a contribution is Andrew Muir.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Health

COVID-19: Tests for Children

1. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Health whether he is considering measures to assist parents at test centres that require help in administering COVID-19 tests to children under five. (AQO 679/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I recognise that for young children, including children under five, testing may be an unpleasant and uncomfortable experience. Parents may find it easier to apply the swab in the home environment using the home testing kit that can be ordered through the digital portal or by calling the 119 helpline. There is a video available on the Public Health Agency (PHA) website to show parents how to take the swab. I am advised that health and social care colleagues are again looking at how best to support COVID swabs being taken on the rare occasions where parents or carers may not be able to obtain a sample at a national testing centre.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his answer. The process of parents administering tests to under-fives can be difficult and cause anxiety. There is also a deep concern among parents that they are not doing the test properly. Does the Minister agree that it is important that parents in those circumstances are provided with professional advice, or the necessary assistance, to ensure that the tests are administered correctly?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point because an accurate swab is critical no matter who it is from, whether a child, a pensioner or someone in a care home. The ability to take the swabs accurately and to ensure their validity is important. That is why there are people available in the test centres who can provide guidance. They will not actually take the physical swab, but they will provide guidance and help. As I said, there is a video online that is accessible to guide parents through the process.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Obviously, the testing of young children is naturally going to be very challenging, particularly if it is a self-testing kit. Is the Department of Health looking at what assistance could be made available by GPs in the COVID screening of the under fives through the COVID centres?

Mr Swann: That is not an area that has been progressed. We are using the national testing site, and, as I said, we guide parents to use the home testing kits where they are available. I would definitely advise that, where parents are guided to get their child tested, they should. My colleagues in the Public Health Agency have advised that the testing data shows that, up until last Thursday, over 10,000 children under the age of 10 have been tested via the national testing initiative in Northern Ireland. It shows that that avenue is working and is accessible. That includes over 4,500 children under five, and the majority of those have been tested in the past three to four weeks. The

avenue of testing and testing accessibility is working for us, but I will take the Member's comments away and see whether they are of an advantage somewhere.

COVID-19: Pillar 2 Testing

2. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Health what actions he has taken to improve pillar 2 COVID-19 testing. (AQO 680/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. Pillar 2 testing is delivered through the participation in the national testing programme managed by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in London. I have discussed the importance of pillar 2 testing capacity directly with my ministerial counterpart in London on a number of occasions. My officials are in daily contact with officials in DHSC to ensure that Northern Ireland capacity is optimised through our participation in the national programme. Currently, in Northern Ireland, we have four drive-through fixed testing sites and six operational mobile testing units (MTU), with two more MTUs due to be operational shortly. The mobile testing units are deployed in towns and villages across Northern Ireland in response to local need. There is also the home-test option delivered directly to a person's home via postal order and/or the satellite test-kit option. That is being used to support a regular programme of testing in our care homes.

Demand for testing has increased significantly across the UK in recent weeks, and I am aware that the national testing programme is experiencing an exceptionally high demand. Overall, however, testing capacity is continually reviewed by my Department, and active discussions are under way to further enhance capacity across all aspects of our testing programme, because optimising available testing capacity will continue to be, for my officials and me, a key priority in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr McHugh: On testing, we have seen increased problems and growing public frustration in accessing COVID-19 test centres, with people being directed in some cases to Scotland and even to Wales. Does the Minister accept that we need a locally based, accessible testing programme?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that point. When the Chair of the Health Committee asked a question for urgent oral answer last week, I addressed a number of those points. I highlighted the importance of our pillar 1 and pillar 2 systems. Pillar 1 is managed by my Department. Pillar 2, the national programme that we rely on heavily, is supported by access through the national testing programme, which has worked well for us in Northern Ireland. We have had difficulties in accessing, but, as I said last week in answer to the question for urgent oral answer, those were due to the computer-based booking programme that looked at who was booking a test and the closest test site but did not take into consideration the Irish Sea. My Welsh counterpart, Vaughan Gething, was having the same problem with the Bristol Channel. The programme was looking for the closest testing site rather than at one that was actually accessible.

Many of those problems and issues have been worked through, and we are not seeing the same challenges or problems with accessing a test. It was, I think, 'The Times' that ran a poll on five postcodes in every local authority by testing them once an hour every hour for 24 hours. Out

of the local districts in Northern Ireland, only one did not hit 100% accessibility for testing, and that was Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon, which was shown an 80% rise. However, it was a great poll, as it demonstrated our accessibility to the national testing programme. However, I caution those who go on to the portal simply to see where tests are without needing one: please think of the system's capacity.

Ms S Bradley: If extra capacity is to go into any system, will the Minister consider the people in Killeel and the Mourne, who are still, despite the technical errors in the system having been ironed out, being requested to make unreasonable journeys, given that those people may be symptomatic?

Mr Swann: As I think I said in my answer to the substantive question, when we see the increase of prevalence in COVID-19 in a specific area, we assign the mobile testing units to make sure that we can support the people in that area. That is how we target where the units access. We have four national testing sites across Northern Ireland to make sure that we can get access to the most central locations that we have for those fixed sites. However, we use and maximise the mobile testing units where appropriate.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister for his response. Once again, it is worth noting that, without access to the United Kingdom's pillar 2 network, our ability to test the consistently large numbers that we are testing would be severely restrained. Can the Minister comment on whether he is considering expanding our own domestic pillar 1 capacity?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. As I said in the substantive answer, that work is always ongoing, and we do it through our partners in C-TRIC in the west, through the Almac Group, through the universities, and even through the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute and the Department of Agriculture, where we look to see where the capacity is in lab availability and access and also to ensure that we can continue to enhance and increase that capacity in pillar 1. That is vital for us; it is what we use for our health service testing programmes. It is also the pillar that we use for residents and staff in our care homes and through which we have identified outbreaks.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for all his efforts to date on COVID; we appreciate all the work that he has done. Can he give us some assurance on the quality of the COVID test in order to give the public real confidence that it is effective and accurate? The accuracy of the test is an issue of concern among the public. What quality assurance systems are in place, Minister?

Mr Swann: The tests are all accredited through the appropriate channels before they are utilised in any of our testing sites, as is the case across the United Kingdom. There have been calls for the introduction of the new rapid 90-minute or two-hour testing kits, but we are waiting on accreditation to make sure that those tests are accurate in terms of quality and reproducibility to make sure that we reduce, as far as possible, the number of false positives. We know that there are false positives in the system, but I would rather err on the side of caution and have somebody work under the assumption that they are positive than send somebody who is positive out under the assumption that they are negative.

Mr Gildernew: In relation to pillar 2, the Minister has acknowledged that there have been difficulties in booking tests. Is he aware that there are increasing difficulties with the return of test results and the time involved in that? That appears to be impacting on children's tests more heavily, which is making more people more anxious and concerned. Is the Minister aware of that? Does he receive information back from the centre on it?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I have had conversations about the timeliness of the return of results with my counterparts across the United Kingdom, because that is crucial. It also feeds into our test, trace and protect system, because the sooner that we can identify a positive case, the better those systems can fully interact to make sure that we get on top of alerting the contacts of an individual who has tested positive.

As the Member rightly identifies, the timely return of a test is crucial for parents who are looking for reassurance for their child. I know that the Member raised a specific case with the BBC yesterday. If he wants to pass on the specific details of that to me, I would be happy to look into it for him.

COVID-19: App for Under-18s

3. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the development of a COVID-19 track and trace app for under-18s. (AQO 681/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. The Department of Health is launching a new version of the app for under-18s before the end of September. That will help schools, further education colleges and universities to provide additional protection to their students and staff.

Mr McGrath: Most MLAs will have had contact from concerned constituents about young people gathering in groups in the community, not least in areas such as the Holylands. What action is the Minister and, indeed, the Executive taking to try to address the issue with young people?

Mr Swann: In regard to the actions of young people, what I will say — I have said this before — is that what we are seeing in the Holylands is not reflective of the entirety of young people across Northern Ireland, who I think have sacrificed quite a bit during the first lockdown of Northern Ireland, so it is unfair and unjust to target and label everyone in the same way. A very small cohort of individuals in the Holylands is showing a blatant disregard for not just their safety, if they were to contract COVID and take it home, but that of their friends, family and older relatives.

The Executive Office has established a cross-departmental working group to look at compliance with and enforcement of COVID regulations. That has met twice specifically on the work in the Holylands. The meetings included the Department for Communities, the Executive Office, my Department, the police and both universities. The working group has shown a positive, coordinated response for, I think, the first time to antisocial behaviour in the Holylands. COVID has really given it that added impetus.

From what I am led to believe in the last update, 55 COVID notices have been issued by the PSNI, 31 of which were issued in one house. That shows the disregard for the

messaging that the universities are putting out. In that same period of time, there were also two arrests: one for drug abuse and one for assault. There is not just a breach of COVID regulations; there is also antisocial behaviour that is now being tackled, and that is for the greater benefit of Holylands residents.

2.15 pm

Mrs Barton: Given the spike in COVID-19 cases in the border counties of the Republic of Ireland, which is leading to a spillover into Northern Ireland, how valuable is it that the Northern Ireland app is interoperable with the Republic of Ireland version?

Mr Swann: The app that we launched a few weeks ago is working well for us in Northern Ireland. We have had quite a number of downloads and activations, with 352,000 individuals downloading it. Nearly 2,000 notifications have gone out to people saying that they have been in contact with someone who has now tested positive. That works, and it is an advantage of the app. One of the working premises that we had, since starting to explore the app, was to make sure that, no matter what we developed in Northern Ireland, it was able to talk to the same app in the Republic of Ireland. Not just North/South but east-west: I welcome the fact that Scotland has now produced its app on the same platform and with the same set-up as ours. All three should eventually be able to talk. It works, and it gives us the reassurance that, for anyone crossing the border, when necessary, if they have the app, they will talk to each other.

Ms C Kelly: Minister, with pupils back at school, can you outline the steps being taken to minimise the spread of COVID-19 in schools?

Mr Swann: That question would be more specifically directed to the Minister of Education. The Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser regularly met Department of Education officials and the Education Authority officials to make sure that we gave as much input into the guidance for schools as was necessary to support principals, teachers and all workers across the school sector — from caretakers to canteen workers — to make sure they got the advice and guidance that, we thought, they needed to support the school cohort. The Department of Health, over the last number of weeks, has established a direct line in the Public Health Agency for school principals. They can ring the Public Health Agency if they have a specific enquiry and get that answered directly to provide reassurance for them, their staff and parents.

Ms Bradshaw: I just want to come back to the issue of the Holylands. Minister, you mentioned the house that 35 people came out of: that has been going on since June. House parties have been going on for months and months. Will you bring forward guidance for houses in multiple occupation, given the unique circumstances, where you could have nine people in one house from different parts of the country?

Mr Swann: It is not only from June that the parties and antisocial behaviour have been going on in the Holylands from the universities, and houses of multiple occupancy has expanded there. There is work going on through the Executive's enforcement working group to see what other avenues, legislation or regulations can be brought

forward, and the Justice Minister may be — I am not sure — involved in that.

With regard to the specifics of houses in multiple occupancy, there needs to be care and caution that any regulation based solely on houses of multiple occupancy is equitable across the entirety of Northern Ireland and anybody who is a resident in a house of multiple occupancy, not just students in the Holylands but those in such housing because of social need or a lack of housing in certain areas. They cannot be penalised adversely by any regulation or guidance brought in specifically to deal with antisocial behaviour in the Holylands.

Hospital Car-parking Charges: Healthcare Staff

4. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to reconsider the car-parking charges healthcare staff pay currently in hospital settings. (AQO 682/17-22)

Mr Swann: First, I want to say that I fully support our Health and Social Care staff. Again, I want to put on record my thanks for the magnificent job that they did during the initial COVID-19 surge and continue to do to provide the best care for the people of Northern Ireland in such challenging and pressurised circumstances.

You will be aware that I secured financial support of £2 million back in March for the provision of free car-parking for Health and Social Care staff for a three-month period. That ended on 30 June. That was in recognition of the commitment that our staff were making to keep the health service going during the initial COVID-19 surge. Although the initial free car parking period has concluded, I will keep the position under review in the context of the evolving position as regards the prevalence and impact of COVID-19. The current policy was set in 2012, and decisions on how it is applied are for each health and social care trust to determine. Charging is an important mechanism on sites where space is limited, such as the Royal Victoria Hospital, for example, to control demand and encourage the regular turnover of spaces so as to provide sufficient spaces for patients and visitors. I am aware that the Belfast Trust is currently conducting a review of its car parking charges and, in the context of its review, the trust has recently agreed with relevant stakeholders a set of car parking access criteria for staff that will prioritise the limited parking that is available on the basis of business need and the availability of alternative travel options. The trust is also seeking to harmonise parking fees across its hospital sites.

It is worth noting that it costs £9 million to cover the cost of parking, and we currently recover £8 million through income. Even if I was able to find the funding to cover the loss of the income generated from staff car parking, there is still not sufficient space to provide free car parking for all our staff, particularly at sites such as the Royal Victoria Hospital where space is limited. Doing so would not only create significant accessibility issues for patients and visitors but require significant capital investment to address the capacity issues, whether through the construction of new car parks or the putting in place of park-and-ride facilities for staff at locations adjacent to hospitals.

Mr Carroll: Does the Minister agree that the latest move to remove free car parking from healthcare workers is

a further kick in the teeth for the people who kept us safe during the pandemic and that it is extra insulting considering that it occurred at around the time that MLAs' expenses were increased?

Mr Swann: I will not comment on the point on MLAs' expenses; that was not a decision taken by my Department. I say to the Member that it is only the Belfast Trust and the South Eastern Trust that charge staff for parking. The Northern, Southern and Western Trusts do not routinely charge staff for car parking. There are, however, voluntary pay schemes in the Northern and Southern Trusts whereby some staff have chosen to pay £30 a month for a designated parking space. There is not the same application across all the trusts, and that is why I wait to see what the Belfast Trust's consultation with stakeholders and staff produces.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his recognition of the sterling work of the staff and his constant support for them throughout the pandemic.

With regard to car parking, many of our sites are shrinking, as he rightly pointed out — the South Eastern Trust's Lagan Valley Hospital and the Royal Victoria Hospital in Belfast, in particular. Will the Minister agree with me and commit himself to some work with his Executive colleagues, particularly the Department for Infrastructure, with regard to sustainable transport, which would, in fact, improve the environment and improve mental and physical health?

Mr Swann: The Member's question gets to the crux: it is about the accessibility of parking and the mode of how people go to work. I welcome the commitments made and the steps already taken by the Minister for Infrastructure in supporting a wide number of workers across the health and social care system with regard to access to public transport. That provision is an example that shows that, during the pandemic and up to now, the Department of Health and the Department for Infrastructure have worked hand in hand to support our staff in getting to and from work.

Mr Lynch: The Minister will be aware that my party colleague Fra McCann is bringing forward a private Member's Bill. Does he agree that car parking charges for staff disproportionately affect those living in rural areas, because of lack of transport?

Mr Swann: I am aware that the Member's colleague is bringing forward a Bill on the subject, and that is why it is important to highlight the fact that it is up to each trust how it implements those staffing charges. As I said to Mr Carroll, there is a divergence across our trusts.

We have known for a long time that access to public transport in rural areas needs to be addressed. That accessibility is crucial, especially when it comes to staff working at specific shift times and people who want to visit loved ones in hospital but have no accessible public transport system to support them. It is important that, as I mentioned in the answer to Mr Butler, we have seen good working between our Department and the Department for Infrastructure. It is also important that we see that work continue and develop in the public transport system to support our health and care workers and our health and care facilities. It is also important that the Executive give my colleague in Infrastructure the support that she needs with rural transport.

Reshaping Stroke Care: Update

5. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Health for an update, including timescales, on the implementation of 'Reshaping Stroke Care'. (AQO 683/17-22)

Mr Swann: As a consequence of the need to prioritise the response to the coronavirus pandemic over the past few months, work on a range of projects, including 'Reshaping Stroke Care', has been paused. While I believe that that was the right thing to do, I appreciate the wider impact that it will have had for stroke patients across Northern Ireland. I assure you that reshaping stroke care remains a key priority, and I recognise the urgent need for the reform of stroke services in Northern Ireland. Over 19,000 people responded to the consultation on 'Reshaping Stroke Care', and my officials have completed an analysis of responses. I have asked for further analysis to be undertaken regarding the staffing requirements for the hyper-acute stroke network proposed in the consultation, and that work is currently under way. I intend to consider that analysis alongside the consultation analysis and the evidence base for reform in reaching my decision, and I will update the House accordingly.

Mr O'Toole: Understandably, the attention of the Department has been reoriented towards COVID-19 for the past six months, but 'Reshaping Stroke Care' focused on several things, particularly the absolute need for early intervention and the importance of in-community care around rehabilitation. We can be sure that both of those things, unfortunately, will have been devastated over the past six months and that people will be receiving much worse outcomes. Is his Department or the trusts looking at how to make interventions now to compensate, where possible, people who have suffered strokes and have had, unfortunately, very poor care outcomes over the past six months?

Mr Swann: Again, the Member makes a vital point when he takes into consideration the approach that we have taken to re-engaging and rebuilding our services. We have done it in that three-month block to make sure that the patients who need that additional support receive it, that it is done in a safe manner and that our staff are supported in the provision of those services. That three-monthly interaction and re-engagement of our trusts has been timely in the way that we have approached this, and it is about making sure that we can provide that support, especially to those who have suffered stroke. One of the messages that we continued to put out through the worst of the pandemic was that anyone who needed that assistance or thought that they were having stroke or cardiac symptoms should present to our emergency departments and to our GPs to make sure that they could get onto that care pathway as soon as possible.

Ms Ennis: Minister, transformation is a critical piece of work, and we have had consultations on the reassessment of stroke services and breast assessment services. Can the Minister explain why he has not yet published and refuses to publish the new criteria for transforming services?

Mr Swann: I do not accept the Member's premise that I am refusing to do it, and I do not think that she meant it in that form, because I have received support from the Member's party and her party colleagues in the Executive on the

work that we have brought forward. The Health Minister was from her party when the work started.

One of the things that Bengoa indicated was that any transformation in our health service would involve running a transformation health service alongside the current health service, so there would be a significant need for input not just of finance but of resource in the shape of people working in the service. That was going to be challenging pre-COVID, and, in my Department and across the health and social care trusts, we are trying not just to run a parallel health service where we are trying to get our key services back on track while we support the COVID services but to look at transformation, although that is coming forward at a slower pace than we would like. It is still going on, so it is not that it has stopped or that I am refusing; it is just that we are now trying to run three health services in Northern Ireland, where, in January, running one was challenging enough.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions.

2.30 pm

Holylands Working Group

T1. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Health whether the Holylands working group has visited the area or, indeed, whether the group plans, at any stage, to be on the ground to see at first-hand the dire state of the area and the multi-systemic problems that need to be addressed therein. (AQT 381/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member because I know that it is an issue that she has genuinely and seriously campaigned on during her time in elected office. It is not just because it is now popular to do so; it is an issue that she has worked very closely on. I have not been to the Holylands, but the working group has representation from both the universities, the PSNI and the local council, whose representatives are able to report on a night-to-night basis on what they have seen and the interactions that they have had.

Ms Bailey: I asked that, Minister, because you mentioned that parties in the Holylands have been happening for as long as the expansion of HMOs in the area has been happening. I see that as a very simplistic statement to make, and I stress to the Minister that government and the statutory agencies have taken a hands-off approach in the area for decades on the issues of regeneration. Can we take any hope at all that the establishment of this working group will continue to rectify this long after COVID?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member, and, as I said, I recognise her seriousness in this. If it was solely a Health issue, I think that we could progress it a lot more expediently, but it is a cross-departmental issue and it involves the PSNI and the universities. Personally, I think that we have seen more engagement in the past number of weeks in addressing what is antisocial behaviour in the Holylands with regard to COVID and restricting the spread of COVID than we have previously. I sincerely hope — I mean this — that what we look at in addressing the current issue actually addresses the long-term future for those residents who live in the Holylands and call it home, rather than just the landlords who often have been exploiting the housing base that is in there for their financial advantage. That is why I am looking forward to the working group's recommendations. If we

have to take some of them through as health regulations under the Coronavirus Act 2020, they will not just be for now but for the long term.

COVID-19 Regulations: Sports Fixtures

T2. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, in the light of the scenes witnessed yesterday in Omagh at the Tyrone County GAA final and in video clips that came out overnight and this morning, which show slogans being chanted while no social distancing is being observed, whether the COVID-19 regulations are working, which is not to take away from Dungannon's victory but to acknowledge that there are no winners in the spread of COVID-19. (AQT 382/17-22)

Mr Swann: Numerous copies of those videos and pictures have been sent to me. They are a disappointment because one of the things that we were able to do very early on in the pandemic was engage with the three sporting codes, and the three sporting codes came up with sets of individual guidance, rules and regulations that their sports and disciplinary procedures could take forward. On what we have seen and what has been widely reproduced across social media, I do not think that that in any way is in keeping with what those sporting codes and bodies would expect of some of their players, and definitely not of their supporters. This virus does not respect any sporting definition, any game or any team. Therefore, when I saw those large-scale breaches of social-distancing regulations, it concerned me. The Member is right: there are no winners when we see that sort of outpouring on social media and across the media.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you for your answer so far. Considering the work that you and the Executive are doing — I must add that it is sterling work — to try to control the pandemic, has Tyrone GAA apologised to you or the Executive?

Mr Swann: Not as far as I am aware.

Maternity Units: COVID-19 Restrictions

T3. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health for an update on the restrictions on birth partners attending antenatal hospital appointments and spending time with mother and baby during and after birth. (AQT 383/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. As I am sure that he is aware, it is a very emotive and special time for parents. However, there are challenges for anyone who needs to access hospital, whether as a visitor or a patient, that we are taking into consideration. The Chief Nursing Officer will be in contact with all trust directors this afternoon to look at the enforcement and guidance that we have for hospital visiting across the entire system, because we have seen that, with the specific postcode approach that we have looked at over the past few days, there is a differential across the hospital system. It will not be ideal — it is not ideal — but we are trying to protect the mother to the full extent that our healthcare system can and to protect the staff as well.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Assembly appreciates the need to control transmission, particularly in our hospitals, but does the Minister accept that those restrictions are causing significant distress, and will he consider relaxing restrictions to allow partners to

attend antenatal appointments and scans, to be present throughout labour and to remain with the mother and baby for longer than one hour post-birth?

Mr Swann: The Member has a very specific list of asks there. As I said, I have asked the Chief Nursing Officer — she is engaging with all trusts — to see what guidance we can provide to make sure that there is consistency. Where we see that differential, we can see that it causes stress and undue challenge, not just to the mothers but to their birthing partners as well.

It is not an easy time for access to our hospitals. I am not going to give any commitment to a relaxation of restrictions. That may change before the week is out, because it is critical that we look after the physical well-being of the mother and baby, but I am also acutely aware of the mental support that comes from the presence of a birthing partner. It is not that this is an easy, blanket no; it is something that we are doing and want to do proportionally to make sure that those physical and mental supports are there.

Ambulance Service: South Eastern Trust

T4. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health what steps he is taking to assist the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, particularly within the South Eastern Trust, to stop ambulances having to queue, sometimes for hours on end, outside the Ulster Hospital's emergency department before being able to release a patient for triage. (AQT 384/17-22)

Mr Swann: We are increasingly seeing challenges for our Ambulance Service, especially in recent weeks and days, where we have seen a number of COVID cases in the Ambulance Service. Therefore, we are seeing a decrease in the number of available staff.

When it comes to waiting times, specifically at the Ulster Hospital, it is a challenge that we are addressing. It is a challenge that the South Eastern Trust is acutely aware of, but due to social distancing and a lack of space in the facility, it becomes even more challenging to sort out the flow of patients there.

One thing that I am acutely aware of, as is the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service, is that every hour that an ambulance sits outside a hospital waiting to discharge someone is an hour lost where it could actually be on the road. Therefore, they are introducing the hospital ambulance liaison officer (HALO) system, where we have coordination from the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service in each accident and emergency department.

Ms Armstrong: Just in follow up to that, I will not ask about what is happening with maternity services at the Ulster Hospital, where miscarriages are also happening without partners present. Is it time, then, given the pressure on accident and emergency departments, for GPs to return to face-to-face appointments, thereby reducing the number of people turning up at A&E when they should be going to their GP?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. She may be aware that that too was the subject of a question for urgent oral answer last week. We are working with the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association committee of general practitioners to make sure that GPs are seeing everyone who needs to be seen. We want to dispel the assumption

that GPs are deliberately restricting face-to-face access. They are doing a lot of work, and it was last week, I think, when I was able to say that they had had up to 8,000 face-to-face appointments. That number continues to increase, but, again, it is about making sure that patients are entering a safe environment and that we support staff working in GP practices as well. Anyone who needs a face-to-face consultation, I am assured, should have access to it. That is something that I continue to take up. If the Member has individual constituents that she wants to address to me, I am happy to take that forward with the Royal College.

GP Facilities: East Antrim

T5. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Health whether he will, as soon as it is safe to do so, visit some GP surgeries in East Antrim, given that although Ms Armstrong highlighted the pressures on A&E and in our hospitals, there is equal pressure on our GP services, with many of the GPs in East Antrim operating in aging health trust facilities, some of which date back to the 1960s, making caring for patients and maintaining a social distance more difficult. (AQT 385/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for working into topical questions what he has asked in questions for written and oral answer. I am grateful to the Member for continuing to champion the healthcare system in his constituency of East Antrim. I will happily take up that invite when, as the Member said, it is safe to do so.

Mr Beggs: Thanks for that response, Minister. There has been limited investment, particularly in primary healthcare facilities in my constituency, and I ask you to review those to ensure that there is equal treatment for patients throughout Northern Ireland.

Mr Swann: I am grateful for the dedication of the health and social care professionals across Northern Ireland who have been working tirelessly to deliver services at this challenging time. In East Antrim, practices reconfigured quickly to protect patients and staff and embrace new ways of working, such as virtual consultations. Practices across the East Antrim Federation recently developed plans to individually deliver flu vaccinations in their own premises or in clusters, and there has been an integrated approach to that work. For example, in Larne, all five practices will provide flu vaccinations locally in the town, in conjunction with the local council, which has provided premises. So, there is that ongoing work. I am aware of the need in East Antrim, and if I cannot visit the Member's constituency, I will be happy to meet him to discuss the subject.

Mr Speaker: As Christopher Stalford is not in his place, I will move on to Karen Mullan.

Community Crisis Intervention Service: Derry

T7. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister of Health for an assurance that the people of Derry will not lose access to the community crisis intervention service given that there was considerable disappointment after last week's Adjournment debate when he failed to commit to maintaining that service. (AQT 387/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. She will be aware that I have agreed to provide an additional

£60,000, in addition to the previous £32,000, to enable that service to continue until the end of March. A separate funding arrangement is being explored for the service thereafter by the council and extern, and I committed to supporting that piece of work last week in the Adjournment debate. A review into mental health crisis services is commencing and will be completed by March 2021.

My commitment to the crisis intervention service in Londonderry is not in question. It has been there, and the second tranche of money that I have provided is to allow it, in conjunction with the council, to bring forward a funding proposal that I am led to believe is well developed and should be well received by the body that it is going to for that funding. It should provide more longer-term financial support than simply what we are doing through the Department currently.

Ms Mullan: Thank you for your answer. I know that that is being worked up, but we need to ensure that there are no gaps in provision. Can you commit to ensuring that those services continue and we do not allow gaps to appear in the trust areas?

Mr Swann: The Member's point is well made. That is specifically why we signed off on that additional £60,000 to provide the surety of that gap between the last moneys that we provided and the access and, hopefully, the start of a future funding stream. We provided the £60,000 to allow that work to continue but also to support the vital work that the Londonderry crisis intervention service provides at present.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. I ask Members to take their ease for a couple of minutes to allow the Minister and other Members to come into the Chamber for the next item.

2.45 pm

Infrastructure

Road Resurfacing Projects: North Down

1. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what road resurfacing projects are planned for north Down during this financial year. (AQO 694/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I am pleased to confirm that my Department's programme of planned road resurfacing schemes is under way in the north Down area and includes schemes at Church Drive, Bangor; Cultra Avenue, Holywood; Main Street, Conlig; and Tower Road, Conlig. Clearly, many more schemes and programmes are being developed across the north Down area. Those will be included in council reports that officials are preparing and intend to issue to councils in due course.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answer. Will she tell me when the Kinnegar area of Holywood will be resurfaced? Will she also commit to visiting the area with me, along with residents, to address a number of surfacing, roads and flooding issues in the area?

Ms Mallon: I do not have the specific details at hand, but I am happy to write to the Member and to engage with her and with residents.

Mr Chambers: Will the Minister provide an update on essential maintenance to ensure road safety, including gully clearing and grass-verge cutting? In particular, will she account for the delays in major pothole repairs?

Ms Mallon: As the Member will be aware, the Department for Infrastructure has suffered from a funding deficit for many years. In fact, when his party colleague held the Ministry, a significant amount of money was taken from the Department and, in all honesty, it has not fully recovered. We have had to scale back services such as gully cleaning and so forth, but we still try to do what we can and I was pleased to be able to maintain the maintenance budget with my allocation this year. I would certainly like to be in a position in which I could do so much more, but, unfortunately, due to funding constraints, we are delivering the maximum service that we can at this stage. I will continue to make the case to Executive colleagues.

Mr Muir: People in north Down are very disappointed that such a low number of roads will be resurfaced in this financial year. Will the Minister commit to bidding for additional funding in the October monitoring round to ensure that north Down and all areas in Northern Ireland get the investment that they deserve?

Ms Mallon: Yes, I will make additional bids in the October monitoring round. I have said before on the Floor of the House that the Department for Infrastructure touches on people's everyday lives, from street lights to potholes and from bridges to how people get to and from work. I would like to be in a position to do a lot more and will continue to make the case. I have always argued that if we, as an Executive, are to have the ambition of winning people's hearts and minds, we need to get the basics right. That very much involves the level and maintenance of our roads network.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Minister, the 2019 audit report stated that the trunk road network is in a better condition than was first estimated. Would the Minister consider prioritising rural roads in any of her budgets? Clearly, there have been a number of complaints about rural roads in general.

Ms Mallon: One of my commitments as Minister is to tackle regional imbalance. That is why I have set aside £10 million for a rural roads fund to address the very issues that the Member has highlighted.

Mr Buckley: The Member is right to raise the issue of resurfacing. Some three months ago, I raised in the House with the Minister the plight of Birchwood Manor in my constituency. A meeting and the hope of progress were promised: to date, no meeting and no progress. Does the Minister think that it is acceptable that, some 10 years after the street's completion, ratepayers have no finished surface and that there are raised ironworks, lighting issues and serious sewage issues?

Ms Mallon: What I can commit to, when I go back up to the office, is to ask officials to meet you on-site to try to address the issues that you have raised, where we possibly can. I do not know whether you requested the site meeting with me in the Chamber. As a Department, and I include myself in this, as a result of the COVID restrictions, we certainly have not been able to have as many face-to-face meetings as we would have liked, but I am happy to take the Member's issue away.

Road Network: Winter Readiness

2. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, as a consequence of repair projects having been delayed by COVID-19, for her assessment of how well situated the road network is to deal with winter conditions. (AQO 695/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Although the COVID-19 pandemic led to some initial delays in the commencement of the 2020-21 road maintenance programmes, those are now well under way. It is envisaged that a significant proportion of the resurfacing programme will be delivered before the onset of the winter period. Prior to the start of each winter season, my Department carries out a significant amount of pre-planning to ensure a state of readiness for the coming winter. That planning includes ensuring that adequate staffing arrangements are in place; that all winter service equipment is in satisfactory working order; and that there are adequate supplies of salt. There are also arrangements in place to supplement stocks of salt during the winter period, if necessary.

Although the Department targets the limited resources available for gritting at the busier through routes, on many other routes that do not qualify for inclusion in the gritting schedule, salt bins or grit piles are provided for use by the public on a self-help basis.

Subject to the availability of funding, a full winter service will operate from 19 October this year until 5 April 2021 and will have approximately 300 staff and 130 gritters available and ready to salt main roads, in order to help drivers across Northern Ireland deal with the wintry conditions.

Mr Allister: Given that one of the Minister's predecessors, Danny Kennedy, was starved of funding to cut the grass verges adequately or fix the potholes, and given what she has just said about matters being able to be done subject to funding, has she any fears that she might obtain the same treatment as a single member of the Executive?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. It is fair enough to say that there are significant challenges when you are a single Member from a party on the Executive. That having been said, I have provided robust detail to Executive colleagues and to the Finance Minister on the importance of ensuring that we invest in our infrastructure, for the reasons that a number of Members have highlighted in examples of streets and other places in their constituencies but also to assist our recovery from COVID. I recently submitted an Executive paper in which I set out the case, which I believe is compelling, for ensuring that infrastructure is front and centre of our recovery from COVID and in order to face the challenges of Brexit. I will continue to make the case, and I hope that the same fate does not befall me as did Danny Kennedy.

Ms Sheerin: Will the Minister commit to adding the B47 to the gritting schedule? This is a rural road that connects rural communities in Cranagh and Plumbridge with services in Draperstown and Magherafelt in my constituency. At various points throughout most winters, the road becomes totally inaccessible, leaving people rurally isolated.

Ms Mallon: I receive many requests of that nature, and I recognise the seriousness with which Members put those queries to me and how sincere they are.

At present, we salt 28% of our total road network, and that carries 80% of traffic volumes. That costs between £5 million and £7 million annually. If we were to increase that to salting 90% of traffic volumes, that cost would double, to between £10 million and £14 million. If we were to increase that to salting 100%, the cost would increase further, to around £28 million. We fund our winter gritting services, annually, through monitoring round bids. I have submitted a bid to the Finance Minister for this year's winter gritting services. I am keen to try to do more, and I look to colleagues to help me make the case to the Finance Minister to ensure that we receive additional funding to enhance our services.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answers. With regard to enhancement of the roads network, it is good to see progress on the A6, which is a strategic road for travel across the North. Was the progress of that work unduly affected by COVID? Will you provide a time frame for completion of that route?

Ms Mallon: I recognise the crucial need for the completion of the A6, and I am 100% committed to its delivery. Unfortunately, there had been slippage due to COVID-19, but I am pleased that the project is back on track and that we are due to see similar completion rates and date to those we expected pre-COVID.

Coastal Erosion

3. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline her Department's work in addressing coastal erosion since the publication of the 'Baseline Study and Gap Analysis of Coastal Erosion Risk Management NI'. (AQO 696/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has been working collaboratively with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on coastal erosion risk management issues. The two Departments commissioned 'Baseline Study and Gap Analysis of Coastal Erosion Risk Management NI', which was published in January 2019. The study collated existing data relating to coastal erosion and undertook a high-level vulnerability assessment. The primary conclusion from that assessment was that there is currently insufficient data to reliably inform coastal management decision-making.

The study identified a number of key issues for consideration in determining the way forward. The coastal forum, whose membership includes DFI, DAERA, the seven councils with a coastline, and the National Trust, is working collaboratively to address those issues. A draft coastal forum work programme has been developed. As part of that, a project is under way to provide a comprehensive coastal survey and vulnerability assessment. The survey, which is led by DAERA, will provide a comprehensive data baseline for our coast, and subsequent surveys — perhaps every three or five years — and will develop a picture of how and when the coastline is changing. Other work progressed includes a position statement to assist councils with their consideration of coastal change when preparing local development plans.

The Member established the coastal forum when she was Minister for Regional Development and remains committed to the issue. I assure her that I am supportive of the coastal forum and the collaborative work that is

progressing to devise solutions to the problems facing our coastline.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for her answer. I welcome the study, but it tells us what we already knew back in 2016, which is that there is insufficient data and that a comprehensive shoreline study is required. Is the Minister satisfied that the current mechanism of oversight from her Department and DAERA is sufficient to deliver and implement a coastal erosion risk management strategy? Or, should one Department take the lead?

Ms Mallon: I intend to discuss with the Minister of Environment how we can take that issue forward. In the absence of the Assembly, the forum was jointly chaired by the permanent secretaries of both Departments, so I am happy to work with my ministerial counterpart to try to move the issue forward.

Mr Beggs: In July of this year, DEFRA published a new policy statement on flood and coastal erosion risk management, which aims to create greater resilience in flood and coastal risk management. Will the Minister advise of the outcome of the evaluation of her approach — the homeowner flood protection grant? Is she open to ideas that have been adopted in other parts of the United Kingdom, as well as those relating to infrastructure and flood defence, and to looking at natural defences and at how resilience can be built into housing and to taking a community and catchment-centred approach to coming up with solutions?

Ms Mallon: I am. I believe that we should not be reinventing the wheel and that we should be learning from best practice, globally. I am also supportive of the approach that the Member has outlined. We need to be building resilience, and we need to look at our natural environment as an aid and protection against flooding. We also need to recognise that we are in a climate emergency. We need to do everything that we can to address that. On a small scale, I have set aside £20 million for the blue/green fund. I have also been keen to see if we can pilot sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) with housing associations, for example, so that we are embedding resilience and climate action in the development and design of housing schemes, and at the centre of our communities. I am, therefore, keen to do what we can to progress that and to take the ideas of Members and others.

3.00 pm

Ms Rogan: Coastal erosion is a big issue in my constituency, South Down, as it impacts on land, property and infrastructure. Does the Minister agree that we need the strongest possible measures to address that challenge and provide coastal communities with long-term sustainable answers?

Ms Mallon: In short, I do. One of the difficulties, as the Chair of the Committee pointed out, is that no one Department has overall responsibility for that area. That does not mean that we should not be ambitious and try to work together. That is why I am supportive of the collaborative approach being taken forward by the coastal forum. I will continue to do what I can to support it.

Fix Your Bike Voucher Scheme

4. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to implement a scheme offering bicycle repair vouchers, similar to the Fix your Bike scheme in England. (AQO 697/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware of the Department for Transport's Fix your Bike voucher scheme in England. I understand that the scheme was introduced at the end of June this year. The aim of the scheme is to encourage more people to embrace cycling, boost the number of commuting and leisure trips and reduce the number of short journeys made by private cars. As the Member indicates in his question, however, the scheme is aimed at providing assistance for bicycle repair or refurbishment. In effect, the vouchers provide a grant of up to £50 towards the repair and servicing of bicycles to encourage owners to start using their old bikes again. It does not provide any assistance, though, for people who do not own a bicycle to purchase one. For many, the fact that they cannot afford a bicycle is the real barrier to cycling. It is regrettable that the scheme does not address that reality.

I have asked my officials to monitor closely the progress of the scheme to determine its effectiveness, the value for money and the benefits that might accrue to Northern Ireland were such a scheme to be introduced here. I am mindful, however, that a similar scheme in Northern Ireland could cost around £700,000, and, unfortunately, given the resource budget allocated to my Department and the significant pressures as a result, the scheme would be currently unaffordable without additional funding being provided to the Department for Infrastructure

Mr Blair: The Minister's answer at least leaned towards a semi-commitment on the issue. In the light of that, if we were to identify the merits of the scheme for Northern Ireland, would the Minister consider introducing a prioritisation structure whereby those in most need got help first?

Ms Mallon: I have asked my officials to consider that. We are considering ways in which it might be possible to make bicycles more easily available to those not in employment or unable to avail themselves of the current schemes. I am looking in particular at schoolchildren to see what we can do there.

The Cycle to Work scheme is available for employers throughout Northern Ireland. It is a salary sacrifice scheme operating between individual employers and HMRC. It helps employees to get access to a bicycle with significant savings. There is a Northern Ireland Civil Service scheme, and many other employers have their own schemes. I would be keen to do what we can to maximise the schemes that exist. I am also keen to see what we can do to assist those who cannot afford to get a bicycle through the blue/green fund and my walking and cycling champion.

Mr McGuigan: I welcome the Minister's announcement last week of £2.8 million for six greenway projects and thank her for her commitment to that. I caveat that with the fact that neither the Ballymoney to Ballycastle greenway nor the Glens of Antrim greenway from Ballymena to Cushendall in my constituency were successful. Will there be additional funding for greenway projects that did not succeed in the current funding round?

Ms Mallon: I appreciate that it was a positive announcement but understand that it will be met with disappointment by others who have not seen the advancement of schemes in their area. I am caught in a bind in terms of the need to get capital money spent quickly. We reached out to all councils. I was clear to emphasise that this is just the first step. I cannot pre-empt what allocations might be made to my Department, but I am committed to enhancing the blue/green fund and doing what we can to enhance our greenway experience across Northern Ireland. I look forward to working with the Member and, hopefully, seeing progress in his constituency.

A5: Irish Government Commitment

5. **Ms C Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure what engagement she has had with the Irish Government to ensure the original commitment for the A5 project is honoured. (AQO 698/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to tackling regional imbalance, connecting communities and improving road safety. There are so many communities, particularly in rural parts west of the Bann, that can benefit from investment in the A5 project. The A5 is also a commitment of the Executive and of the Irish and British Governments and is specifically referenced in 'New Decade, New Approach'. I am determined to deliver progress. A public inquiry for the project concluded in March 2020, and my officials received an interim report from the commissioner on 2 September. Officials are considering the issues raised and recommendations made in the report in addition to taking legal advice before I decide on the next steps for this very important scheme.

The Irish Government reaffirmed their commitment of £75 million to the project in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The importance of the A5 was also discussed at the recent North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meeting. I very much welcome that commitment. I have had initial discussions with the Irish Transport Minister, Minister Ryan, and will meet him again later this month. I look forward to further discussion on how we can work together in partnership to deliver on this much-needed project for citizens across our island.

Ms C Kelly: It is vital that the Irish Government honour their original commitment to the A5 project, and, of course, this also opens up possibilities to expedite the construction process. Minister, will you assure us that you will pursue this urgent matter with the Irish Government, who are, of course, led by your party's Fianna Fáil partners?

Ms Mallon: I assure the Member that I will always do what I can to maximise funding. We live in difficult financial times, and, certainly, I will not be found wanting in working with anyone in any political party across this island to ensure that we can deliver improvements and enhance the life of all our citizens.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, I am sure that you will join me in wishing a speedy recovery to our colleague Daniel McCrossan, who would ask a supplementary if he were here this afternoon. Do you have an indicative time frame for the work that you outlined in your earlier answer?

Ms Mallon: I want to extend to our party colleague Daniel our best wishes. No doubt, if he were here, he would very much ask that question. It is a hobby horse of his.

As I said, the public inquiry was held earlier this year, and it concluded in March. My Department received the interim report on 2 September. It raised issues that are being carefully considered by officials. We are also taking legal advice on that. I hope to be in a position very soon to update the House on the next steps.

Mrs Barton: Does the Minister accept that the A5 has been specified at a level above what the traffic volume normally justifies, which means that a new route is being adopted and existing roads are largely being disregarded? Therefore, with the growing cost estimates and the absence of the promised £400 million from the Republic, can it now proceed only with the loss of many other infrastructure projects, such as other roads, cycle routes and upgrading projects?

Ms Mallon: While finances are always tight, it is not always a question of "either/or". Even if I were not the Minister for Infrastructure, I would say that infrastructure and investment in it are a catalyst for change. They are an economic driver and critical tools for tackling the climate emergency. That is being demonstrated by Governments across the world. The A5 is an Executive flagship project and is referenced in 'New Decade, New Approach', so it is very much a firm commitment of the Executive.

Vehicles of Historic Interest: MOT Exemptions

6. **Mr Harvey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she will bring legislation to the Assembly to implement MOT exemptions for vehicles of historic interest. (AQO 699/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I announced on 2 July that I intended to introduce the exemption of vehicles of historic interest from periodic roadworthiness testing in Northern Ireland. The exemption will align Northern Ireland legislation with that in GB and will apply to vehicles that were first registered at least 40 years ago, are no longer in production and have not been significantly modified. The exemption will not apply to vehicles that are still in public service.

I advise the Member that the draft regulations required to introduce the exemption recently received legal clearance and were laid in the Assembly on 18 September 2020. They are subject to the Assembly's statutory period that applies under the negative resolution procedure. It is anticipated that they will come into force on 12 October. I know how passionate the Member is. He has been an active campaigner on the issue on behalf of the vintage vehicle community. I hope that this news and this success make him happy.

Mr Harvey: I thank the Minister not only for her kind words but for her positive consideration of the scheme and for bringing it to its implementation stage. I hope that I have plagued you in a pleasant manner; even though it was a regular occurrence, we never managed to fall out.

Minister, do you agree that historical vehicle owners deserve credit for their mostly unrecognised charitable work? They put hours into their vehicles while raising huge sums of money for charities. I convey thanks and

appreciation on behalf of all the enthusiasts whom I have lobbied for.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his kind words. This was not an issue that was particularly on my radar until I took up this post, but you very kindly and very actively made sure that it was on my radar; I thank you for that. You showed me up close the great work of the historical vehicle community, particularly the work that it does for charities. It does so without seeking recognition, but we have a responsibility to acknowledge and recognise the many groups and communities across Northern Ireland that make a huge contribution quietly but hugely effectively.

Mr Speaker: I may call you “Mr Happy Harry”.

Mr Lynch: Will the Minister provide us with an update on whether the Department is exploring biannual testing for certain vehicles, as happens in the Twenty-six Counties?

Ms Mallon: The Member will know that I advised the Committee that I was keen to explore that. I have asked my officials to move to a call for evidence. We hope that that will be completed by the end of this year, after which I will be able to take stock and decide on next steps.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her announcement. It will help in a very small way the current situation with regard to the MOT backlog.

As the Minister will be aware, temporary exemption certificates (TECs) are no longer being issued for four-year-old cars. As a result, I have been contacted by many constituents struggling to get through to the booking line to get an MOT secured. What is being done to ensure that that is ended and people are able to get their MOT booked?

Ms Mallon: That has been an issue. We have seen a huge increase in the number of calls to the booking centre. Currently, vehicle test bookings can be made only through the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) call centre. Customers have been experiencing difficulties in getting through, and, for that, I apologise. To mitigate the issue and the general high volume of calls being handled by call agents, the DVA is introducing a call-messaging service to redirect calls to nidirect. Capita has also agreed in principle to extend its opening hours by an additional two hours from 5.00 pm to 7.00 pm from Monday through to Wednesday to provide additional capacity. Those measures are to be implemented from Wednesday 23 September.

To further alleviate pressure on the Capita call centre, the DVA will continue to engage directly with the haulage industry, particularly operators with large fleets, to facilitate bookings at local test centres, where possible. Members should encourage their constituents to check the status of their vehicle online. They should go to — if I remember it correctly — www.gov.uk/check-mot-status to see the status of their vehicle. A number of vehicles have been given temporary exemption certificates and have no need to go for an MOT, so I encourage Members to direct their constituents to that website.

Gallagher Shore, Enniskillen: Sewerage Issues

7. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on action she has taken regarding the sewerage issues at Gallagher Shore, Enniskillen. (AQO 700/17-22)

Ms Mallon: This is, undoubtedly, an extremely distressing situation for residents of Gallagher Shore. This is, as, I know, the Member is aware, a very complex issue in a private development, where a developer has not entered into an agreement with Northern Ireland Water to adopt the sewers in the development. The developer has subsequently gone into liquidation, and the sewerage infrastructure is overflowing and causing pollution. While the matter is not of the residents' making, neither my Department nor Northern Ireland Water has legal responsibility for addressing the issue. However, I am sensitive to the residents' extreme distress.

I have, therefore, written to Conor Murphy, Minister of Finance, to seek an urgent meeting to discuss Gallagher Shore and other private development sites with inadequate private sewerage infrastructure, as well as the funding shortfall facing Northern Ireland Water which is inhibiting it from being able to meet its statutory obligations. My hope is that, working together, a solution can be found to those issues.

3.15 pm

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions. I call Ms Clare Bailey. Clare, since you won the number-one spot in the ballot for both Ministers today, would you like to share your lottery ticket numbers?

Ms Bailey: No chance, Mr Speaker; no chance. It will be the first number one that I get. *[Laughter.]*

Camlough Hydro Storage Scheme

T1. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, albeit that she welcomed her announcement last week about the North/South interconnector, which is a good first step forward for our long underfunded energy infrastructure, whether she has had any discussions with her officials about resurrecting the Camlough hydro storage scheme. (AQT 391/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have not had any discussions with officials on that matter, but I am keen to raise it with them later on.

Ms Bailey: It would be good if the Minister could, because this is key. Consumers in Northern Ireland have been paying very high energy rates and I see this as one of the reasons, along with the lack of storage and infrastructure, why we need to get that balance. The scheme started 40 years ago and a lot of work was done, but it has stalled. In the current context, this a good opportunity not just to lower prices and increase availability but for a great, green job-creation scheme.

Ms Mallon: I share the Member's view. We have the importance of securing the supply of energy but also, as the Member has pointed out, the importance of ensuring that it is affordable to people. We are keen to do what we can to ensure that we have security of supply but also to bring down prices. It is very important too that, where we can, we maximise the opportunities to increase the provision of renewable energies.

DVA Booking Line: Capacity

T2. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, having listened with interest to Mr Muir's question about the difficulty that people are having in trying to get through

on the DVA line to book vehicle tests and me having sort of got lost in her answer, which was a bit convoluted, why her Department is not building capacity into the DVA's booking line. (AQT 392/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. It is building capacity. That is why I said that, in Capita, we are increasing the number of hours that the service is available. Its hours will be extended and we will have additional staff answering. One of the other challenges is that a number of people are calling the call centre with additional queries, which is putting pressure on the system. That is why we are now putting in the automated service to better direct people to where they need to go for help. We are also doing what we can to lift capacity and pressures off the system by engaging directly with our hauliers, for example, so that they do not have to go through the call-booking system. We are putting in a number of measures to increase our capacity and to redirect those who are calling the centre but for whom that is not the best number for them to get the help that they actually need.

Mr Sheehan: Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for that answer. What is the Department doing to address the backlog in driving tests?

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware that we have reinstated a number of practical driving tests for different vehicles. We are working through priority workers and those who had their tests cancelled. I think that that is a fair and balanced approach. We have recruited two new vehicle examiners. Their training will take 10 days, so they are due to start in 10 days. We are also in the process of recruiting an additional 12 temporary vehicle examiners in the next few weeks. The purpose of that is that, at present, we have 40 dual role examiners who can carry out both practical driving tests and vehicle examinations. By bringing in the additional vehicle examiner capacity, we will be freeing up those people to carry out practical driving tests. In addition, we are exploring extending into the evening the hours when practical driving tests can be carried out, and the possibility of carrying out tests on a Sunday. However, as I am sure that the Member will appreciate, we need to make sure that there are proper driving conditions against which to assess the candidates.

River Moyola: Flood Mitigation Measures

T3. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for details of any flood mitigation measures that will be introduced along the course of the River Moyola, given that she will be aware of repeated severe flooding from that river, about which he has had several meetings with the Rivers Agency over the past number of years. (AQT 393/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question, and I am aware that he has been raising the issue for some time on behalf of his constituents. The measures being undertaken on the designated stretches of the Moyola river include the inspection and repair of the existing flood defences. That work involves the removal of heavy vegetation, treatment of invasive species, and repair and reinstatement of the existing earth and flood defences. Sections of the Moyola river are maintained every year, and that watercourse maintenance work includes the removal of channel silt and aquatic weed growth and of obstructions from the channel that restrict the free flow of water. The maintenance may

also include upgrade or replacement, if necessary, of flap valves.

Mr McGlone: Mo bhuíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra chuimsitheach sin. I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. Specifically, what measures can be introduced or speeded up at River Road, Draperstown and at the Broagh, Castledawson?

Ms Mallon: My officials are aware of the 10 River Road issue and have advised that a financially viable flood alleviation scheme at 10 River Road to reduce flood impacts is unlikely. However, the Department suggested that the owner consider the homeowner flood protection grant scheme, and I confirm that we have received the application from the homeowner and are keen to work with them.

In respect of Broagh — I hope that my pronunciation of that is right — the project team involved with the ongoing construction of the A6 Randalstown to Castledawson scheme has commissioned its consultant to investigate the incident and seek to determine the cause of the flooding. At that stage, the team will consider what mitigation measures might be appropriate. That process is likely to take two months. I am happy to keep the Member fully updated.

Translink: Financial Position

T4. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on Translink's financial position and whether it will have the reserves that it will need to operate legally in this financial year and in 2021-22, following the news of its plans to make £20 million in cost reductions. (AQT 394/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question in which she referred to the efficiency savings and potential — well, likely — redundancies at Translink. COVID-19 continues to have a major impact on passenger numbers and has seen Translink face a significant decline in income. There have been allocations from the Executive for Translink. That is very welcome and is recognition of the fact that it is a critical public service. I have a bid in currently.

It is concerning that the savings will lead to redundancies. While it is an operational matter for Translink and the accounting officer, I have asked that, where possible, we explore the voluntary redundancy aspect. It is a hugely challenging time.

In respect of the position facing my Department, it is hugely concerning, but I will continue to work with the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues to try to secure the resources that we need to do our job and be able to deliver critical public services, particularly our public transport and Northern Ireland Water.

Ms Armstrong: Tomorrow is "no car" day. As the Minister said, public transport is a critical public service. However, I have concerns that the rural, non-economically viable services may bite the big one, to be quite honest, if Translink gets into trouble. Can the Minister provide an assurance that rural areas will not suffer more as a result of the pressures?

Ms Mallon: I have been assured that the efficiency savings of £20 million this time round will not impact on services. I have to also point out that, if further savings and cuts are required, it will impact on services. That is why I was pleased, previously, to secure a commitment from

the Executive that we are committed to having a publicly owned public transport network. The issue for us is this: if we believe that we should have a publicly owned public transport network that operates on need, not profit, which is particularly important to our rural communities, we absolutely have to fund it.

COVID-19: Impact on DFI Services

T5. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has made an assessment of the impact of the worrying spike in COVID-19 cases on service delivery and recovery in her Department. (AQT 395/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. Like all Members, I am deeply concerned at the increased levels of COVID-19 in our community, and, as Member of the Assembly and a member of the Executive, I will always put the health and safety of our population first. Every day is challenging for all of us, with rule changes, changes to services and changes to family life, and I know that people want clarity and a clear plan.

While my Department has put in place a clear plan for our services, I have to be honest with the public and say that nothing is sure with this virus and no one can say with certainty that services will not be affected if there are future restrictions. I can, however, advise that DFI continues to do all that it can by following strictly the health advice and also doing what it can to minimise disruption to the public. My senior team is meeting regularly to discuss and plan for our response and our recovery from COVID-19. With infection rates increasing, we all have to be prepared. I am confident that my Department is focused on progressing the restoration of services while maintaining a firm focus on responding to COVID-19, with contingency planning in place should we face a second wave. I ask Members and the wider public to remain on their guard and to work together by washing our hands, keeping to social distancing and following the advice of the Health Minister to keep one another safe.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, thank you and your Department for your diligence in giving clear messages. There is some confusion on school buses where there are other service users, particularly in rural areas, because some of our children and young people wear masks and some do not have to. That is probably because of the height of some of our young people. They may well be under the age for having to wear a mask but look much older. It is causing confusion. Therefore, Minister, along with the Education Minister, could you provide some reassurance to transport operators and service users?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. That is why I moved to make face coverings mandatory on the public transport network. Obviously, there are clear exemption categories, but it is mandatory for those aged 13 and above. I understand that a different approach has been taken on school transport, and I did engage with the Education Minister. To my mind, it would have been more beneficial to have uniformity in approach. Translink is engaging with schools so that we are encouraging our young people and making it clear to them that, when they are on the public transport network, they must wear a face covering, but we are strongly encouraging them to do that when they are on school transport as well. I encourage all of us, as elected representatives and as parents, to ensure

that our children have face coverings, because that will keep them and other passengers safe.

Free Public Transport

T6. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the availability of free public transport for people who are fleeing domestic abuse, as announced in July. (AQT 396/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As the Member points out, by working with the Justice Minister, Women's Aid and others who are involved in this very important work, we introduced free transport for those who are fleeing domestic abuse. My understanding is that the uptake has been small, but, even if it helps one person leave an abusive relationship, it will very much have been worth it.

Ms Bradshaw: I appreciate that it was really brought in because of the COVID lockdown. Given the small numbers, are you minded to continue it?

Ms Mallon: I am committed to continuing it. Yes, it came in against the backdrop of COVID, but I would have been keen to progress it without that.

Mr Speaker: I call John Blair. I do not think that you will get to ask a supplementary question.

Cycle Parking

T7. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, with one car-parking space representing enough space for approximately 12 bicycles, whether she will commit to incorporating cycle parking in future park-and-ride plans, given that although he welcomes the announcement of the first phase of this year's park-and-ride programme, he notes that it contains no mention of cycle parking. (AQT 397/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Yes, I am committed to doing that. The park-and-ride schemes are at various stages. Some will move to land acquisition but a number of them are at the detailed design stage, and I have said to my officials that we should be maximising active travel. For me, it is the combination: we need to encourage people to walk and cycle to our bus stations, train stations and halts, but we must make sure that they have the space to safely secure their bicycles, so that will feature in the design.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Our time for topical questions is up.

Members will be aware that I have accepted questions for urgent oral answer that were tabled by Justin McNulty and Doug Beattie. Normally, these would be taken now. However, the Ministers involved have requested that I defer these questions to the end of scheduled business. This is to allow the Ministers to attend an emergency meeting of the Executive that is to take place very shortly. I understand that this meeting is critical to the Executive's ongoing management of COVID-19. On that basis, I have, of course, agreed to their request. The questions for urgent oral answer will be taken immediately after the debate on promoting dementia-friendly policy. Revised indicative timings have been issued and are available in the Business Office. I ask Members to take their ease while we get ready for the next item on the agenda.

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

Private Members' Business

Honouring the EU Withdrawal Agreement Protocol

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly acknowledges that the majority of citizens voted to reject Brexit; recognises that the departure from the EU gives rise to substantial political and economic challenges for our society; further recognises that while the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland is imperfect, it guarantees that, whatever the circumstances, there will be no hard border on the island and will protect the Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions, North/South cooperation and the all-island economy; believes it would be entirely unacceptable if the British Government sought to abandon these safeguards and mitigations, as this would amount to a serious betrayal of an existing international treaty; and calls on the British Government to honour their commitments, and to ensure, now, the rigorous and full implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, prioritise peace and stability, and work to secure a future economic partnership with their EU colleagues now and in the weeks ahead.

Mr Muir: Normalisation is the process by which ideas, actions, behaviours or events that society previously considered extreme and undesirable come to be accepted as within the bounds of acceptability. Normalisation can be a force for good, but we must also be wary of it. In recent years, at local and international level, we have had to continue to challenge normalisation. It is not normal or acceptable to go without a Government for three years. It is not normal or acceptable for the President of the United States of America to fuel racism and lie continually on social media. Today, we must recognise the absurdity of what we are debating. We, as an Assembly that was founded by an international treaty, are compelled to ask —

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Muir: No. We are compelled to ask our sovereign Government, the same sovereign Government that signed the aforementioned Good Friday Agreement, to respect international law by not unilaterally breaking another international treaty. I should not have to ask my Government to obey the law; nor should anyone else.

I am not here today as an enthusiastic supporter of the Northern Ireland protocol. Unlike members of other parties, I actively campaigned against Brexit before the referendum and afterwards so that these decisions would not be necessary. However, they are necessary, and the threat by the UK Government to unilaterally walk away is utterly reckless. Brexit, which my party always said would be a disaster for Northern Ireland, makes regulatory and customs checks necessary. Unicorn/fantasy solutions do not solve the problem; they just take us, full circle, back to the reality that Brexit is bad for Northern Ireland and cannot be implemented without friction. We are in a fine mess that was signed, sealed and delivered by the DUP, which was a cheerleader for Brexit in 2016.

In an acknowledgement that checks may be necessary and that they must be undertaken in the Irish Sea, the Northern Ireland protocol was the agreed mechanism for managing them. It was hailed, less than a year ago, as a negotiating success by the British Prime Minister, who called it:

“an oven-ready deal.”

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I note that he said:

“signed, sealed and delivered by the DUP”.

Does he acknowledge that, on three occasions, the DUP not only voted against the Northern Ireland protocol but were vocal in their opposition to it?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Muir: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker.

During the debate on Brexit in 2016, the Alliance Party and others made it very clear what the implications of Brexit would be, and we are now living with them. Northern Ireland voted against Brexit with a very clear knowledge of its implications.

Walking away from the Northern Ireland protocol, as the UK Government have threatened to, risks serious implications and sets a dangerous precedent. As Margaret Thatcher once said:

“Britain does not renounce Treaties. Indeed, to do so would damage our own integrity as well as international relations.”

How the Conservative Party has changed. To threaten to collapse the Northern Ireland protocol, necessitating a hard border in Ireland, in order to avoid exit declarations while, at the same time, destroying the international reputation of the UK, is a bizarre way to try to support businesses in Northern Ireland.

We have worked for decades to create a society in this place where you cannot pick and choose the laws that you are going to abide by. We are asking people to abide by laws and regulations that create a tremendous strain on their lives. We must not normalise the approach of the UK Government, and I am happy to condemn it as being utterly unacceptable. My party calls on the UK Government to honour their commitments to an international treaty. It is a worrying state of affairs to have to do so. I support the motion.

Mr McNulty: The Ireland protocol contains vital protections for the North and for the whole island of Ireland. The protocol is no one's first choice for our island, but it is a necessary response and compromise that has been forced by the hard Brexit ideology of the right wing ideologues in Downing Street. The Internal Market Bill is blatantly irresponsible instrument that seeks to override the Ireland protocol; it recklessly threatens the Good Friday Agreement in substance and in spirit.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentions the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement as many have. The motion talks about protecting the Good Friday Agreement “in all its dimensions”. Does he not recognise that fundamental to the basis of the Belfast Agreement is the principle of consent, which means that it is for the

people of Northern Ireland to decide their constitutional future and, as such, remain a full and integral member of the United Kingdom. How does the protocol protect that?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr McNulty: The Member's party did not consent to the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Muir: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree that Northern Ireland did not consent to Brexit and that the majority of people in Northern Ireland voted to Remain?

Mr McNulty: Mr Buckley's party did not consent to the Good Friday Agreement, although it did consent to Brexit, which is the source of all the problems here. This island did not consent to Brexit.

Businesses want to see the protocol implemented in a way that works, businesses want maximum access to the UK and EU markets and cross-border workers — frontier workers — want to know that they will not be impacted. There are still unanswered questions. Businesses want and need clear and unambiguous information on where they stand and what the future holds so that they can plan and prepare.

Mr Givan: I thank the Member for giving way. Businesses have welcomed the Internal Market Bill because it tries to address some of the problems that they have with the protocol. Will the parties not get on the side of business and minimise the damage now rather than going back to this ideological debate all the time?

Mr McNulty: I thank the Member for his comments, but the businesses that I know have not welcomed it.

Businesses and communities know that the way to achieve a compromise is for the UK to abide by its original obligations and work constructively to implement the Ireland protocol. It is very simple. I support the motion.

Ms Bailey: I support the motion. The willingness of the UK Government to unilaterally move to change the EU withdrawal agreement protocol — a protocol that they painstakingly devised, agreed and signed off with the EU — which would, as the current Secretary of State unequivocally stated to the House of Commons last week, break international law, should be roundly rejected by all in this House. The EU and the UK Government agreed the protocol as the best way to secure peace in Northern Ireland and it cannot and should not be allowed to be changed unilaterally. The narrative from some that the move is needed as a safety net or — the irony — as a backstop, should also not go unchallenged.

It has not been the EU negotiators who have been consistently threatening a no-deal Brexit. That has always been the threat from the UK Government. The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has openly stated that he believed that he could get a no-deal Brexit through the Commons. He said:

"I think that MPs on both sides of the House also understand that they will face mortal retribution from the electorate unless we get on and do it".

No such threats have come from the EU negotiators. They have consistently repeated that Brexit is bad for us all. The majority in this House also agreed that there is no good

Brexit for Northern Ireland. While the protocol is imperfect, it guarantees that whatever the circumstances, there will be no hard border on this island. It will protect the Good Friday Agreement and our place in the internal market and it further ensures that trade from Northern Ireland to GB remains unobstructed. That is the central ask from most businesses here at home.

The Prime Minister has told us many times that in the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, we have got a deal that is oven-ready. We have just got to put it in at gas mark 4, give it 20 minutes and Bob's your uncle. *[Laughter.]* In the Conservative Party manifesto, Boris Johnson himself wrote:

"With a new Parliament and a sensible majority Government, we can get that deal through in days."

Good luck. However, while we have all listened to his lies and spin for years, this latest move to brazenly break international law should be taken as a new level of duplicitous governance, and the Green Party will not be on record as supporting it.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bailey: No, you have had plenty, thanks.

Many others will also not be seen to be complicit in this either. Many resignations have already happened from people with more integrity and self-respect than this Tory Government. For example, Jonathan Jones, the Treasury Solicitor and permanent secretary of the Government's own legal department was the sixth senior Whitehall official to resign this year amid growing tensions between the Prime Minister and staff at the top of the Civil Service. His departure follows the exit of Cabinet Secretary, Mark Sedwill, Simon McDonald from the Foreign Office, Philip Rutman from the Home Office, Richard Heaton from the Ministry of Justice and Jonathan Slater from the Department of Education.

If Brexit was simply about economics, it would have been sorted long ago. Trade deals today go way beyond negotiations about tariffs on goods, whether they move north, south, east or west. Either way, Northern Ireland is not set to benefit. Trade deals affect how we regulate big business and foreign investment, how much we charge for our medicines, the standards of the foods that we eat and the environment that we create. In short, trade deals shape what sort of society we will live in.

This move from the UK Government is setting us up in the eyes of the world as a rogue state. That is not something that any of us should be supporting. Northern Ireland continues to live in a fragile peace process and we should reject any and all attempts to undermine our peace agreements. For that reason, the Green Party will support the motion.

Mr Allister: The key question for everyone who is supporting the motion is not whether they can get over their ideology and get over 2016 but whether they really care about the people of Northern Ireland. In supporting the protocol, they are supporting that which will crucify business in Northern Ireland. They are supporting the imposition of exit declarations on everything that passes from Northern Ireland to GB and tariffs on everything that passes from GB to Northern Ireland.

Let us just pause and remember what the balance is: £11 billion a year of goods from GB to Northern Ireland; £2 billion from the Republic of Ireland to Northern Ireland. Yet the proponents of the motion — Sinn Féin, the SDLP and their lackeys in the Alliance Party — want to strangle business in Northern Ireland. They want to make life difficult. They want, in fact, to submit Northern Ireland to hundreds of laws over which we have no say and about which we cannot even debate. They want to submit us to a foreign court to which we have no input. That is the essence of what those who peddle the motion support. Of course, they cloak it quite disingenuously as support for the Belfast Agreement.

3.45 pm

Let us just take that. I have the Belfast Agreement here. I would like to ask a question of all these proponents of the Belfast Agreement, belatedly Sinn Féin — of course, it did not support it initially — the SDLP, which is always very up front in its support, and the Alliance Party likewise: can any of them point me to a single paragraph in this document that says that the United Kingdom or the Republic of Ireland could not leave the EU? Can anyone point me to a single paragraph in this document that says that there could not be regulations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland? I am waiting.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Very well, Mr O'Toole. Give me the paragraph. I am not looking for hyperbole. I am looking for facts. I am looking for the cold data. Give me chapter and verse of what you proclaim says that you cannot have regulations between Northern Ireland and the Republic.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. May I invite him to look at strand two of the Good Friday Agreement? He will find in that, among the list of, I believe, a dozen North/South implementation areas, one that includes EU bodies and EU spending. The idea that European Union membership is irrelevant to the Good Friday Agreement is not relevant. Will he tell me whether some form of regulatory threshold between the island of Great Britain and the island of Ireland — between GB and NI — is unacceptable? Is it unacceptable to him to have the current all-island sanitary and phytosanitary area?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Allister: Chapter and verse: which clause or paragraph says that you cannot have regulations between Northern Ireland and the Republic? Which clause says that you cannot have a border between Northern Ireland and the Republic? Which clause says that you must trash article 6 of the Act of Union? None of them — not a single one. Yet the proponents tell us, "You have to protect the precious Belfast Agreement", when it does not say a word about any of these things. That is the most disingenuous spin that there has been in the whole Remain debate: to dress up and pretend to the ridiculous point where presidential candidates repeat the same lies and where a Member of the House, Mr McHugh, tells us that the American Government are guarantors of this agreement. None of that is here. What is here is a supposed recognition of the integrity of Northern Ireland as part of the United Kingdom, yet everything about the protocol — everything — is in the

business of destroying that integrity. That, of course, is why Sinn Féin is an enthusiast.

When I talk about the hypocrisy of all this, something is brought home very strongly to me. I hear the mover of the motion — a convicted bomber — talk about the rule of law, about things being "unconscionable" and about human rights. A bomber, talking about that which is unconscionable. Really? Talking about human rights. Really? That is the hypocrisy that reeks from the mover of the motion, who is one of the most avid demanders of the Belfast Agreement in all its parts. However, she sat silent when I challenged her: which part of the Belfast Agreement does this proposal uphold? Not a single one. I say to the House, therefore —

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

Mr Allister: — rightly, to reject the motion.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Agus anois iarraimse ar Gerry Carroll faoi choinne cainte. Gerry, you have four minutes. OK.

Mr Carroll: Thank you. The latest move by Boris Johnson will surprise no one. The Tories and the privileged elite who support them do not care how it will impact on people here. All along, the Tories have ignored what people think, how they voted in the referendum and, ultimately, the reality of life for people who live on a divided island, especially those who live in border towns and communities. Just because it may not be a surprise does not make it any less repugnant that the Tories would be willing to throw people under a bus in such a callous way. The Internal Market Bill might be a tactical ploy by the Etonian to get a better deal from the EU in negotiations, but who could really rule out the Tories who are, once again, willing to disregard people here in a bid to essentially get a deal that suits British capitalism. Johnson and the Tories put billionaire bosses first from the coronavirus pandemic through to Brexit.

What this latest saga has given verve to is the need for people here to govern for themselves and not be repeatedly dictated to by London, be that through the issue of Brexit or, indeed, the coronavirus pandemic. Far too often through the pandemic, Executive parties here have followed suit and danced to the tune of an out of touch Conservative Government. Johnson and the Tories have demonstrated over and over again that they are not worried that their stand-off with the EU could lead to the return of a hard border in Ireland. This latest move once again threatens the possibility of a hard border. The people of Ireland, North and South, have made it clear to Westminster, Brussels, the Dáil and Stormont that they do not want and will not tolerate the return of a hard border. Under no circumstances will a hard border be allowed to return.

These latest shenanigans will no doubt add momentum to the call for a border poll for a united Ireland and the ending of the 100-year disaster that has been partition. The renewed argument for democratic self-determination is not unique to the North. We have seen emerging conversations around national governance in Scotland, Catalonia, the Basque Country, Quebec and many other places. Westminster and the EU have set their face against these democratic movements. The vision of a new Ireland,

a socialist Ireland, rejecting the neoliberalism of the elites in Westminster and Brussels is gaining momentum.

The Northern Ireland protocol, as the motion suggests, is definitely far from perfect and does have fundamental flaws within it. However, it is clear that the Internal Market Bill is an attempt by Boris Johnson to bolster the strengths and, fundamentally, the profits of British corporations, whilst risking a no-deal crash out of the European Union and the beginning of a war over tariffs. The way that the British state has rolled out its limited testing and contract tracing programmes gives an indication of how Messrs Cummings and Johnson view the state in modern society. The Tories have poured £10 billion of public money into the likes of Serco and other private corporations to run England's test and trace programme and it has been an absolute disaster. While only £300 million of additional funding has been offered to local authorities to support the test and trace programme. Who do they put in charge to run such an important system; not a health expert, but a loyal Tory baroness, a former chief executive of TalkTalk. Something that you would probably expect to see in an episode of 'The Thick of It', but this is government policy in the middle of a health pandemic.

Despite the Tories criticising the left over its view of a state that intervenes in the economy and protects people's lives, the Tories essentially want to do the same. They want to intervene in the economy in a way that will increase the wealth and the power of major corporations that are based in Britain, and that is a complete and utter disgrace.

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

Mr Carroll: I will do. That is why Cummings and Johnson are looking towards the state to intervene in such a way as to bolster their mates. The Internal Market Bill would result in an effective power grab and massively elevate the powers of the Secretary of State whilst riding roughshod over the devolved Administrations —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to conclude please.

Mr Carroll: — and I find that unacceptable.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Agus anois iarraimse ar an Dochtúir Caoimhe Archibald le críoch a chur leis an mholadh. I call Dr Caoimhe Archibald to wind on the motion.

Dr Archibald: A fortnight ago we stood here amidst the speculation of what the Internal Market Bill would contain and, despite what Mr Givan asserted, we were all very exercised about seeing the details. It is fair to say that, on publication, it was worse than feared and showed that the British Government are intent on tearing up the protocol in the withdrawal agreement and the very necessary protections in it: protections painstakingly negotiated, agreed to, and ratified by that same British Government. While that comes as no surprise to most of us on this island, their blatant renegeing on their commitments — to the point of admitting an intention to break international law — has been met with outrage and condemnation, not just from the European Union or the United States but from the ranks of their own diplomats, Tory MPs and former British Prime Ministers.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: Can I get through a bit? Then I will come back.

The intention to disregard an agreement that they committed to in an international treaty fewer than 12 months ago has shown the British Government of being incapable of living up to their commitments. It is, of course, worth reminding ourselves, as the motion outlines and as others have mentioned, that people here did not consent to Brexit. The protocol is an imperfect compromise, and that was referred to by several Members: Mr O'Toole, Mr Dickson, Mr McHugh and Mr Muir. However, it goes some way to mitigating what are the negative outworkings of Brexit. It was negotiated to protect our economy, North/South cooperation and, of course, the Good Friday Agreement.

The nonsensical claims that the Bill is designed to protect the Good Friday Agreement are perverse and have rightly been met with disbelief and ridicule. The Bill, as my colleague Martina Anderson outlined, undermines all three strands of the agreement. It curtails the powers of the Assembly and the Executive, with the Scottish and Welsh Administrations also criticising it as a power grab.

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: Go ahead.

Mr Allister: Will the Member tell us which paragraph of the Belfast Agreement the Bill infringes? The Member has obviously never read section 38 of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 or she would have known that the agreement was passed subject to the sovereignty of Parliament.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for his intervention. I have read the Good Friday Agreement; I am across it and the details of it.

Mr Allister: Can you tell me?

Dr Archibald: I am moving on, thank you.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will Members please not make comments from a sedentary position and interrupt other Members?

Dr Archibald: Following the publication of the Bill, we had renewed reports in the British press about Boris Johnson's intention to roll back protections in the ECHR, which was also referred to by Martina Anderson. Article 2 of the protocol commits to "no diminution of rights", including the rights in the ECHR and the Good Friday Agreement contained in the annex of the protocol.

When the British Government threaten to override parts of the protocol, it causes alarm bells to ring about what else they might attempt to undermine. That reinforces the necessity of the withdrawal agreement and the protocol being fully implemented to protect our economy, our communities and our peace agreements.

Mr O'Toole: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way. I will be brief. Claims have been made about the implementation of the protocol and about blockades, for example. I am sure that the Member is aware that article 16 of the protocol has a standing safeguard against "serious economic, societal or environmental difficulties", including against the kinds of things that people claim will happen. In a sense, the powers to protect against the kind

of disruptions that Boris Johnson claims are in the Bill already exist in the protocol.

Dr Archibald: The Member is quite right: the claims being made are quite ludicrous.

As other contributors mentioned, the international community, not just in the EU, is looking on —.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: I am sorry; I am running out of time.

We have to wonder why on earth any country with which the British Government might want to do a future deal would believe that it would be worth making an agreement with such a Government.

With that, I want to pick up on other contributors' points. Mr Givan lamented the fettering of trade by the protocol. However, it never fails to bemuse me that Brexiteers wilfully ignore the link between their campaigning for Brexit and the problems that have now resulted. As Mr McGuigan said, it is Brexit that is the problem. As Clare Bailey highlighted, the protocol is there to protect all of that.

Let us deal with other issues of trade. The DUP and UUP Members have often talked about, and they talked about it today, the importance of the British market. I concur, as did many Members who supported the motion. It is a vital market. We want to see as little friction as possible in trade. The most recent figures, from 2016, show that total exports to the South, the EU and the rest of the world now exceed sales to Britain. When it comes to goods, which, of course, is what the protocol refers to in terms of unfettered access, the figures are £6.5 billion in sales to Britain, £8.7 billion to the South, the EU and the rest of the world. When we look at the rest of the world, we see that, of sales worth £3.5 billion, the top five countries account for the majority of them. Number one is the United States, which is worth as much as the next four countries combined.

For the Members opposite, let us be clear: the only people threatening the free trade agreement with the United States are those who are trying to wriggle out of their commitments and, in the process, override the protections in the protocol. The next biggest country is Canada, and there is no free trade agreement with it yet. It is the same for Thailand, it is the same for Australia and it is the same for China.

4.00 pm

The Economy Minister, in her role, has consistently said that her top priority is to seek to ensure that Northern Ireland firms have unfettered access to the internal market in the United Kingdom. The Economy Minister has also indicated that she advised Executive colleagues that she is not willing to bring forward an LCM on the Trade Bill because she does not have the necessary reassurances that the North is able to be a full participant in future UK trade deals. What has she done about seeking reassurances that we can have access to existing EU free trade agreements through the protocol? Has she lobbied for that? I ask that because that is also a very significant issue. Putting all our eggs in one basket and focusing on unfettered access to the detriment of other trade agreements amounts to negligence.

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: No.

Matthew O'Toole highlighted the important issue of divergence in services and what sometimes gets lost in the discussion with the focus on trade and goods. It is one of the imperfections of the protocol and where energies need to be focused in trying to minimise those divergences.

Steve Aiken said that the EU does not care about the North. It cared enough to make it a priority in the negotiations. It cared enough to insist that issues with the North were resolved as part of the withdrawal agreement exactly because of the wrangling that we are now seeing.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: Sorry.

He and his colleagues also mentioned state aid. The irony, of course, is that we have Brexiteers and unionists talking about state aid as though, by leaving the EU, they will be shaking off the shackles that have restricted them in using it, when Britain is, in fact, amongst the bottom five countries in terms of spend on state aid as a percentage of GDP. Germany, Denmark and Hungary all spend four times as much as Britain. It is, of course, how state aid is used that is the issue, and the countries that they will be seeking to do free trade agreements with, such as Japan, will be looking for commitments on state aid.

A number of Members — Martina Anderson, Pat Catney and Philip McGuigan — referred to the integrated nature of our supply chains, a fact that cannot be ignored when we talk about the importance of the British market. We need to recognise that. In seeking to ensure unfettered access to the British market, which, as Clare Bailey pointed out, is included in the protocol, there can be no compromising on the protections, because the protocol is not just about trade; it is, vitally, about rights and the protections of communities and our peace process.

By taking the path that they have taken, the British Government and Tory Ministers have shown, once again, their complete disregard for our peace, our economy, businesses, jobs and the livelihoods of people on this island. What our businesses and communities, more broadly, have been crying out for is certainty, and this Bill has done the exact opposite of creating certainty. The ongoing negotiations require all parties to contribute in good faith. There are difficult issues to resolve — issues that Mr Allister referred to — such as exit declarations and tariffs, and those are part of the negotiations. That is without even considering important issues not included in the protocol such as mutual recognition of professional qualifications and access to EU funding schemes.

We cannot sit back and allow our businesses, economy and hard-won peace to be collateral damage. We will continue to work in partnership with all those who are willing here in the Assembly and the Executive, in Dublin, in Brussels and across the EU to protect the best interests of citizens across this island. The withdrawal agreement is an international agreement. It needs to be maintained and upheld in order to protect our economy and our peace agreements. I urge Members to support the motion.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I think that we may have a Division. Clear the Lobbies. The Question will be put again in three minutes. I remind Members that we should continue to uphold social distancing and that those who have proxy voting arrangements in place should not come to the Chamber. Thank you.

Members, resume your seats. Before I put the question, I again remind those Members present that if possible, it would be preferable if we could avoid a Division.

[Laughter.] The things I have to read; the things I have to read. *[Laughter.]*

Question put a second time.

Some Members: Aye.

Some Members: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): OK, Members. Before the Assembly divides, I want to remind you that, as per Standing Order 112, the Assembly currently has proxy voting arrangements in place. Members who have authorised another Member to vote on their behalf are not entitled to vote in person and should not enter the Lobbies. I also remind Members to ensure that social distancing continues to be observed while the Division is taking place. Please be patient at all times and follow the instructions of the Lobby Clerks.

The Assembly divided:

Ayes 48; Noes 36.

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Anderson and Dr Archibald.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Aiken and Mr Middleton.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly acknowledges that the majority of citizens voted to reject Brexit; recognises that the departure from the EU gives rise to substantial political and economic challenges for our society; further recognises that while the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland is imperfect, it guarantees that, whatever the

circumstances, there will be no hard border on the island and will protect the Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions, North/South cooperation and the all-island economy; believes it would be entirely unacceptable if the British Government sought to abandon these safeguards and mitigations, as this would amount to a serious betrayal of an existing international treaty; and calls on the British Government to honour their commitments, and to ensure, now, the rigorous and full implementation of the protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, prioritise peace and stability, and work to secure a future economic partnership with their EU colleagues now and in the weeks ahead.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We will suspend the sitting for a couple of minutes for a comfort break.

The sitting was suspended at 4.22 pm.

The sitting resumed at 4.25 pm.

Promoting Dementia-friendly Policy

Ms P Bradley: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the need to prioritise and enhance the health and well-being of every person living with dementia, and that of their carers, in Northern Ireland; highlights the importance of earlier and better diagnosis, effective community and home-based support, as well as high-quality inpatient and residential care in realising better outcomes; notes that transforming public understanding and ending stigma about dementia is integral to ensuring local services and activities are more accessible, and everyday life made easier and more enjoyable, for those affected; acknowledges the role that the devolved institutions can play in embedding cultural change to this end; and calls on the Minister of Health to work with his Executive colleagues to implement a dementia-friendly approach to their responsibilities and decision-making moving forward.

I start by thanking the Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place today —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): If I could just interrupt for a wee moment to outline the rest of the business, please, Paula? Thank you for moving the motion. There is a wee bit of detail. The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to one hour and 30 minutes for the debate. The proposer will have 10 minutes to propose and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who speak will have five minutes. I now ask you to continue, please. Thank you.

Ms P Bradley: Thank you Mr Deputy Speaker. Apologies for not moving it first and then sitting down in my place. I have to get used to doing that.

I just want to start by saying thank you to the Business Committee for allowing this debate to take place today and to all the parties that signed the all-party motion.

I first met Martin Riley and Michael Keenan from the Alzheimer's Society back in February, and we had a discussion about bringing a motion to the Assembly around May. Then COVID hit, and we are where we are now. I am glad to say that this debate is taking place on World Alzheimer's Day, and what is even more special is that the strapline for this year is, "Let's talk about dementia". I hope that, through this debate, we can reduce some of the stigma and we can talk openly about how we, as an Assembly, want to bring about changes when it comes to dealing with people with dementia.

I am not going to come off with too many facts and figures; I will leave that to people who are better than me at that. However, at present, there are 22,000 people living in Northern Ireland with dementia. That is a scary figure.

When I was looking through all of the packs of information that we received, something struck me as I read that. It brought back to me a very early memory. When I was a child, I had an aunt who died of dementia when she was in her early 40s. She would have been in her late 30s when she first had the signs of Alzheimer's. It was actually a very rare genetic form of Alzheimer's disease. I remember seeing that as a child and not fully understanding what it was. I saw that my aunt needed help going to the bathroom

or needed help to be fed. At that time, as I say, I was a child, just approaching my teenage years, and things were not discussed in front of us in our house. My mum and dad never openly discussed those things, so I never really knew what was going on. However, what I do remember was that, when my auntie died, she left behind two very young boys without a mummy and their daddy without a wife. So that just shows, yet again, that Alzheimer's and dementia can hit at any age.

As I moved further on, I remembered my granny Browning, who was fun-loving and full of mischief. She kept the whole family going. I come from a really matriarchal family, and she was the east-Belfast woman, the matriarch of the family, who did everything for us. I have so many fond memories of my granny and, every Saturday, having to walk the Newtownards, Cregagh, Castlereagh or Woodstock roads, and that was done on a monthly cycle, especially to go and look at all the handbag shops.

4.30 pm

I remember then, as a teenager, my granny was diagnosed with vascular dementia. I saw this fun-loving woman with a bit of devilment in her change dramatically. My granny was really fortunate because she came from a big east Belfast family. She had four daughters, four sons and numerous grandchildren, so we were really fortunate that we were able to keep my granny at home. We were all able to look after her. We all had our days that we had to spend with her. I remember all those. We laugh about some of the stuff that she did and some of the memories that we have. She was always just wanting her ma. She just kept saying to me, "Where's my ma? My ma will be looking for me. Where's my ma?", but then she thought her ma was my auntie because she lived with my auntie. I have happy and sad memories of my granny and the effects that Alzheimer's and dementia has on people.

Most of us in the Chamber will have some experience of Alzheimer's or dementia in our lives. When you look at the statistics for Northern Ireland, it is clear that we are all bound to have some experience of it. We want to highlight this special day with today's motion. We want to highlight World Alzheimer's Day, but we also want to encourage not only our Health Minister but all our Executive to do whatever they can to promote living well with dementia. As I said earlier, people in any age group can get it. People who are working and bringing up families have diagnoses of Alzheimer's. None of us know what is ahead for us.

Over the past six months, the impact of COVID-19 on people living with dementia has been devastating. We also know that, in Northern Ireland, over 30% of those who have died had dementia mentioned on their death certificate. I do not have the statistics — others in the room may well have them — to say how many of those deaths were in care homes and how many were in their own homes. There are issues, and those are maybe for another day and another debate for the Health Committee when we look at care homes and how COVID-19 manifested itself and some of the failings around that.

During COVID, social isolation has been a major factor for many people suffering or living with dementia, not only those living in private nursing homes or residential accommodation but all those living at home. I have spoken to many friends and family who said that they had to make judgement calls during COVID-19 to go and visit their

parents. They knew that, for some of their parents and elderly relatives, the social isolation and lack of confidence would play a major part in how they would come out the other side of COVID-19. Many families have had to make those judgement calls and have done so for the right reasons.

Many Members were probably glad to hear that I had left the Health Committee. I liked to wax lyrical about my life before I became an MLA, but I will just mention it a little. Before I was an MLA, I worked for our wonderful health service, and I am proud to say that I worked for it. I worked in elder care and had many wonderful experiences, especially with people who were living with dementia and their families. I saw at first hand the lack of services in place for those people, the lack of respite and the lack of care provision. I saw a fact somewhere in all that paperwork about care costs in Northern Ireland. It said in my paperwork that £120 million was spent in 2019 on healthcare, £340 million was spent on social care and £350 million was spent on unpaid care.

I have been here since 2011, and we have had various policies and strategies where we have looked at dementia and pathways for dementia, and we still come up short. Our Health Minister is not with us this afternoon; he is in a meeting. I know that it is not a new problem, but it has landed on his table. It has been around for years, and it is something that we still have to grapple with. We still have to make a difference to people's lives because we want people to have healthy lives. We want them to live longer, but we need to put that support in place not only for the person living with dementia but for their carers and the amount of unpaid work that they do. Without them, our health service would fall absolutely to its knees.

Just before I finish, I want to say that good work is being done; it is not all negative. Last year, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive was awarded Dementia-friendly Large Organisation of the Year in Northern Ireland by the Alzheimer's Society. That is something that we should shout about and be proud of. That organisation took it on itself to do the training and to recognise that, when it sends someone out to someone with dementia, they should deal with them in the right way.

Dementia is something for our entire Executive and not just our Health Minister. I am sure that someone else will mention it later, but we all know the figures for how many people will be living with dementia in Northern Ireland in the years ahead and the money that it will cost to manage that. We need to put efficient plans in place now to deal with that.

Mr Gildernew: I am delighted to be associated with the motion and to have been asked to be. It is an area of huge importance to all MLAs and our whole society. I also met representatives of the Alzheimer's Society in early February, and I have to say that they impressed me with their level of detail, as they always do.

We know that over 14,700 people here live with dementia, and that figure is expected to rise to 20,000. It is an issue that we will have to grapple with. In my previous role as a social worker in the older persons team in the south Tyrone area, I worked with many families who were struggling with the issues that dementia brings and, indeed, the additional pain and worry that people have when they are trying to plan care for their loved ones. They have to negotiate a

lot of issues around capacity to make decisions and how to include the person's voice and their wishes in settings in which family members may have different views and the person may have strong views. With all the other pressures, it can be difficult for everyone's voice to be heard and for the issues for that person to be dealt with in a way that reflects everyone's wishes fairly.

In my time as an MLA, I have come across some serious issues relating to deprivation of liberty that arise from dementia care. At times, I have also found that the health and social care system can be difficult to navigate for people who are trying to explore the wishes of their loved ones and to retain as much as possible of their normal way of living or way of going on, as we often talk about here. Sometimes, it can be easier to wrap people up in cotton wool. That gives everyone the comfort of knowing that they are safe, but people may not be able to live their life in as full a way as they did or, indeed, as they are capable of, despite the issues associated with dementia. There are issues there, and we need to look at how we engage with families and support them.

Having worked with it in my role as a social worker, I know that the Alzheimer's Society provides fantastic support to a range of people; in fact, it provides bespoke individual family planning sessions that I have found invaluable. One of the things that I discovered as a social worker was that the services are not always there and, often, you have to rely on the community and voluntary sector to provide additional input into cases. It does that very well, and we need to ensure that it is supported to do that.

I am conscious that the 'Power to People' report flagged up the issue of carers' rights and how we need those rights to be put on a statutory basis. Carers should have the right to know what to expect and what they can expect. I am working on putting together an all-party group on carers, and I hope that many of the Members here today will join me in that. It is important that that is an area of focus for the Assembly. It impacts on so many of us, and informal family carers provide a huge amount of care to the system. We need to reciprocate and recognise that and support those carers.

There are even cross-cutting planning issues, such as how we plan dementia-friendly towns, cities and streetscapes in future. There are very simple steps that we can build into planning that will allow people to continue to live at home longer and to engage in their community longer. It is important that we try to gather that learning and implement it in such a way that we genuinely have departmental cross-cutting. I recognise that the Minister has not been able to be here today; no doubt, he would have been. While there is a focus on him to lead, all our Executive colleagues should assist with that. I also urge the Minister to consider the issue of carers legislation and to bring it forward as soon as is possible.

I support the motion and welcome today's debate and the chance to say, on World Alzheimer's Day, "Let's talk about dementia".

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the DUP for giving up its slot today in order for the House to be able to progress, on World Alzheimer's Day, this cross-party motion. As it is for previous contributors, the issue is something that is dear to our hearts. There are few of us who do not have family members who are suffering from dementia. In my case,

it was my grandfather, who had presenile dementia. His symptoms started to display from his late fifties. That points to the increase in numbers that we see today of people with dementia in their fifties. Some, indeed, are in their forties.

Dementia has a number of different causes. There is vascular dementia, Alzheimer's dementia and Lewy body dementia, which is particularly nasty, not that there is any good form of dementia. I have a friend who is having to care for her 69-year-old husband, who has received that dreadful diagnosis. That demonstrates the need to have tailor-made services. There is a lack of support services, particularly for people in the younger age groups, who may be only in their fifties. The majority of people in nursing homes or elsewhere in the care sector are in their seventies or 80-plus, however. That is a particular area of concern. As many know, people with Down's syndrome live much longer lives, thankfully, but some are also suffering from dementia in their fifties. That is another specialty area — a niche market, if you like — in which particular needs must be addressed.

I know that COVID-19 has had a huge impact on people with dementia and their carers. We hear the stories of people not understanding why they cannot see their loved ones and not understanding FaceTime, but COVID-19 has also shone a spotlight on the social care sector, which is an area that has been neglected. In Northern Ireland, we are more fortunate, in that we have a joined-up health and social care sector, unlike in GB. Nonetheless, the social care sector in particular has suffered from a huge lack of investment.

I know that the Minister would be here, had that been possible, but I want to raise with his Department the huge problem that exists as we struggle to get back to some sort of normality or new normality over the coming weeks and months. Support mechanisms have not been put in place, not just for families who are caring for loved ones with dementia but for day-care services, rehabilitation services and home-help services. We have not heard much about how health trusts are responding to the particular challenges of COVID by working with carers and supporting them and by giving a quality of life to those who are suffering from dementia and other illnesses.

Other Members spoke about the need for investment, as have I, but some of the asks from the Alzheimer's survey are not necessarily for big-money investments but are about things being done differently and about uniformity and consistency across trusts. It is, as Mr Gildernew said, about preparing and about people being able to get their diagnosis early so that they can make informed decisions.

How many of us have been faced with people in our constituency offices who believe that wishes have not been presented in wills, and those wills have been the subject of family disputes? Sometimes, the law is not clear about the point of reasoning, if you like, at which a will can be made and adhered to. I have had to deal with at least two cases in which there have been disputes, and they will be fought in courts. We need clarity around the element of the legal system that relates to people who want to make informed early decisions, at a time, perhaps, when other people are trying to interfere in the will and testament. That must be halted. The Law Society and others are giving clear guidance to their membership about giving —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Mrs D Kelly: — the correct direction to families and carers to ensure that dementia sufferers' wishes are adhered to.

4.45 pm

Mr Chambers: I do not believe that there is one word in the motion with which anyone in the House could disagree. Dementia is often a catch-all phrase. However, in reality, there are over 200 subtypes of dementia, the most common of which are, of course, Alzheimer's disease and vascular dementia. Across the types, the impact can be debilitating. It can rob people of their memories, thoughts and relationships. It can also be particularly difficult for the families affected, as they can only watch when their loved ones remain often physically healthy but, mentally, slipping away. As our population ages, there is no doubt that dementia is going to become a growing problem. We should, therefore, be planning and taking steps to prepare for that.

Dementia is, perhaps, seen as some sort of a new medical condition, but, in reality, it has always been among us. I doubt there is a family who has not been touched by it. The reason we are so aware of dementia is testament to the success of our NHS and its medical practitioners in increasing the life expectancy of our citizens over recent decades. In its early stages, it is an invisible condition and can be excused as simply the forgetfulness that we associate with the ageing process. However, it is a condition that has no regard for age, social condition or standing. Over 22,000 people are living with dementia in Northern Ireland, and as many as 1,600 of those sufferers are under the age of 65. That reinforces the point made by Paula Bradley.

Thankfully, there is much more awareness of the condition now, so the Ulster Unionist Party strongly supports continued efforts to dementia-proof our health service for future years. That should start with our health service staff so that they can spot the signals and, perhaps, pre-empt the practical but important challenges of communication and surroundings.

There is no cure. The only comfort that we can draw is that, unlike back in the day, when much less was known about dementia, and patients could have found themselves in a locked-down hospital ward or even in an asylum with no stimulation to help them through the day, we now have nursing homes that deal exclusively with the care of dementia patients and staff who are trained to deal with their mood changes. There is also a growing body of evidence to suggest that it is possible to reduce an individual's risk of dementia. Research here, the rest of the UK and internationally suggests that smoking, excessive drinking and lack of physical activity, for instance, can contribute to a higher risk of an individual getting dementia later in life. With that in mind, healthcare practitioners and public health bodies can aid the population to reduce or mitigate the risk of developing dementia along with other conditions, such as diabetes.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention and pay tribute to the many tens of thousands of people locally — family members, staff, volunteers and support groups and associations — who care for people with dementia. Without them, our social care system would not be able to

cope, and there is no doubt that the quality of life of those whom they care for would be severely impacted.

It is important to note that it is not a failure when a family has to make the hard and heart-wrenching decision to allow a loved one to go into professional care. Carers drive themselves to the limit. They compromise their own health to keep loved ones in their own home. My family has been there.

The Ulster Unionist Party has no hesitation in fully supporting the motion.

Ms Bradshaw: I support the motion. From the strength of feeling I see in the Chamber, I am sure that it will get all-party support.

As many have mentioned, a key aspect of the motion is carers. It is estimated by the charity Together in Dementia Every Day (TIDE)

that carers for people living with dementia are, in effect, paid 20p per hour for their work, yet their contribution in the most difficult of circumstances is invaluable to us all.

The motion talks about:

“effective ... home-based support”.

That can, to some extent, be the luck of the draw. Some live in tightly bound communities with plenty of neighbours to help out; others are less fortunate. The issue then becomes not just lack of support but lack of knowledge about how to get support. That is why the motion implies a need to raise awareness across the community so that people who develop dementia, and their carers, know that if, sadly, the time comes, that support is there and that we do all we can to avoid people living in isolation.

I pay tribute to dementia navigators. I came across a constituent a year and a half ago who was at her wits' end. She was caring for her husband and was very isolated. I told her about the navigators, and a few weeks later, when she telephoned me back, she was a changed woman. She was thrilled with the support that she got. The support is there; we just need to connect the dots.

We are fortunate in Northern Ireland in that the rates of dementia diagnosis are among the highest and quickest in the UK. However, it remains, perhaps, harder than it should to secure a diagnosis, and the differential between trusts remains a concern. Diagnosis is vital for a host of reasons, not least to gain access to the right treatment and a pathway that can enable people with dementia still to live life to the fullest extent possible.

I will add one key point to the motion, from personal experience. The issues for people with dementia and their carers often extend well beyond the health service, and, indeed, well beyond public services, such as entering into telephone contracts accidentally or, via scams, cancelled. My father-in-law at one point had six telephones. He just kept taking out a new contract, and then had to keep going back to explain his circumstances. He did not have his full dementia diagnosis at that point, so it was difficult.

The next part of the process is recognising and making necessary legal arrangements for power of attorney and suchlike, and all aspects of caring for people with dementia. Those can draw little attention but cause the greatest practical difficulties, particularly at the outset.

There needs to be awareness of dementia across all sectors, particularly the role played by carers, and in not just caring directly but in managing so many other things, from access to the right healthcare to household administration and finance. A lot of carers themselves are elderly and may have health conditions. It is a trying time for people in their retirement years. The Assembly is right to focus on the health service and the broad public services but we must also recognise those broader issues.

For people who live with it, dementia brings significant change. That often leads to other difficulties, such as depression, itself quite possibly undiagnosed among those in the early onset stages. For carers, too, it brings a form of living grief. Organisations such as the Alzheimer's Society, Dementia UK and TIDE, which began operating in Northern Ireland in the past year or so, are increasing their work in that area having realised that it is such a vital issue.

When we speak of removing stigma, there is also the stigma for carers, or, at least, the sense of not wishing to trouble others with their own sense of living grief. We have to consider that as well.

It is something that we all need to be prepared for, given our ageing population and the inevitable increase in the number of us who will have to care for people with dementia. That is why I am keen to support the motion for dementia-friendly neighbourhoods. Some great work goes on around that in my constituency of South Belfast where thought goes into how we get everyone involved — the police, the shops, the schools and all the voluntary organisations — to make life easier for people with dementia and their carers in everything from ensuring ongoing access to services and assistance to designing streets and shops in such a way that they can continue to get out and about and be independent for as long as possible.

This is an enormous challenge for us all, but it is one that matters a lot. I support the motion.

Mrs Cameron: I support the motion. I thank Members from across the House for tabling the motion for debate on this particular day, which is, of course, World Alzheimer's Day.

For any of us who have watched someone with dementia and the dementia progress over time, the motion really resonates. While many illnesses, whether they are cancer or COVID, are cruel, dementia is just that: it is cruel. It is cruel on the sufferer and cruel on their family and their loved ones, and it is hugely challenging for those who are tasked with caring duties.

We have a problem here in Northern Ireland, and that is the rising prevalence of dementia. While statistics indicate that just shy of 15,000 people here in Northern Ireland have a diagnosis of dementia, that number could be much more and even be as high as 22,000, which the Member who moved the motion mentioned. Each of those people represents a loved one, a family and a duty of care. While that represents a huge challenge, according to the LSE, the problem could be much bigger come 2040, when it estimates that we could have a 95% rise in cases and some 43,000 people suffering from dementia.

What we are doing now simply will not meet the need and the challenges that we will face with such a potential rise in cases. Therefore, we need to look at a new strategy.

We need to look at it now in order to meet that growing demand by 2040. We are currently using a 10-year-old strategy, but as we are now learning daily, science and treatments change and data and research can revolutionise how we care for people and secure better outcomes for patients.

We need to look at substantial investment in this area of care. By 2040, we could be looking at a cost of £2.3 billion. To help to achieve that, it is vital that longer-term reforms are interlinked. Those include the review and reform of Northern Ireland's Health and Social Care and of independent nursing and residential care homes, taking due account and cognisance of the dementia needs that are in our communities.

We must also provide the support and recognition that our unpaid carers are due and deserve. Those heroes, and they are heroes, must be supported and not taken for granted. Their role is vital in not just providing care but in maintaining that independence and home living that so many dementia sufferers value so much. The demands on those people are significant, and it must not be forgotten that while there is a physical demand, there is also a significant mental and emotional demand. Therefore, we must ensure that a blanket of support is around our carers, and I urge the Minister, who, I am glad to see, has arrived from the Executive meeting, to look specifically at how carers right across society can be better supported and recognised.

My colleagues will address other aspects of this pressing issue, but I cannot press enough the need for action now. The patient must be first, and the families and carers must be supported. I support the motion.

Ms Flynn: I thank all the Members and all the parties that have been involved in tabling the motion. Listening to what Paula Bradshaw and to some of what Dolores Kelly said about their experiences triggered some thoughts for me about a family member who is living with dementia at the moment. I am sure that a lot of us in the Chamber can relate to those issues.

I fully support the motion and the efforts of Members to work towards a truly dementia-friendly society. Some of the figures and statistics that are involved have struck me not because they are high but because they do not show the full picture. A few Members quoted figures that say that there are just under 15,000 people on the dementia register. However, that is a conservative figure, with an estimate of 22,000, which has been quoted, suggested by the Department of Health.

It is so important that the stigma and pressure around dementia care are addressed not only for the person with the diagnosis but for their family, carers and community. I wish to pose a question to every Member who is here today, and it is one that I know that at least one or some of you have already faced or will face.

The question is this: what would you like your personal reaction to be if you heard that your loved one had received a dementia diagnosis? Would you like it to be one of anxiety, with concerns about who will help with the potential caring responsibilities, such as collecting medication or helping with household tasks, or would you want it to be a sense of relief and hope? We should do all that we can to ensure that it is the latter, where there is a feeling of relief that your loved one finally has

that diagnosis and, more importantly, a suitable pathway of support and care and a feeling of hope that, with that diagnosis and recognition, supports and changes will be put in place to allow that person to continue to live a fulfilled life. I strongly believe that that is possible. That is what a dementia-friendly society is. Of course, as other Members have referenced, that will require a broader Executive approach, with all Ministers and Departments stepping up to the task. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, particularly about his plans to reform social care and deliver accessible and supportive services for those with dementia and am happy to support the motion.

5.00 pm

Mr Easton: Over half of the UK public know somebody who has dementia. Many of us in the Chamber know someone or probably have a family member who has dementia. Dementia is a life-limiting disease with no curative treatment. The most common cause of dementia is Alzheimer's disease, which accounts for over 50% of cases. Vascular dementia accounts for 20%, and the remainder include frontal lobe dementia and alcohol-related dementia. When a person has dementia, the brain nerve cells are damaged and die faster than normal without replacement. It is a worldwide health issue, with 35 million cases reported in 2010. That number is expected to double by 2030. There are some stark statistics from Alzheimer's Research UK: over 500,000 people in the UK have a dementia diagnosis. Around 15,000 people in Northern Ireland have a dementia diagnosis, although, as other Members have said, separate research has indicated that that could be 22,000. From 2006-07 to 2015-16, the number of people on the dementia register rose from 9,500 to over 13,000, which is an increase of 43%. One in three people born in 2015 will develop dementia in their lifetime. If that were reflected in the Chamber, 30 Members out of 90, if born in 2015, would develop dementia. That is frightening if you think about it. In 2014, one in 14 people aged over 65 and one in 79 of the whole population across the United Kingdom had dementia. In Northern Ireland, there is a 73% local diagnosis rate, which is significantly higher than any other part of the UK.

There is also a huge financial cost associated with care. The London School of Economics and Political Science care policy and evaluation centre calculated that, in 2019, care costs, as were mentioned, were £120 million for healthcare, £340 million for social care and £350 million for unpaid care. Overall costs will increase by 192% by 2040, with a total annual cost of £2.3 billion. The regional dementia care pathway was established by the Health and Social Care Board to set out a vision for improving the services and support arrangements available for people with dementia, their families and their carers. It aims to deliver on the recommendations of the 2011 Northern Ireland dementia strategy entitled 'Improving Dementia Services in Northern Ireland'. The dementia improvement collaborative was established by the Health and Social Care Board in spring 2015. It recognised the need to improve dementia care, particularly in the area of waiting times for memory assessments and follow-on reviews. A Health and Social Care Board review of dementia services in Northern Ireland recognised the need to develop a standardised dementia care pathway to ensure high-quality care in the right place and by the right people. A dementia innovation lab was also established in the

summer of 2015 to review the long-term implications of dementia for Northern Ireland.

The current dementia strategy for Northern Ireland is almost a decade old. It is time to rethink and redouble our approach. Much of the good and valuable work being undertaken across health and social care trusts has stemmed from the 2011 strategy and recommendations. We need to assess whether it is still relevant and ensure that the evidence base is up to date and, most of all, patient-centred. We want to see the traditional focus on tackling dementia expanded from a simple care provision basis to a dementia-friendly approach throughout all our homes and communities. There are real barriers to people with dementia accessing important community services and activities. We need to change public perceptions of the disease in order to make tangible differences to the quality of life of those affected. It is vital that we take steps now to put in place approaches, ambitions and sustainable funding arrangements to meet the rising demand in coming years. I support the motion.

Ms Anderson: Tá me ag labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin seo. I will speak in favour of the motion, which is especially welcome as today is World Alzheimer's Day.

As Pam said, there is no doubt that dementia is an utterly horrendous disease: witnessing the shock on a loved one's face when they realise that they have just repeated themselves; noticing the quiet panic when they realise that something is wrong with them but they do not know what it is; or seeing the frustration that a loved one expresses when they cannot remember something or forget what they wanted to say or do. Like Paula and Dolores, I will recount my personal story. Along with my family and a fantastic team of carers to whom we are truly indebted, I cared dearly for our mother, Betty, who suffered from Alzheimer's for 17 and a half years. Bit by bit, we lost the strong, strict, independent mother who looked after us, as we, her children, began to look after her. Sometimes, we felt hopeless, trying our best to hold on to the mother whom we knew and loved, showing her pictures, singing her favourite songs or talking about her past to trigger memories. However, day by day, more of my mother's memories slipped away. While she forgot some of our names, we never forgot her. She was our mother until the day that she died.

As recognised by the motion, families need "effective community and home-based support". That is the case whether they are large families, blessed because they can share the caring responsibilities — I know that to be true and can attest that even they struggle — or smaller families who must opt for residential care so that their loved one gets the care that they need. The motion states that we:

"need to prioritise and enhance the health and wellbeing of every person living with dementia, and that of their carers ... and calls on the Minister of Health to work with his Executive colleagues to implement a dementia-friendly approach to their responsibilities and decision-making".

I can attest that the system needs reform, serious reform, if it is to adopt such a dementia-friendly approach. One of the things that it could do is to accept families' and carers' ability to know even the right size of incontinence pads for their loved ones. The system takes it out of the best of

families. It makes them jump through hoops and wait for weeks and months of assessments and form-filling before the right size of pads are approved. Families struggle for far too long as they wait for domiciliary care packages to be approved. Minister, that needs urgent attention.

It is a cocktail of emotions, an aching hurt, because someone whom you love cannot speak up for themselves. They need you to be their voice, yet it is like howling at the moon. You are left feeling utterly helpless as you endeavour to make their life just a little better. The fact that they suffer from dementia does not mean that they have lost their right to dignity. My mother — four stone in weight and not able to walk, talk or feed herself — cried out with tears of fright when the system insisted that she be hoisted out of her bed rather than manually lifted onto a chair and wheeled into the bathroom. If we refused the hoist, the carers would be withdrawn. We needed those precious carers. It is cruel that families are given ultimatums at a time when they need the support most.

That is just one example of the failings in the system. The motion will not end the pain and suffering that dementia causes, but calling out bad practices, trying to end the stigma and stating that local services must be more accessible is so necessary for so many people. Everyone in the room, if they have not done so already, will probably, one day, need access to such services for themselves or for someone whom they love deeply.

Ms Bunting: Before I move to my remarks, I declare that I am the proposed chairman of the all-party group on terminal illness, which is awaiting the approval of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, and previously sponsored the Walk for a World without Dementia event in this estate. Prior to touching on the substance of the issue, I commend the Alzheimer's Society, Marie Curie and the East Belfast Community Development Agency, which have worked extremely hard, with others, to make east Belfast dementia-friendly and to teach us what it is like and what, in practice, can be done to assist those with the condition. It is because of work like that that I lament the loss of the RADAR centre, which was such a fabulous facility for practical demonstration.

I am advised that over 14,700 people are on the dementia register in Northern Ireland, although the true number of people living with the condition here is estimated to be closer to over 20,000. The occurrence of cases is expected to grow significantly in the years ahead due to our ageing population, as we have discussed. Dementia accounted for 13% of deaths in Northern Ireland in 2018, and it is important to note that that number was 11% higher than in 2016. We can and should expect the trends to continue in tandem with the growing prevalence of the condition locally.

Evidence suggests that there are issues and barriers that prevent some people with dementia and their loved ones from accessing the appropriate, high-quality care and support that they need, including at the end of life. I wish to focus primarily on the end of life.

It is estimated that around 70% of people in care homes have dementia or severe memory problems. Care homes have been and will continue to be the setting in which a large number of people with dementia spend the end of their life. It is, therefore, critical that care home staff have the experience, skills and training required to

deliver high-quality palliative care. Unfortunately, while some homes do their best, that is not always the case. High staff turnover, inadequate staffing levels and lack of access to training due to time pressures and funding issues all make it difficult to equip care home staff with the skills that they need to provide complex care to dying residents. Many care homes provide excellent care for residents with dementia — Palmerston in my constituency is a shining example — but that is not universal. It is vital that improving knowledge and competency in palliative care and supporting people with terminal conditions like dementia is prioritised as part of the social care reform agenda.

I turn to the context of hospitals. People with dementia will often live with comorbidities and complex needs. While emergency admissions to hospital are sometimes necessary, the symptoms of dementia make hospital a uniquely ill-suited care setting. The busy A&E environment and disruption resulting from emergency admission can exacerbate confusion and cause serious distress to the individual and their loved ones. It is, therefore, in the best interests of many people with dementia that emergency trips to hospital are avoided or minimised where possible, especially when they are approaching the end of their life. It is estimated that, in 2015, there were over 2,560 emergency admissions to hospital in Northern Ireland of people with dementia in the last year of their life. While some of those admissions will undoubtedly have been necessary, it is reasonable to assume that a significant number could have been avoided with greater support in the community. Action to address the issue and build greater resources and care capacity in community settings should be pursued as a matter of urgency across health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland.

5.15 pm

Finally, I wish to address the matter of support for dementia carers. Caring for someone with dementia is a demanding experience. Carers will largely be responsible for tasks such as, to name but a few, providing personal care to their loved one, administering medication, collecting prescriptions, preparing meals, maintaining the home and coordinating care among a wide range of health and social care professionals and providers. In many cases, this role is 24/7, round the clock and can leave carers feeling burned out, especially as many dementia carers are spouses and are likely to be in the older-age category and living with their own health complaints. Training and information to help them perform their caring role and access to respite is therefore vital.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I had other remarks, but I will conclude by saying this: it is clear that some people with dementia in Northern Ireland, as well as their carers and loved ones, are missing out on the high-quality care and support that they need throughout the disease trajectory, including at the end of life. With so many more dementia —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close.

Ms Bunting: — deaths expected in the coming years, it is critical that we address these barriers and gaps in care as a matter of urgency. I commend colleagues for bringing this issue to the House, and I am proud to support the motion.

Mr Sheehan: The only disagreement during the debate so far has been about the number of people in the North who have been diagnosed with dementia. It has varied between 15,000 and 22,000-plus. One thing is for sure and I am sure that we all agree that, given our ageing population, the number of people diagnosed with dementia will increase very significantly over the next number of years. We will all take account of that.

Everybody here has had some experience with dementia. Some very close family members have been diagnosed with it. I remember that, when we were youngsters, my mother's aunt had to come to live with us because she had dementia. Eventually, with four kids about the house, it was impossible for my mother to look after her, and the decision that Alan talked about, when families have to decide to put their loved one into care, had to happen.

I also had a friend, not much older than me, who was a great athlete in his youth. He played soccer for Distillery and was one of their top strikers in the 1970s. He was also captain of the Antrim Gaelic football team. He was diagnosed in his early 60s with a very aggressive form of dementia, and, as it turned out, he died a few months ago from COVID. We need to take account of that fact that it appears that dementia is one of the significant risk factors in contracting COVID. Those are some things that we need to take account of.

It was also mentioned that, back in 2018, almost 15% of all deaths were attributable to dementia. Of course, dementia is an incurable, progressive neurodegenerative disease. As I say, there is no cure for it yet. I am sure that plenty of research is going on, but, to date, nothing has transpired that will cure it. Symptoms may start off quite mild and progressively get worse or, in cases where it is an aggressive strain, the deterioration can be quite quick. As the condition deteriorates, there is a need for greater care and greater support for people who are caring for those who are diagnosed. It is critical that we address the deficiencies in care as a matter of urgency.

A lot of the problems have already been touched on. For example, in care homes — I think that Joanne Bunting mentioned it — up to 70% of residents are suffering from dementia of one degree of severity or another. Many people in care homes are seeing out their last days there, and the staff need the appropriate training and skills to deal with people at the end of their lives. We all know of excellent care homes that are doing that, but, of course, there are other care homes that are not so good. There is not a universal level of care across the piece. That is no great surprise given the high turnover of staff in the care sector. Often, staffing levels are inadequate in the first place. Staff lack the access and time to take up training, and, of course, there are always funding issues. In fact, often, carers in the care sector are on the very bottom rung of the ladder: there is no career progression; they receive the minimum wage and so on and so forth.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way. As well as the points that the Member raised, we share concerns — concerns that have been raised with me and, I am sure, with him — about some care home owners refusing to allow people access to a trade union and not allowing trade unions on to their site to organise.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Sheehan: I do not disagree with that.

It is difficult to provide care home staff with the training and the skills that they require when trying to deliver and provide complex end-of-life care to patients who are, literally, going to die. It is important that proper resources are put into our care sector. It is important that our carers are supported. It is also important that the people who care for those who, fortunately, are able to remain at home get the proper support that they need and deserve. There is a high incidence of mental ill health among carers. Often, carers are elderly, not in great health and they face —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Sheehan: A higher than average number of those carers take antidepressants. We need to address the issues. We need to deal with it, and we need to deal with it urgently.

Mr Dickson: I am pleased to speak to the motion, tabled in my name and the names of Members from parties across the House, which seeks a dementia-friendly approach to daily life. Today is World Alzheimer's Day, and it is time to break the silence and put in motion work towards a society that supports people living with dementia and their carers in every way possible, including research to find new treatments to halt this cruel disease. Approximately 22,000 people are living with dementia in Northern Ireland, and I doubt that a single person here today is not aware of dementia in some form. Personally, I have seen former work colleagues face the condition, as well as a close family member, who is in the care of the Northern Trust. His family are very grateful to the trust for the care that he receives. I have seen, at first hand, the strain that this places on individuals and families. So, today, I pay tribute to the thousands of carers across Northern Ireland who help to ensure the well-being of people living with dementia. It has been a particularly difficult year, but our carers helped to keep our society going, and we must never forget this. Unpaid carers need better support from our health system. Paid carers need fair pay and conditions for the vital and difficult job that they do.

We must not shy away from talking about dementia and what we can do to make the lives of people living with it and their loved ones better. That means ensuring their well-being and their dignity. It also means ensuring, where possible, the inclusion of dementia sufferers in decision-making about their future. I believe that everyone here wants Northern Ireland to be a model of best practice in supporting dementia patients and their families. We want our society to be inclusive of people with dementia, and one of the greatest examples of that is in my constituency: a dementia choir set up by my Alliance friend Alderman Gerardine Mulvenna, who is not only a member of Mid and East Borough Council but its dementia champion, and the choir shows what an impact this role can have. The This is Me choir is for people with dementia, their carers and their family members, but it is also inclusive of those experiencing loneliness, widowed people and the vulnerable. The choir brings joy and companionship to those living with dementia and their families. Even during lockdown, they were able to keep going online. I pay tribute to Gerardine and people like her for all the work that they do for people who live with dementia in mid and east Antrim and the participants of the choir. In particular, I thank the Northern Trust for its support of the initiative.

We need to be diagnosing and managing dementia earlier. GP practices and referrals for patients are, of course, where we need to be focussing. We need to ensure that the system is well-funded and accessible to all. The Department's regional strategy on improving dementia services has developed memory clinics in each of the trusts. I would be grateful if the Minister could give us an update on how they are functioning in the current environment and how the work of the dementia navigators is continuing.

It is important that we ensure for those living with dementia that wider public services are accessible to them, that their dignity and well-being are maintained and that daily life is made easier for them and their carers. That covers a wide range of responsibilities, so it should be an Executive-wide initiative and local councils should be included in decision-making so that key services are delivered at the local level.

Dementia is not something that we can ignore; it is part of our lives. We must ensure that consideration for those with the condition and their carers is integrated into the planning and delivery of services to ensure dignity and well-being for all.

Mr Carroll: I am in favour of the motion; I thank the Members who brought it to the House and stand in solidarity with those who have been pressing for better legislation for many years to cater for and protect our loved ones who have dementia. Proper review and reform of the measures that are in place to allow people with dementia to live fully and safely is long overdue.

In particular, I want to speak to the situation that is facing people with dementia in our care homes. Since the beginning of the crisis, those in care homes have felt its effects very sharply. We know how many care homes endured the pandemic with little to no PPE at all for far too long, how little testing was put in place for those who arguably needed it more than most and how residents were discharged from hospitals and placed straight into care homes without being tested. I hope, for the sake of residents and the carers involved, that they will one day be armed with answers on who decided that their care should be deprioritised. Hopefully, accountability will follow. The Health Committee is looking at some of those issues.

One facet of the crisis facing those in care homes, including dementia sufferers, has not been the subject of rigorous debate but has had a debilitating impact on their ability to survive the pandemic. Care home residents who live with dementia have endured seven or eight months without seeing any of their loved ones. They have been calling for clarity and action on the matter, and the response has been lacking. Some families have been stopped from visiting their relatives at their bedroom windows, whilst car park visits have been banned and access to carers has been limited.

While the restrictions behind those measures are in place to stop care home residents falling ill with COVID-19, those with dementia and their families are speaking out about how some of the most vulnerable members of society are coming to harm as a result of those measures, which were not made in consultation with those on the front line of care. It seems incredible that our bars and work places have been flooded with workers and punters and that that is deemed to be safe and yet resuming care home visits, which can alter the living experience of some of the most

vulnerable people in our society and communities, is not. I am not just speaking about the elderly and those who are vulnerable; many young people with disabilities are in the same position. As the massive political drive to get the economy restarted has overhauled the regulations, those people have been left feeling forgotten about and, to be frank, let down.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: Yes.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for raising that point. There are increasing concerns about the level of elder abuse, which is quite often hidden. Therefore, I appreciate his very well-made point on checking in on the most vulnerable.

5.30 pm

Mr Carroll: That is a concern that has to be raised and I thank the Member for mentioning it today.

In conclusion, I call on the Minister and the Executive to review priorities going forward and to seriously consider where the recent spikes in the pandemic are coming from. I cannot see how anyone could come to the conclusion that people with dementia or other conditions in care homes are spreading the virus compared with the tens of thousands of people who are in our cities and town centres every weekend. If our regulations do not reflect that reality, the Executive's approach needs to be seriously reconsidered.

Finally, I welcome the work that is being done by the Alzheimer's Society and Marie Curie, which has already been mentioned. Both organisations have corresponded with us to remind us of the numbers of people who had dementia who have died with COVID and the numbers of deaths in general from dementia in our society.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, who will have up to 15 minutes to respond to the debate.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I will begin by apologising to the proposers of the motion and those who have already spoken before I was able to join the debate. I will review their contributions in Hansard to make sure that I get the full flavour of what they said. I thank the proposers of the motion because it provides us with an opportunity to consider the importance of dementia services across Northern Ireland. It is notable and appropriate that we are discussing the motion on what is World Alzheimer's Day.

Since coming into the Chamber for the debate, I have listened intently to those Members who have spoken in support of the motion. Like many, I cannot fail to be moved by the various contributions and the personal experiences that have been brought to the fore in the Chamber today. Too often, people outside the Chamber forget that many of the issues that are debated here reflect personal experience and are of personal importance to us. I thank those Members who have contributed those very personal stories because not only do they reinforce the message that is coming forward from the debate, but that when we speak as politicians in a debate such as this, we do so from a heartfelt understanding and a desire to get things right not just for society but for our loved ones as well.

As has been said a number of times, the term "dementia" can be used to describe a number of symptoms, including a decline in memory, reasoning and communication skills and the gradual loss of skills that are needed to carry out daily activities. As Ms Anderson said, that is where the frustration comes into the lives of many of those strong personalities. It is a hard situation for families to manage because they see a loved one changing from the person that they once were and they see that decline almost on a daily basis.

Dementia has a profound effect on the people who experience it and on their families. As has been said, we all know of family members, friends or acquaintances who have been touched by dementia and we know the impact that it has on those around them and the sufferers themselves. As Mr Sheehan said, it is no respecter of physical activity or ability. When the deterioration starts, it is something that needs management and support. It is a cruel disease that can strike at any time and at any person. As Mr Dickson and others said, there is no cure, but we can deliver support.

One of the impacts of better standards of healthcare is that we have an increasingly ageing population which, in turn, means that the number of people who live with dementia is increasing. There are over 22,000 people living with dementia in Northern Ireland, 15,000 of whom have had a confirmed diagnosis. As many as 1,600 people under the age of 65 have dementia, so it is not age-specific.

A new case of dementia is diagnosed every four seconds in the world. Mr Sheehan said that the only thing that we have disagreed about is the statistics. However, as Ms Flynn's contribution reminded us, let us not forget that those are not statistics; those are people and their families and loved ones who have to support them and endure what is a very cruel disease and diagnosis. By that metric, if we continue at this rate, by 2051, the ageing of Northern Ireland's population means that the number of cases of dementia will rise to over 60,000. That is a major social, economic and healthcare challenge well into the future.

It is heartbreaking to think of increasing numbers of families enduring the unspeakable pain of watching those loved ones slip away — husbands and wives, even sons and daughters — and finding that their loved ones no longer even recognise them. Ms Cameron's and Mr Dickson's contributions referred to the support networks and to the heroes on whom we depend. Mr Sheehan and Mr Chambers — I missed his contribution as well — talked about that challenging point that comes to families when they have to take the incredibly difficult decision that they are no longer able to cope and that they have to look elsewhere.

As was said, there is currently no cure for any type of dementia. Recently, there have been significant advances in our understanding of the factors that contribute to prevention, together with improved diagnosis and treatment of dementia. For longer than should have been the case, this awful condition has been mistaken simply as being a part of the ageing process. Across the four home nations and in the Republic of Ireland, political Administrations have continually identified as a priority the need to promote greater understanding of the causes of dementia, to work to find a cure, to modify the risk factors and to improve standards of care for people living with dementia.

As was said, my Department has produced a regional strategy, albeit back in 2011, with the aim of improving services for people with dementia and their carers. The strategy, among other things, helped to develop memory clinics across the five trusts — Mr Dickson mentioned those — which provide a timely diagnosis for people with dementia, and information and support in order to inform decisions about their future care and treatment.

The Delivering Social Change initiative was launched in September 2014, and it covered three broad project areas: dementia care, early intervention/transformation and shared education. The Delivering Social Change dementia signature project, which provided a joint funding package of £6.25 million, with some of that money coming from Atlantic Philanthropies, the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Department of Health, was a precursor to what the motion asks for: cross-departmental working and support for a dementia strategy. This was intended to transform the commissioning, design and delivery of dementia services into the future, and to improve the quality of care and support for people living with dementia. The legacy funding from the project provided £2 million recurrent, which has been invested in the dementia service improvement leads, of whom there are two for each health and social care trust, the dementia navigators, of whom there are also two for each health and social care trust, and dementia companions, of whom there are 44 across the region.

Phase 1 was completed in March 2018 and included a number of developments of which Members may be aware. There was a major public awareness campaign, *Still Me*, addressing the stigma around dementia, 11 information booklets were produced on a range of dementia-related issues, there was a training programme on delirium for health and social care staff, and a new dementia website located as part of *nidirect*. The training and development work stream included the recruitment of dementia navigators and champions, and the training covered 2,463 carers. There was also the publication of the dementia learning and development framework.

The second funding package — phase 2 — was just over £7 million, and it was made available through the Delivering Social Change initiative. That project included the development of technical solutions in training and communication, support to people with dementia and carers, data collection and analysis, research projects and data analytical projects. The aims of the programme were to build on existing Connected Health infrastructure in order to improve the patient journey for people with dementia and better support for families and carers, and it has sought to build the capacity and the capability to collect new dementia data to improve the planning and delivery of effective services.

A dementia patient portal was also developed as part of the phase 2 project. That portal is to secure user-friendly web-based tools, designed for patients and registered carers to manage their patient record and communicate with healthcare providers.

Phase 2 also provided resources to establish the General Practitioner Intelligence Platform (GPIP) and the recruitment of an analytical team. That will, amongst other things, allow the creation of a dementia disease register and provide an analytical platform to help improve care. GPIP is a hugely ambitious development for the health and

social care sector. When implementation is complete, it will enable the routine collection of a broad data set of granular codified activity and registered data from GP clinical systems. It will create the potential to establish multiple virtual disease registers. With data linkage to other hospital and community service data sets, it will enable the development of advanced population health data. That facilitates the vision of health wellbeing in 2026 as was set out in the Bengoa report.

As has been mentioned by contributors today, the sector has facilitated engagement with people with dementia and carers and has been able to deliver flexible person-centred services across the region. I know that, for example, in my constituency, and Mr Dickson referred to it as well, the Northern Trust is committed to helping businesses adapt their services to meet the needs of people with dementia and their carers. The trust works with the councils, the chambers of commerce, the Alzheimer's Society and many other partners to raise awareness and deliver training and support to many businesses to become dementia-friendly. To date, they have made a difference by establishing dementia-friendly town centres in Coleraine, Ballymoney, Ballycastle and in Larne. In addition, the villages of Glenarm, Ballygally, Carnlough and Cushendall have participated in dementia friendly information sessions. The work is going on. Ms Bradshaw referred to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive being awarded status as a dementia-friendly organisation.

As Mr Dickson also referenced, the importance of local government and the contribution that his party colleague Ms Gerardine Mulvenna makes as the local council's dementia champion and her work through the 'This is Me' choir, a very valuable asset, not just to the council area, but to those people and families who engage with it.

As with other services, responding to the current pandemic has had a major impact on the delivery of dementia services, which is being reflected in increased waiting lists for initial diagnosis and reviews. It has also had an impact on the provision of residential, day and domiciliary care services. Necessarily, health and social care trusts have had to rethink and redesign the way in which they respond to people with dementia and their carers; so too has the voluntary and community sector and there has been evidence of imaginative person-centred practice that must not be lost when this pandemic passes.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for giving way. I am sure he, like many of us, is dealing with personal independence payment (PIP) applications. If there is a delay in diagnosis, and yet the condition is so obvious on the demands that it places on carers, would the Minister consider writing to the Minister for Communities to accept a GP indication that the person is on the waiting list for a confirmed diagnosis for dementia? That would allow the carers to buy in additional resources to help them in their caring role.

Mr Swann: That is certainly an issue that I will look at and engage with the Minister for Communities, now that the Member has raised it, to see if there is an easier and better way to support not just those who are awaiting the diagnosis, but also the support that is needed for the families.

In regard to the regional dementia care pathway, 14 of their recommendations in the regional strategy referred to the development of the memory services. In order to address

those recommendations, an agreed dementia care pathway has been developed. It is important to note that specific work has also been taken forward to ensure that the pathway supports adults with learning difficulties who also develop dementia. Although no funding has yet been identified to support the implementation of the pathway, integrated care partnerships, local commissioning groups and the trusts have been working with the voluntary and community sector and people with dementia and carers, to establish service innovations and prototype sites in each of the trust areas. Full implementation of the pathway is likely to be achieved across the region within the next number of years.

Members from Ms Bunting through to Mr Carroll, have registered and spoken about the impact of people with dementia in the care home setting, especially at this very challenging time.

There have also been particular impacts on those with dementia in care home settings and their relatives, and challenges have presented with visiting restrictions. While such restrictions are a necessary measure to try to prevent and control the transmission of COVID-19 in care homes, they have been very difficult for care home residents and their families.

5.45 pm

At this time, such guidance must continue to reflect the Executive's priority to minimise the risk of transmission of the virus in care home settings. However, the guidance must also recognise the very real need for residents and families to see one another. In that context, the guidelines published by my Department are intended to support visiting while balancing the ongoing risks posed by COVID-19 —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Minister to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Swann: — to residents, staff and families.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am happy to support the motion, how it was tabled, and the Members who tabled it.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you. Before we move to the Member who will make a winding-up speech, I have a few comments to make to extend the sitting.

As business in the Order Paper is not expected to be disposed of by 6.00 pm, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3), I will allow business to continue until 7.00 pm or until the business has been completed.

Mr McGrath: Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. I do not have much faith in myself sticking to my 10 minutes. However, I will try to finish in that time.

I am grateful for the opportunity to make a winding-up speech on the debate on promoting dementia-friendly policy in the North and to speak in support of the motion. One of the things that we learn quickly when we enter public service as elected representatives is the scrutiny that our lives are placed under, whether through the media or, increasingly, social media. The life of an elected representative is often seen by some as a life detached from the lived human experience. However, I am sure that everyone in the Chamber has encountered the devastating effects of dementia on someone in our lives. In this debate, I have heard all sides and all Members talking about their

very personal stories, and that allows us to show the human side that there can be to politics as we discussed this issue. It has been a nice debate and motion to be part of.

I welcome the fact that the motion is a cross-party one, and I thank the DUP for foregoing their turn in order to allow this cross-party motion to take place. That sends a clear message to the tens of thousands of people across the North who have been impacted by the condition or who care for those who are living with it. The fact that we have all come here together today to be unified in our approach in discussing and caring for those who are affected has been a particularly nice touch.

Dementia is a heartbreaking condition. It takes the people we cared about and breaks them down into someone that we must care for. Statistics show that there are between 14,000 and 22,000 people living with the condition, although that may be just the surface; there may be many more. We have been told that dementia accounts for about 13% of all deaths here. Whilst those statistics are shocking, they do, however, give us a picture of the heroic work being done by those in our care homes and why a dementia-friendly policy is so badly needed.

Many care homes provide excellent, round-the-clock care every day, but it is, as has been recognised, a sector in which there is a very high turnover of staff, yet continuity is critical when working with people with dementia and in understanding how to care for them. Working out their individual quirks to make their life more comfortable can be done more easily if you have long-term staff. Trying to challenge the high turnover of staff in the care sector is something that we should be doing. It may have something to do with low wages and difficult conditions, yet it is something that we should be working to eradicate.

To say that caring for a loved one or a patient with dementia is not easy would be an understatement. The demands that it places on a carer are monumental, as you try to make sense of the condition that is so cruel in its affliction. Carers for such a person can go through a range of mourning as well, as was highlighted. They mourn for the person at the outset of the diagnosis, knowing what is ahead. They mourn as the condition develops: a once patient and gentle person may become aggressive as the condition continues its assault on their mind. They mourn for the life that the person has left behind. Finally, they are left to grieve the passing of that person. We understand that, in one third of all COVID-related deaths, dementia was also on the certificate. I know that the Health Committee, of which I am a member, will conduct an investigation into the care home sector's handling of COVID. Hopefully, we can examine that to see whether any practices can be replicated or improved to be able to help those who have dementia.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Member for giving way. On the basis of placing dementia in today's COVID scenario, the Minister and others have rightly pointed out the difficult decision that a family have to make when they feel that they can no longer care for a loved one. Those decisions are possibly being postponed or delayed because families are hesitant about putting their loved one into a care setting under such circumstances. Perhaps we will see that come out in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for her intervention. Absolutely, it is such a critical and massive step to place

a loved one in a care home but to do so under the current circumstances would be very difficult. It is a decision that families will put off and put off and put off. Again, that may be to the detriment of the care overall for the family and for the care of the loved one.

That helps me to dovetail into my next point about the carers of those living with dementia often feeling isolated, lonely and forgotten. That is unacceptable. One of the cruellest ironies of dementia is that the people who care for those who have lost their cherished memories are often the ones who are forgotten. Certainly, the ethos of the SDLP and others has long been about bringing people in from the cold and not forgetting them. I commend the work of the APG on preventing loneliness, which is chaired by my colleague Sinéad Bradley.

It is anticipated, based on projected numbers, that dementia diagnoses will double by 2040, with the North having the highest projected increase. Therefore, our response to this disease, which is an indiscriminating illness, must increase proportionately to be able to deal with that.

I know that this is a cross-party motion, so I will take a few of the points raised by one rep from each party to give the breadth of views on it. Paula Bradley began by highlighting some of the true impacts of dementia, which can be that children are left behind and husbands and wives are left grieving. That is a real concern for people, and they know that maybe years in advance when the condition starts. She also mentioned the roguish spirit of her grandmother, and I could not help but feel that that is maybe a family trait and that there is something in the genetics. I am sure that we will continue to find that out. Again, she started off by mentioning, as many, many others did, the importance of help and support for carers and how that is absolutely critical, because they are contributing a great amount to society by taking a massive burden off the health service.

The Chair of the Health Committee, Colm Gildernew, highlighted the impact of the condition on those who are suffering. He mentioned his professional work as a social worker and that of social workers right across the North as they try to help families. He also highlighted the importance of the charitable and voluntary sectors. I think that many of us got photographs today with some of those from the charitable and voluntary sectors to help support them in the work that they do.

My colleague Dolores Kelly mentioned the issues and concerns about COVID and the impact that it is having. The Minister gave what was a very extensive and detailed response. It was a ministerial contribution that told us lots and lots about the things that are happening and are taking place and about the help and support that are there. That is good, because sometimes Ministers come in to be defensive and talk about the things that they are trying to do, but there was plenty of detail in your response, and I know that that will be appreciated. I know that Dolores mentioned the limited visits for people in care homes and how that is having an impact.

Alan Chambers mentioned the impact of people living longer; people are living longer and therefore it is a condition that we are going to see an increase of.

Paula Bradshaw mentioned how support is available and various projects. She highlighted the dementia navigators and how they can help. Matching people to the help and

support that is available is a critical job for all of us. People may be feeling lonely and isolated but there is help and support out there, and we should be trying to connect them.

It has been highlighted that no patient should be waiting for more than nine weeks for dementia services. We have to reduce that because we know that some trusts are not hitting that target and we must do all that we can to try to pull together and provide the support, through the Executive and the House, so that trusts are able to get that number right down. Somebody else mentioned — I forget who it was — that early diagnosis is key to being able to provide the appropriate services and interventions.

I have said that COVID-19 is teaching us many lessons about healthcare, caring, loneliness and isolation. Unless we are willing to learn from these vital lessons and, more importantly, to act on them, we will be doomed to repeat them

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr McGrath: All those who receive care, whether at home, in a care home, in hospital or hospices deserve every dignity that we can afford them. Members, we cannot lose sight of this. I support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the need to prioritise and enhance the health and well-being of every person living with dementia, and that of their carers, in Northern Ireland; highlights the importance of earlier and better diagnosis, effective community and home-based support, as well as high-quality inpatient and residential care in realising better outcomes; notes that transforming public understanding and ending stigma about dementia is integral to ensuring local services and activities are more accessible, and everyday life made easier and more enjoyable, for those affected; acknowledges the role that the devolved institutions can play in embedding cultural change to this end; and calls on the Minister of Health to work with his Executive colleagues to implement a dementia-friendly approach to their responsibilities and decision-making moving forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): That concludes the business on the Order Paper. I invite Members to take their ease while we prepare for the question for urgent oral answer to the Health Minister.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Questions for Urgent Oral Answer

Health

COVID-19: Outbreak in Daisy Hill Hospital

Mr Speaker: Mr Justin McNulty has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Health. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health for an update on the COVID-19 outbreak that has resulted in three deaths at Daisy Hill Hospital.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the Minister of Health, I thank the Minister of Health and the Minister of Justice for attending the Chamber this evening, notwithstanding the fact that there was an emergency Executive meeting. Thank you very much.

6.00 pm

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I want to take the opportunity to provide the House with an update on a very serious situation at Daisy Hill Hospital. As Members will know, on Friday, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust confirmed that 11 patients and 21 staff connected with the male medical ward at Daisy Hill had tested positive for COVID-19 and that 67 staff contacts were off work and self-isolating. At that point, three of the patients who had tested positive had sadly passed away, and, tragically, I can now inform Members that, over the weekend, a further two patients have lost their lives. I want to again express my deepest sympathy to the families, who have been plunged into grief in these particularly difficult circumstances.

Thorough investigations are absolutely essential, and I am determined that no stone will be left unturned to ascertain the facts about these cases and any learning that we can take to prevent further reoccurrence. The deaths of these patients, along with the six deaths on the haematology ward at Craigavon Area Hospital, will be subject to a detailed review through the serious adverse incident (SAI) process. That investigation will be independently chaired, and its findings will be made public. There is also a piece of work connected to the learnings from the outbreaks that is being delivered across all trusts. My Department and I are in regular contact with the Southern Trust, and I assure the public that all necessary measures are being taken, first, to control these outbreaks and, secondly, to investigate the circumstances that have caused them.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for coming to the House today and welcome his confirmation that an investigation will now take place. I hope that the Minister will join me today in communicating a strong message that Daisy Hill Hospital is a first-rate hospital with a committed and

dedicated staff. Five families are grieving. My thoughts and prayers are with those families.

Minister, staff should not have to come to me. I hope that you will ensure that an appropriate mechanism will be put in place for staff to raise their concerns and for them to be listened to. I have a list of questions that patients, families and staff want answers to around testing protocols and delays, infection control and ward deep cleaning — lessons that were not learned from Craigavon. The overarching issue now, however, is that staff, patients, families and the wider community need to know that their hospital is safe and that they will be safe when in hospital. What actions have been taken and what additional resources have been put in place to ensure that that is the case? Can you reassure them today, Minister?

Mr Swann: With regard to the specific things that the Member has asked, I assure him, the staff and the families that we will do all we can to ensure the support of the staff, the patients and the loved ones, to support their work and the daily challenges that, he rightly acknowledges, the staff members face. They are supported. As the Member is saying, now is not the point of apportioning blame; this is about taking robust steps to ensure the future safeguarding of our staff and the patients in those vital hospital settings but also supporting the families who have lost loved ones at this critical juncture. That support, provision, assurance and communication must be there and must be strengthened while the SAI level 3 investigation goes on. It will take time, but they need those answers and those reassurances now. That is why my officials and I in regular contact with the senior leadership of the trust.

The Member mentioned cleaning. I have been informed by the Southern Trust that enhanced environmental cleaning is being taken on five times a day and that, at the end of this outbreak, there will be a terminal clean of all the facilities.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his attendance this evening on this important matter. Of course, our thoughts are with the five families and their friends, who have now been thrust into grief prematurely.

Minister, can you confirm whether you will expedite as far as possible the timescale for the completion of the serious adverse incident review to help restore public confidence and implement stringent safety measures to protect staff and patients at Daisy Hill Hospital?

Mr Swann: I join the Deputy Chair of the Health Committee in sending condolences to the families and friends who have lost loved ones in the past number of days.

I said that the serious adverse incident would be at level 3, and I committed to publishing its findings, because I know that the validity of our SAI process has been challenged in the past. I reassure the House, the families and the staff that we will ensure that answers are sought to the questions that are being asked. I am informed that the chair will be in place by 25 September, which is the end of this week. That will ensure that that process can be commenced. The Southern Trust is working not just with the Public Health Agency here but with Public Health England to ensure that its management of the process is of the highest standard and to ensure that there is learning across the entirety of our health and social care system.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for coming to the House again this week on this important issue. I too have had a number of contacts over the past two weeks since the issue first arose in Daisy Hill. As with other Members, I have had concerned patients and families contact me about their safety in hospital and staff contact me about their safety in the workplace. I really welcome the reassurances that you have given here this evening, Minister.

As the weeks have gone on, this has been a major issue. When we hear news like this around a COVID outbreak, it obviously raises concerns. Daisy Hill has been without A&E for six months. I have been liaising with the trust on many occasions, and I really appreciate those engagements. Can you confirm today that this COVID outbreak will have no implication for the reopening of A&E in the next few weeks?

Mr Swann: I thank the Minister for her concern, but I am reluctant to join the two issues specifically together. The Southern Trust has given specific timelines for opening the facility at Daisy Hill. It has been delayed, I think, and that has been communicated to elected Members. I have not received any update that it will be delayed further. A number of staff are off self-isolating, but that should be complete within the 14-day period, so the new date should be reinforced. I will check that with the trust and get back to the Member and other Members who are participating in today's questions to provide that reassurance or an update.

Ms S Bradley: I add my name to the condolences offered to all families who have lost loved ones due to COVID-19. I welcome the Minister coming to the House, because words of reassurance are needed. Specifically, can the Minister assure the patients, their families and the staff that all of the areas in Daisy Hill hospital that have been affected by COVID-19 have been subject to a deep clean under the instructions of the Public Health Agency on infection control? He mentioned that towards the latter end of his answer, but could he elaborate on that, please?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member on that specific point, because I am led to believe this afternoon that that is an issue that staff have raised. I am seeking assurances from the PHA and from the trust. I have been informed that staff have carried out enhanced environmental cleaning five times a day in those areas and that, at the end of the outbreak, which is determined by the Public Health Agency, there will be a terminal clean. I will seek further reassurance from the Public Health Agency and the Southern Trust to ensure that that is being done to the extent that the PHA requires it to be done.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber. Are we getting to the point where some of the health services in this hospital may need to be moved to a neighbouring facility to accommodate this? I am concerned that some people may not turn up for appointments if they are concerned about hygiene control in this location.

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point. It goes back to Mr McNulty's supplementary question regarding how we reassure the members of the public who have to present as patients and the staff. It is the job of the House collectively to provide that reassurance and encouragement to patients to come forward. If anyone is concerned, they should contact those who are organising their appointments, whether that is the consultant or

the doctors, to make sure that that reassurance can be provided. I am not aware that the Southern Trust is indicating that they want to relocate any of their services because of the outbreak, but, again, I will check that now that the Member has raised the issue, because it is an important one. We need as many people presenting for medical treatment as is possible during this period with the surges of COVID-19.

Mr Chambers: Minister, we all view hospitals as a place of safety and recovery, and we probably do not expect our loved ones to come into contact with something like COVID in that setting. However, hospitals suffer infections from time to time — MRSA and gastric infections spring to mind — and it does not necessarily represent negligence on the part of anyone. Does the Minister agree that it is impossible to completely exclude infections in hospitals, and can he assure the House that everyone involved is taking every step to mitigate this infection in Daisy Hill Hospital?

Mr Swann: I think that the immediate priority in the Southern Trust, working with the Public Health Agency here, and, as I said, that in England, is to ensure that their management of the outbreak is to the highest standard and to share that learning across our health and social care system. I will also take the opportunity again to reassure the staff and those who are working through these unprecedented times that, in caring for the patients and the loved ones, they are supported in their work and the daily challenges that they are presented with. As I said, this is not about apportioning blame; this is about taking robust steps to ensure the future safeguarding of our staff and the patients currently in the hospital and in all our hospital settings while also supporting the families.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for coming to the House to answer our concerns. Again, I add my thoughts and prayers for the families of those who have lost their loved ones at Daisy Hill and Craigavon hospitals in recent times. You have said that 21 staff have COVID and 67 staff are self-isolating: how is that level of staff loss affecting the day-to-day running of the hospital?

Mr Swann: The Member will be aware and under no doubt that, with that level of absence, there are adverse effects and there are certain services that are being stepped back. The trust is doing all that it can through reallocating staff and the utilisation of agency staff to make sure that we can deliver as many services as is safely possible at this minute in time. However, it is about making sure that we get the staff who have tested positive and those who are self-isolating supported during this period of self-isolation so that we can get them back to work safely.

Mr O'Dowd: Minister, on 7 September I asked an urgent oral question to you in the Chamber. On that day, you said to me that you were going to establish a serious adverse incident in Craigavon Area Hospital and that a chair would be appointed. At that stage, four people had died as a result of the outbreak on the haematology ward in Craigavon: it is now six. Five are dead as a result of the outbreak at Daisy Hill. The serious adverse incident has not been established and the chair has not been appointed. Does the Minister agree that time is not on our side? He has said that it is not the time to apportion blame — I agree with him — but something has gone wrong. A person, a process or equipment has let the system down, and, unless we get the serious incident investigation up

and going, we will not know, which means that this could be repeated somewhere else.

Mr Swann: The Member brought the urgent oral question back, and I know that he has an adjournment debate tomorrow afternoon on this subject.

With regard to the serious adverse incident, the important bit is getting the right independent chair. As I said, they will be appointed by the end of this week. I have also asked that the Patient and Client Council in my Department makes sure that there is a support mechanism for the families and staff who have to interact with the serious adverse incident. There is ongoing work through the PHA — through their inspection processes and their engagement with the trust and with the staff — to ensure that whatever learnings we need to do now are learned now. It is a matter of fact that the Chairperson of the Committee for Health has also raised these concerns.

The Member is right: there is no point in waiting until the SAI is complete; it is about learning what we can do now. That is why the PHA has engaged with Public Health England, which has seen similar outbreaks in similar conditions in hospitals across its jurisdiction, something that we did not see in the first wave. So, there are learnings there to be brought across. We are implementing them now. I can assure the Member that we and the trust are doing all that we physically and practically can to ensure that this does not happen again anywhere in Northern Ireland.

6.15 pm

Mr Buckley: I, too, would like to place on record my condolences to the families affected by this COVID-19 outbreak. Inevitably, as with other Members here, my attention turns also to the staff and the staffing pressures and, I hope, their ability to cope with what will come, even with general winter pressures.

Will the Minister provide an assessment of current health and social care workforce capacity within the Southern Trust, in light of the COVID-19 outbreaks? Will he outline what mitigations he will put in place to ensure that associated staff absences will not adversely impact patient safety or provision of vital front-line services?

Mr Swann: Again, in response to the Member, I do not have the specific, detailed figures with me, but I ask him to reflect on the answer that I gave to his party colleague Mr Irwin. It is about making sure that any provision of service that we deliver is done safely. Therefore, with the level of staff absence due to self-isolation, which is the right thing for the staff to do, there will be some downturn in service provision, but the trust is doing all that it can to ensure that that is minimal and that there is as little disruption as possible to service delivery at both the Craigavon and Daisy Hill hospital sites.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for coming in to give us his answers and, in particular, for his comments on rapid learning. Given the bereavements that we have seen, and I extend my condolences to every one of the families impacted, will the Minister outline what specific bereavement support and guidance has been put in place, both for those who have lost loved ones and those who are continuing to experience the impact of the disease and whose loved ones also need support?

Mr Swann: The Chairperson of the Health Committee raises a point about the crucial support mechanism that the health service does have to provide. As I said, I engaged with the Southern Trust — with the CEO and the chair — with regard to the initial outbreak in Craigavon to make sure that they brought in additional resources, not just to support the families but to support the staff as well, because this is a very challenging time as they manage this outbreak and the implications of what has happened. I have also asked the Patient and Client Council whether there is a role or remit for it to provide an independent or secondary support mechanism, should there be families or staff who want to avail themselves of a service or a listening ear outside the trust.

Mr Speaker: Members that concludes this item of business. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

Justice

COVID-19: Restrictions in the Holylands

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice what action she has taken to prevent breaches of COVID-19 regulations in the Holylands area of Belfast.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members that if they wish to ask a supplementary question they must continually rise in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary.

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The scenes that we have been witnessing in the Holylands area not just over recent weeks but for a number of years now have been a cause of real distress and anxiety for residents. It is a problem that predates the coronavirus pandemic but which has been exacerbated by it since it is now putting people's health in danger.

I have no hesitation in condemning such irresponsible and inconsiderate behaviour, whether it is by people living in the area or by others coming into the area for entertainment. I welcome the actions taken by the PSNI, Belfast City Council and others to deal with those caught breaching the public health regulations and making residents' lives a misery.

The Executive have collective responsibility to encourage people to comply with the COVID-19 restrictions, whether those are contained in guidance or given legal effect through regulations. Enforcement of public health restrictions is not the sole responsibility of my Department, nor am I, as Minister of Justice, leading this important piece of work.

A working group was recently set up by the Executive to assist in its response to compliance and enforcement, which is a cross-cutting matter. The working group is led by junior Ministers in the Executive Office for that reason. It held its first meeting on Wednesday 16 September. My Department is represented at senior official level, alongside a number of other Departments and statutory agencies.

Partnership working between all the relevant agencies is crucial at both strategic and local level to deliver a swift and coordinated response to problematic behaviour, and

I assure the Member that I and my Department will play a full part in that.

Mr Beattie: I genuinely thank the Minister for coming along because I know that she has a lot going on at this moment in time. I totally agree with her that these COVID breaches have their genesis in antisocial behaviour in the Holylands, which has been going on for an awful long time. Although I am not from Belfast, I have watched the residents being absolutely tortured by what is going on there.

I note that the DOJ did a review of antisocial behaviour in 2018, but we are still waiting for the output of that. I also note that Part 5 of the Criminal Justice (NI) Order 2008 allows for the police to stop antisocial behaviour due to excess alcohol in an area listed by a council, yet it has never used it. The Minister could legislate for public space petition orders, but she has not done so. Therefore, the question is: what has the Minister done and what measures has she brought before the Executive COVID enforcement working group, which I believe she should be heading and attending?

Mrs Long: With respect to the Member, the composition of the working group was not a matter for the Department of Justice; it was a matter for the Department of Health and the Executive Office, so I suggest that perhaps that is something that he should take up with them.

In terms of what we have brought forward, we have been facilitating the police to ask for additional powers where those are required. We have asked them specifically if they need additional actions taken, and, to date, where they have required additional powers, we have sought to have those implemented. However, they have not been asking for additional powers because many of the health regulations are effective in controlling what happens in people's homes. That is a very hard area for the police to have control over. This is a point that has been made repeatedly by the Executive, namely that we rely not on enforcement but on people being willing to comply with those regulations.

The complex issues in the Holylands go way beyond simply the coronavirus regulations. They extend into antisocial and, sometimes, criminal behaviour, and the police have been acting to deal with those issues in terms of criminality — there have been arrests — and also breaches of the coronavirus regulations.

Mr Givan: The vast majority of people in Northern Ireland will follow these regulations and, indeed, do not need the law to get them to act with common sense, but where regulations are being used as the tool to best combat COVID-19, then if they are going to be implemented, for them to have any credibility, they need to be enforced. Where there are blatant breaches of the COVID regulations, like the Bobby Storey funeral or like what we have seen in the Holylands, it is vital that the police then act and enforce those regulations. What confidence does the Minister have that the PSNI are effectively policing these regulations when we have blatant breaches occurring?

Mrs Long: As the Chair of the Committee, the Member will know that it is not my responsibility to answer for or on behalf of the Chief Constable on operational matters. That is a matter that the Member would be best to take up with the Chief Constable directly or via one of his colleagues on the Policing Board, because that is the right forum in which

to hold the police to account. I am accountable for the actions that are taken by the Department of Justice, not by the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

However, I would direct the Member to the figures that are in the public domain on the work that has been done on enforcement. Some 116 COVID 1 notices — £60 fines — were handed out over the weekend and approximately 203 COVID notices have been handed out since 1 September. The PSNI have confirmed that most of those notices have been given out following attendance at houses where there have been disturbances. However, given that up to 15 people can meet outside, in larger crowds of people, it can be very difficult to distinguish one group of 15 from another. That is something that the Executive needs to return to in due course.

Of course, the difficulty with this all is trying to balance public health and civil liberties issues. As you rightly said, most people abide by it because they believe that it is the right thing to do, and it would be, I think, an unfortunate consequence if we were to penalise those who obey the restrictions and the law, simply because a few concerted individuals make an effort not to do so.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answers up to now. I agree with her that it is a cross-departmental and cross-agency issue for all those involved. Since the Minister has answered that part of the question, does she have any update on any conversations that she has had with the landlords in the area and what those have amounted to? Of course, the residents in the area are suffering. Are they being kept up to date by the various agencies, including, in particular, the Department, about what is going on?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for the issues that he has raised. He will be aware of the working group on the Holylands that Belfast City Council chairs to try to address those issues. It encompasses many of the agencies that he mentioned.

Since Friday, there has been a subgroup — a very focused subgroup — that is working on the COVID regulations and how those can be addressed in the current circumstances. Council officers — night-time noise officers, safer neighbour officers and ASB officers — are working together to report to the police. For example, noise offences can be followed up after the event, but COVID breaches will take precedence.

It is also clear that the universities have a responsibility and a role and, as I have said publicly today, I believe that landlords have a responsibility. If you have tenants who are causing a persistent and ongoing nuisance, not only to other full-time residents of the area but to other students who are there to study and not to be on a wrecking mission in that community, it would be completely unfair if that was allowed to continue. They are stakeholders in that community, they gain rent from those properties and they should be robust in dealing with their tenants where they are creating a nuisance or engaging in criminal activity. I would hope that landlords would engage positively and constructively with other agencies in the same way that the council and other residents' groups have done to date.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome the Minister coming to the House and the question being asked. No one wants to demonise students, but it is clear that, in the Holylands, a group of students have behaved terribly in relation to

the restrictions. I ask that the group that has been set up, as well as looking at the urgent issues around COVID enforcement, looks at many of the longer-term questions that have plagued inner-south Belfast and the Holylands neighbourhood, including the appalling behaviour of some of the HMO owners and some of the deeper cultural issues around student behaviour in that area. I know that it is not just in her Department's bailiwick, but can the Minister and the Executive look more broadly at turning that into a high-level, long-term group to look at issues in the Holylands?

Mrs Long: To be clear, the groups that have been set up under the auspices of the Executive are there to look specifically at the coronavirus regulations and the enforcement of them, which is an important but only one small part of the overall picture. It is important to recognise that we should not assume that one group is responsible for all the problems. It is not all students. In fact, the police have indicated to us that many of those who have received notices are not students at either of our universities, but are drawn to the area because there are students there and go on the rampage while they are there.

They are often visitors rather than residents.

6.30 pm

It is therefore a complex area, and one for which an approach needs to be taken forward. As someone who previously sat on Belfast City Council, I would argue very strongly, however, that the council is by far the best place for that approach to be taken forward, because it has many of the ongoing levers for planning; for enforcement of noise and statutory nuisance; for dealing with waste, which has also been a major problem in the area; and for all the other behaviours. The council is the right vehicle to take forward that longer-term approach, which is absolutely necessary. I absolutely agree with the Member on that.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, can you provide us with information on what your Department's role and responsibilities, if any, are on the new enforcement group?

Mrs Long: Yes. A number of new enforcement groups have been set up. First and foremost, a group has been set up by the Executive at a strategic level. That ministerial-led group is already working on looking at collaboration and operational challenges. The focus in that case has been on discussing the best mechanism for the provision of public health information to inform enforcement activity. It involves the PSNI, the local council, the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the relevant Departments, including my own. Indeed, the Executive have also been working on a number of other subgroups, which look at reviewing relaxations, restrictions on travel and the hospitality sector, as well as the weekly four-nations stocktake. We all have an enforcement focus on those subgroups.

The Executive also agreed that a new ministerial subgroup would be established, chaired by TEO junior Ministers, on compliance and enforcement, and it met for the first time on Wednesday 16 September. The discussion at that meeting centred on the current challenges in the Holylands. We have a DOJ representative at senior level on that group, which also includes the Minister of Health, a member from the PSNI, representatives from the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE), the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Scientific Adviser, and, as I say, representatives from DFC and TEO information service.

Ms Bailey: It is good to hear that the Minister has acknowledged that this is a long-term problem for the area. That problem is heightened by the added pressures and dangers from COVID. The Health Minister told the House earlier today that over 50 notices have been issued in the past few days in the Holylands area. That is good news. I certainly pity the fool who would go ahead with a house party in the area these days.

I ask the Minister whether she plans to be on the ground to experience at first hand the true extent of the antisocial and criminal behaviours that need to be dealt with in the area in the long term.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for her question. I am not sure that it is wise for more people to be on the streets rather than fewer when we are asking people to take the COVID regulations seriously.

I am well aware of the problem. I served on Belfast City Council for over 10 years. Throughout that time, this was a major problem. I have visited the area many times. Our party headquarters is in the centre of the area. My colleague who is an MLA for the area is regularly on the ground to see what people are going through. We do not need to add more footfall to the area. I think that I can rely on those who are there to enforce the regulations to do so responsibly. I have met the residents many times on the issue. It is hugely frustrating that young people who have the privilege, and it is a privilege, of being able to go to university, of being able to study and of being able to further their life are behaving in such an inconsiderate and selfish manner. I have to say that we all understand what it is to be a student and to have fun. We have all been there, although that may be hard to believe when you look at some of us now. The problem here is not that young people are going to wake up tomorrow morning with a bad hangover; rather, they are going to wake up with a criminal record that marks them out for the rest of their life. They need to get a grip.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much, Minister, for coming to speak to us this evening. You have outlined a plethora of responses to do with the Holylands issue. You yourself have shown a considerable amount of knowledge of the issues that have been affecting the Holylands for a very long time. What we all think that this needs is senior leadership, a ministerial direction and somebody with your experience to take personal charge of this. Will you commit to getting it moving and taking charge of the issue yourself?

Mrs Long: I am delighted to hear that the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party has such faith in me as an individual to be able to turn around such a long-standing problem in the Holylands. I point out to him, however, that the danger of the Minister taking on the issue is that people then focus entirely on police enforcement. That is what happens when the Minister of Justice takes responsibility for something. It is not a matter simply for the PSNI. Councils have responsibility for such matters as night-time noise. Belfast City Council has a night-time noise service, safer-neighbourhood officers and a houses in multiple occupancy unit. Queen's University, through its community engagements, is working with a wide range of partners on how it is going to return students. It is also looking at what sanctions will be applied to those students who receive penalty notices. The University of Ulster is also engaging

with students who are living in problematic properties, and has maintained a presence on the ground throughout.

I am flattered that the Member believes that I could turn the issue around by taking leadership of the group, but I will resist the temptation to step into the shoes of my colleagues in the Executive Office whose job is to coordinate those cross-cutting matters.

Mr Dunne: I, too, thank the Minister for coming here this evening. We were shocked at the behaviour seen in the Holylands. What discussion has the Minister had with the Chief Constable around the consideration of cordoning off the area for a short time and restricting access to only residents and students who can prove that they are legitimate tenants with, perhaps, documentation from their landlord?

Mrs Long: I have had no conversations with the Chief Constable about that matter. To introduce some kind of a cordon sanitaire around the Holylands would be incredibly difficult, given the transient nature of the population, the multiplicity of businesses that operate in that place by daytime and the number of services that operate there in the evening. However, I have talked at length with the Chief Constable about the enforcement and antisocial behaviour issues in the area. It is a conversation that I have had with previous Chief Constables.

The issue is not going to be easily resolved, and none of us should assume that it will be, but the coronavirus regulations provide an extra layer of challenge, as well as an extra opportunity to drive home to young people the risk that they are taking with their health. As I said previously, this is not just high jinx. People's property has been damaged, wing mirrors have been kicked off cars and windows have been smashed. It not minor and trivial. It has a significant impact on not just the residents who live there permanently, but other students who are there with a view to getting an education, not a criminal record.

Mr Frew: This is an activity that has blighted the area for many years. It is the case — it is true — that you are asking the police to police living rooms and gardens. Is it not the case that messaging must do the job in order to get compliance? Is that message shot to pieces when the Minister's Sinn Féin Executive colleagues wilfully and brutally flaunt the regulations and do not apologise or take responsibility for doing so? How does the Minister, who is the Justice Minister and a member of the Executive, fix that problem and give a concerted message?

Mrs Long: My recollection is that the incident in question has been apologised for. I ask the Member to speak to his colleagues who are displaying a deep and profound resistance to wearing masks, for example, and to following the other health advice that is being offered, because that behaviour is unhelpful. It is not just the Executive who have responsibilities in these issues, but every elected representative. Therefore I say, gently, to the Member that he should look at some of his colleagues who have been anything but exemplary in that regard.

Mr T Buchanan: Minister, thank you for being here this evening to discuss the issue. You place a lot of blame on landlords. They may have some responsibility, but surely the bulk of responsibility lies with the tenant who signed the tenancy agreement and signed up to all the issues relating to that agreement. Therefore the responsibility is on the tenant more than the landlord. It is the tenant's

responsibility to adhere to what is on the tenancy agreement, and to the COVID regulations.

Mrs Long: I have no problem in saying that it is entirely the responsibility of the tenant to adhere to the COVID regulations and to abide by their tenancy agreements. When they fail to do so, we look to enforcement. We have talked about the role that councils, the police and universities can play in enforcement. We are, therefore, looking at a multi-agency approach. I see no reason why landlords should not be part of that multi-agency approach, given that huge numbers of students are residing in those properties and are in the area because they have tenancies, and many of those who come to stay in the area are staying in those properties with their friends. There is a serious issue for landlords to address. You are absolutely right to say that it is not their fault that this is happening but they must take responsibility for those elements where they can have a positive impact.

That is a community in which they have invested by buying a home. It is also a community in which they have their business and make their money in the rents that they receive. They are invested in that community and should play a role, along with everyone else who is a stakeholder, in trying to improve the situation for all residents. Let us be clear: this is as much for the students as it is for the full-time residents of that neighbourhood.

Mr Speaker: Members, that concludes this item of business.

Adjourned at 6.40 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 22 September 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McGlone] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr McGrath: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Last week, the Speaker made his views known about press conferences and information being made known in press conferences rather than to the House. That was on the back of a Business Committee meeting where the views of many Members were articulated that, because of the nature and complexity of the rules that are being introduced and the lack of clarity in the information that is being given, we stated that the House would be the best place to make announcements about them. Has there been any further action or response from the Speaker's announcement to the First Minister and deputy First Minister last week?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): While the Member's point is perhaps not a point of order, it would be a matter of good practice and professionalism for the Assembly. I do not have anything to report on that, but I will get it checked out, because it is to be expected as good practice. Thank you for raising it.

Executive Committee Business

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The next items of business are motions to approve a total of five statutory rules, all of which relate to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations. There will be a single debate on all five motions. I will repeat that: a single debate on all five motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion, and I will then call on the Minister to move it. The Minister will commence the debate on all the motions. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call on the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion. That process will be repeated for each of the remaining statutory rules. If that is clear, I shall proceed.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I beg to move

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

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

Mr Swann: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. As you said, there are five motions before the Assembly, and, with your permission, I will address each of them in my opening remarks.

I will begin by outlining for Members the changes that have been brought about by these regulations, so I will begin with the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. At the conclusion of the fifth review of the need for the restrictions and requirements in the health protection regulations, the Executive agreed that a fresh set of regulations should be made for the purpose of retaining those restrictions and requirements that were considered still to be necessary and clarifying powers for the imposition of new restrictions should the need arise. The subsequent amendment (No. 2) regulations were then made on 23 July. They revoked and replaced the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, including all previous amendments that were made to them. The regulations required the closure of certain businesses, services and premises listed in the schedule,

except for limited permitted use. The regulations imposed restrictions on gatherings, both indoor and outdoor, of more than 30 people, which were not permitted to take place except for gatherings organised or operated for cultural, entertainment, recreational, outdoor sports, social, community, educational, work, legal, religious or political purposes where the organiser or operator of the gathering undertakes a risk assessment and complies with the relevant guidance to limit virus transmission.

The regulations also imposed restrictions on gatherings in private dwellings, which, outdoors, were to be of no more than 30 people and, indoors, were to be of no more than 10 people from no more than four different households. The regulations are required to be reviewed every 28 days, with the first review taking place by 21 August. The regulations are due to expire after six months, which will be 23 January 2021.

I now move to the second motion. The Executive have been clear from the start that our response to COVID-19 is informed strongly by the advice that we receive from the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA), with health protection at its heart. In line with that, in considering the arguments for and against the use of face coverings by the general public, the Executive agreed to the introduction of the mandatory requirement for passengers on public transport to wear face coverings. That requirement was brought into effect on 10 July by way of an amendment to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 were then made on 23 July. Those regulations replicated exactly the face coverings provisions in the original coronavirus restrictions regulations as amended so that they sat outside but alongside the new Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, which were made at the same time. They require members of the public, subject to limited exceptions, to wear a face covering on public transport. The regulations are required to be reviewed within six months, which is by January 2021, and are due to expire after 12 months, which takes us to July 2021.

In the light of the evolving evidence and proposals to relax restrictions in relation to indoor interactions and the pausing of shielding, the Executive subsequently agreed to introduce the use of face coverings in indoor settings where interactions with individuals from other households take place. The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 were then made on 31 July and were commenced on 10 August by way of a commencement order that was made on 7 August. The face coverings amendment regulations require members of the public, subject to limited exceptions, to wear a face covering whilst in an inside relevant place, focusing on settings where there is retail sale of goods or services, including in a shop or shopping centre.

The Executive set up a cross-departmental working group on entertainment issues to address the risks associated with certain activities taking place, such as singing and dancing, the effects of loud music, and outdoor larger event management. The group has discussed the situation for the arts sector. The Department for Communities proposed that theatres and concert halls be allowed to

reopen for the purposes of rehearsal and live recordings without audiences, which would also enable staff to return to work. The Executive agreed to that proposal. The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 were then made on 7 August. The two main changes that were introduced allow a theatre or concert hall to be used solely for rehearsal or live recording, in both cases without an audience, from 8 August and to permit sports in indoor arenas not capable of seating 5,000 or more spectators from 10 August.

The Executive were mindful from the start of the COVID pandemic of the impact on family ties and social interactions. This is why the Executive gradually eased arrangements for gatherings within domestic settings. However, in response to the rising number of cases since July and due to the particular transmission risks associated with people gathering in these settings, the Executive agreed to reduce the number of people who could meet in domestic and garden settings. The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 were made on 25 August. In summary, the main changes that have been introduced by these regulations and amendments are to reduce the maximum number who could participate in an indoor or outdoor gathering not at a private dwelling from 30 to 15 people, with some exceptions; to reduce the maximum number who could participate in an outdoor gathering at a private dwelling from 30 people to 15 people; to reduce the maximum number of people who could participate in an indoor gathering in a private dwelling from 10 people from four households to six people from two households; and to permit up to 10 people to attend a wedding or civil partnership ceremony indoors at a private dwelling where one of the participants is terminally ill. The restrictions on gatherings and those in relation to private dwellings do not apply to a funeral or wake, but those involved must comply with the guidance issued by the Department of Health.

The nature of these debates is that I take the opportunity to outline some of the further changes that have been agreed since the regulations that are subject to debate today. In previous debates, Members have raised concerns about the time lag between the Executive making decisions and the opportunity for the Assembly to hear and debate those. I am taking the opportunity today, then, to update the Assembly on decisions recently made by the Executive. These have included decisions on soft play areas, which have been allowed to open from 13 September; introduction of local restrictions on 16 September in protected areas that were specifically defined by postcodes; and confirmation on 21 September of an Executive decision to allow wet pubs to open with effect from 23 September.

Given the ongoing rise in the number of cases over the past few days, the Executive agreed yesterday that it is now necessary to widen the local restrictions to cover the whole of Northern Ireland. This will take effect from 6.00 pm today. The Executive are keeping all options open, especially now that we are at a critical juncture and need to act quickly to try to bring the rate of transmission down. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Bhreathnaigh an Coiste Sláinte na rialacha reachtúla ar an 10 Meán Fómhair. The Committee

considered all five statutory rules on 10 September. There is an unfortunate irony to our discussing today the relaxation of restrictions announced so recently as we are now aware of the changing direction that is required to tackle the current rise in the number of cases. Nevertheless, I think that it is important to put on record the Committee's scrutiny of the regulations under debate. Key issues from compliance to enforcement and communication require consideration whatever the nature and level of restrictions. We hope that discussions to date can inform the forthcoming regulations and their implementation.

The Chief Environmental Health Officer (CEHO) summarised their content and reminded the Committee that the short time frame for bringing the SRs into force resulted from the need to ensure that restrictions are only in place for as long as is strictly necessary. I turn first to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations as amended. The Committee had previously acknowledged the complexity of the previous coronavirus restrictions, which had become a lengthy list of exceptions to the general restriction on leaving home. The Committee heard that the newly restructured regulations, as amended, revoke the previous restrictions and provide instead a list of businesses, services and premises that are required to remain closed. In addition, we were advised that the review period for these regulations is 28 days. We discussed the range of purposes for which a gathering may be arranged, subject to certain conditions. On enquiring about what was excluded from the apparently very wide-ranging list of permitted purposes for a gathering, the CEHO advised us that this approach has been taken to confirm what was permissible given the revocation of previous restrictions.

He highlighted that the provisions require an organiser to conduct a risk assessment if numbers exceed those specified.

10.45 am

Committee members conveyed that there was a degree of frustration on the part of the public in trying to keep up with frequent changes and understand the rationale for certain rules. People have found it hard, for example, to fathom why, at a certain point, it was safe to go to a restaurant, where there could be large numbers of people, but not safe for one person to visit a relative in their home. The Chief Environmental Health Officer stated that there was evidence that gatherings in homes presented a greater risk, possibly because business environments are subject to guidance and various measures that make them less risky, whereas behaviour in our homes tends to be more relaxed, and we all know that. When we go into our family home, we touch many more surfaces — we put on the kettle, and we open the cupboard to find things — and there is evidence that that is causing further spread.

Public messaging on this is so important, and it is a matter to which we will, no doubt, return. Public understanding will be key to sustaining support for the rules in the coming months. The CEHO confirmed that the regulations are kept under constant review and that renewed efforts were being made to bring all the guidance together in one place on nidirect, which is a welcome step.

Further to questions around funeral arrangements, the CEHO confirmed that funerals had been taken out of the regulations and were instead subject to detailed statutory

guidance developed through significant engagement with stakeholders to seek to address the sensitivities of that matter.

The distinction between what is covered by legislation and what is covered in guidance or statutory guidance arose in a discussion on face coverings. The director of public health advised that the regulations required face coverings on public transport, in shops and in shopping centres, subject to exemptions. In other indoor spaces, face coverings are strongly advised in guidance where a 2-metre distance cannot be maintained. Staff working in a shop are not required specifically to wear face coverings, but employers may decide that that is necessary.

In our discussion on 10 September, student accommodation was already a worry, and the serious concerns of permanent residents were put to officials, as were the risks associated with large student houses both for the students and, if they return home at weekends, for their families. The CEHO confirmed that no specific regulations to address student accommodation were in development at that time, because each house or apartment becomes a student's residential address for the purpose of the regulations, which apply equally to such houses and should be adhered to. The Committee has asked to be kept updated on the working group that has been established to work through all of those issues.

When the Committee enquired about the requirement for risk assessments for certain gatherings, the CEHO emphasised that the Department's guidance would direct an organiser to consider the potential risks, depending on the nature of the gathering, and to put in place reasonable measures to address them, such as provision for handwashing, one-way systems etc. He advised that the health and safety website has a template to assist. On that occasion, the CEHO could not provide detail on the application of risk assessment in school settings but confirmed that the CMO and the Chief Scientific Adviser were working with the education sector on that.

We also explored the level of public compliance with regulations and their enforcement. A degree of concern was expressed about the low level of mask-wearing in certain settings, such as petrol stations, although positive views were expressed on compliance in retail settings more generally. We have all witnessed how people have a mask on when doing a big shop, but, when they pop in and out to pick something up, they do not. That presents a risk that we should all be conscious of. On the compulsory use of face coverings, the director of public health acknowledged that the list of exceptions was wide but expressed the view that the approach of encouraging personal judgement was more likely to be successful in driving up compliance than seeking to be more prescriptive. She also confirmed that visors were not regarded as face coverings for the purpose of the legislation.

The Committee noted that there was provision for fixed penalty notices and court proceedings that could lead to a fine at level 5 on the standard scale. The Chief Environmental Health Officer advised us that the different provisions were there to provide options to the PSNI for lesser and more serious breaches, although their approach remained to advise and encourage adherence before moving to enforcement. The Committee requested further information on the enforcement of the regulations

to date, and perhaps the Minister will say a little more about that in his closing remarks.

In closing my remarks as Chair, I confirm that, despite the concerns raised, the Committee agreed to support the confirmation of the regulations. We look forward to ongoing engagement with the Department to ensure that we respond promptly, proportionately and on an evidence-led basis to the challenges ahead and that changes are communicated effectively throughout the community.

I will now make a few remarks in my role as Sinn Féin spokesperson for health. We understand that these are unprecedented and extremely challenging times. Normally, I do not think that anyone in the House would consider regulations and powers such as these, but they are necessary. We need to keep it in mind that individuals and communities are directly affected by bereavements and struggle with the restrictions and the lack of work opportunities and threats to business. We are all conscious of those concerns.

Although the regulations came into force a while ago, we still see a need for regulation that is proportionate and measured. It has been said before, but it is worth noting that the regulations have since been amended and overtaken by other regulations. However, it is important to fully reflect on them today.

Tá a fhios againn cad é a oibríonn: an scaradh sóisialta, do lámha a ní. We know what works: it is the COVID basics of social distancing, washing your hands and good respiratory hygiene. We know that that can have a positive impact on the spread of the virus. I will make a plea about face coverings: I encourage everyone to remember to wear a face mask. The wearing of a face covering is more productive than not wearing one, and it is something that we can all do for ourselves and each other.

We also need to keep it in mind that, when the Assembly introduces restrictions and duties, it must also provide support, whether that be providing masks or supporting the delivery of vital public services. I am conscious today of the situation at Daisy Hill Hospital and Craigavon Area Hospital. We have many front-line workers fighting the virus every day, and they deserve our support and encouragement. Hospitals are dealing with COVID cases, and we are worried about them. However, we will support them to get the equipment, guidance, policies and principles that they need to protect themselves and their patients.

It is one thing to put in place restrictions and the means to enforce them, but it is sometimes more difficult to provide a comprehensive system of support. Our response should be led by public health, and I welcome any co-operation between the health agencies and the PSNI that emphasises that message.

Finally, we could easily get stuck into the details and the exemptions. It is important to keep in mind the real and lasting impact that the regulations have on members of the public, but we must also bear in mind the risk of further spread of the virus and work together to do what we can about that.

Mrs Cameron (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Health): It is useful to have had that more technical Committee scrutiny detailed by the Committee Chair. I have no intention of repeating what has been said.

We have come a long way since the last time we progressed regulations through the House. It is worth reflecting on some aspects of the journey that we have been on recently. First, I pay tribute to our schoolchildren, school leaders and staff. It has been a difficult six months, but, as a society, we all felt that a little bit of normality had resumed when we saw the kids walking to school with their school bags on and when we saw the first day photographs on social media of children in their fresh uniforms. Our prayers are for their safety, that they can catch up on the valuable time lost in their education and enjoy the company of their classmates.

Obviously, for our business community, this remains a challenging time. I think specifically of those who operate wet bars, soft play areas and those in our arts, travel, tourism and hospitality sectors. We need to look at what we can do and what we can ask our Government at Westminster to do to support those industries, as we know that, in the short term, for many, the difficulties of recent times will not ease.

I want to mention one specific area of the regulations and the current situation. There has been much focus on the so-called lockdown of certain areas and, from today, that will apply to all of Northern Ireland. This is not lockdown.

I know this is a source of great frustration for people and I urge the Minister to do all that he can to evidence to the public the need for the restrictions and to ensure that they are lifted at the earliest possible opportunity. They must not go any further than is absolutely necessary.

I welcome the allowance that a family of six who live under one roof will be allowed to meet a smaller number of people from one other household. It is right that children aged 12 and under, with evidence that they rarely transmit the disease, are discounted from that party of six figure. We ought not to discriminate against large families and we should adopt a similar common-sense approach, as has been the case in Scotland. In addition, I want to ask the Minister to confirm that households may “bubble” with one other family and to make clear what that means in practice — that it is not just for those who live alone, but covers, for example, my ability to “bubble” with my parents.

Adherence to the guidelines is vital if we are to combat the spread of the disease. We need to work with people as much as possible and, where common sense can apply, we ought to apply it. That is asking a lot of people who are already very weary, who crave normality and who are worried about family, finances and futures. If we are expecting the public at large to adhere to the guidelines, then those who breach them must be dealt with by the rule of law. The flaunting of the law, whether it is by the deputy First Minister at the Storey funeral, by triumphant GAA supporters invading a pitch in Dungannon or by students who believe that they know better, partying in the Holylands, the public are watching to see that the law is enforced. Failure to do so will further erode public adherence to the rules, just as those scandalous events have done.

As the Minister, the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer have said, we are once again facing a key period in the fight against COVID-19. Whilst prioritising that battle, we must not lose sight of the need to keep Northern Ireland open, to keep our health service open and to keep businesses and society open as much as we

possibly can. That is a fine balance and not an easy one. I urge the public to continue to follow the guidance; if we all do our bit, we can stave off the worst that the virus can do to our community, not just in relation to individual victims but in terms of wider societal harm.

Mr McGrath: Coronavirus, as we all know, remains in our community with spikes moving up and down. It is quite clear from the past few weeks that the current trajectory is upwards and that that will, eventually, result, if unchecked, in too many people contracting the virus and thus, maybe, needing hospitalisation and some, perhaps, needing ICU intervention. We know from our past experiences that that will result in people dying.

I do not envy the job of the Executive Ministers in trying to manage the response to the virus, although it increasingly appears that we have only one Minister responding to the issues. I wonder whether the First Minister and the deputy First Minister are now hiding because they cannot agree on the message that they need to be sending out. That was certainly evident to anybody that listened to the radio this morning.

The regulations that we have been presented with up to this point are very complex, confusing and, at times, contradictory by the time they make it to the Assembly and are grouped together. That always makes it a very difficult message to sell to the community. That is amplified by the fact that many of the regulations that we are talking about today will be out of date by 6:00 pm when the new rules and regulations come in. One of the regulations said that it was OK to go to Portugal and another one came in two weeks later to say that it was not OK. We know the ramifications that that had for our constituents who were caught out when they were over there.

Every time I have taken to my feet in this place to discuss the regulations, I have said that the matter of clarity is critical. A lack of clarity means a lack of certainty. When is the message going to get through that we need to have clear and simple messaging? The bottom line is that the communications strategy from the Executive is not working. The public are left to try to understand what the regulations mean, how they should interpret them, when they can or cannot hug their grandchildren or when they can or cannot stay with people during birth. They are not embracing the regulations because they are changed so often and they do not like that.

11.00 am

I ask that the Minister gives some update specifically on the Executive's communication strategy that is there to punch out the message in a clear and unequivocal way. I accept that this has probably been transferred to him in the last few days, rather than how it was carried out previously.

As I said, lack of clarity means lack of certainty, and I give an example. The announcement yesterday was made to the press, not to the House, as the Speaker suggested last week. I note that, yesterday, the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Health Minister were all in the House and we were sitting when the announcements were made. As all MLAs would undoubtedly have done, to try to help my constituents, I posted on social media a little snapshot of the new regulations and the changes. At the point of preparing for this debate, I have just short of 200 comments on that thread. They are not positive.

It has almost shocked me that, to a tee, they are not positive. I can understand the thread being peppered with an unhappy comment here, or disputed comment there, but it is comment after comment from people who do not like the regulations, do not want to see them or are totally confused and exasperated by them.

There are comments like, "I cannot have people in my house but I can take them to the bar?"; "How does this work with so many children in my classroom?"; or, as one constituent sums it up, "There needs to be a simple go-to place for the most up-to-date guidance." Each day, something new is said and wires are crossed, causing confusion. I appreciate the complexities of what is going on, but these announcements leave it open to individual interpretation.

As MLAs, we have done our job in delivering the message to the public, based on the messaging that we are presented with. How are we meant to sell the message when it is so unclear? How can we expect the public to adhere to something that is unclear, confusing and open to interpretation? The public are rightly frustrated and angry. It is becoming increasingly frustrating to have to say, time after time, that when decisions are taken by the Executive, we end up with 200 comments on social media streams, asking what this means for day-to-day life. How do we find out about this information, when we have to wait 28 days before the regulations come to the Floor of the Assembly?

What I am about to say, I say with no sense of satisfaction or enjoyment. The problem with simply going to the media could not have been illustrated more clearly than this morning. Not two hours ago, our First Minister and deputy First Minister took to the radio separately, with one giving her interpretation of the new regulations and the other giving hers, 30 minutes later. It is still early in the day but am sure that, by the end of it, we might see one of the parties' MPs give a further interpretation of those guidelines, with their expert views on the matter. Suffice to say, the First Minister and deputy First Minister were all over the place this morning.

As the public are asking relevant and appropriate questions of their representatives, it is high time that we got the opportunity to ask these questions in the Chamber and get answers from the Dispatch Box. I absolutely welcome that the Health Minister will take on that role. As evidenced here today, he is prepared to stand up, give a bit of clarity and get a bit of information to us so that we can ask questions. We were unable to get it from the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I hope that we continue to get it from the Minister of Health.

A plethora of regulations is presented to us. In their own time and way, the regulations were logical. I continue to support the decisions taken in the interests of public health but the issues of clarity, understanding and interpretation seriously need addressed. If the Health Minister can answer any of the questions I raise today, especially around messaging, it would be very welcome.

Mr Butler: I welcome the Health Minister here today as he brings these regulations — SRs, as we call them — before the Assembly. When he was Chief Whip and leader of the party, I saw less of him than you guys are seeing him in the Chamber. I do not say that to raise a smile. I say it because he seems to be the Executive Minister not only with the biggest portfolio but with the biggest responsibility, which

has been thrust on him, once again, by TEO deflecting work. I thank Mr McGrath for his comments on that. Let us get real, people: this is a crisis of monumental proportions, as the Health Minister laid out at the start of the pandemic.

The restrictions are somewhat old. I will refer to them — the Deputy Speaker will hold me to task if I do not — and it is important that we get our act together not only in the Assembly but in the Executive. Petty squabbling can be kept for another day, because the very lives of people across Northern Ireland depend on the leadership of people in the Chamber, whether you are an Executive Minister or an MLA. People follow our example, regardless of what they say on Facebook and Twitter, or what is said on the news, and the public beatings that we take. People really do watch and act on what we do, not on what we say.

I will turn to the regulations. We discredit and do a disservice to the population across Northern Ireland in its adherence to many of the rules and regulations that have been meted out, face coverings, in particular. Let us be honest: as has been said, it can be conflicting to read and interpret some of the regulations. I find it OK, and, through my office, I am able to answer many questions.

One of the problems that we face in 2020 is the threat of fake news. When you search posts on Facebook and the internet, it is almost impossible to find the right information. The posts are very believable. Stuff is shared with me, and I am sure that people send items to Members that look like regulations or advice, and could even be stamped, but which are desperately dangerous. Facebook and Twitter — they make enough money out of it — just like us, have a role to play in cleaning up their act and making sure that, at a time of crisis, people can access the best and most relevant information. In doing that, it is incumbent on us to ensure that we are not weeks and weeks late in bringing those regulations and messages to the people who require them. After all, they are our sons and daughters, our mothers and fathers, our relations, and the people who underpin business, education and the health service on which we rely.

When we give a message, as we do today — we are talking about regulations, many of which have been superseded — people will listen but be confused. That is why I plead with TEO to step up. There are four Ministers in that office. Four, not one: four. Why are they not here today? I do not get cross very often, but I am cross today. I do not believe that it should fall solely on the Health Minister's shoulders at a time of crisis.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I ask you to indulge me. I know a little bit — I always go back to it because I had 16 wonderful years in the Fire Service — about something called "span of control", which is the terminology used when you deal with a crisis or a big event. Everybody has a limited capacity to deal professionally with a certain amount of work, regardless of how good you are. That is why, in the Fire Service, in the Prison Service, in the Police Service, in nursing and in every profession, the workload is spread. It is to make sure that things do not fall through the cracks. This is not politics; this is people's lives. Let us get our act together. I want TEO to hear that loudly from the Chamber today. I hope that the Minister can address that. Perhaps he will square his shoulders and say, "No, Robbie, I am big enough. I can take it". I hope that he is humble enough to say, "No. I will accept all and every bit of help that I can get from every office". This is everybody's responsibility.

I will return to the issue of face coverings. In my role as education spokesperson, that is probably one area on which there has been a lot of debate recently with regard to teachers, pupils and the messaging from our scientific and medical officers about who does not need to wear a covering in certain circumstances. This is about risk mitigation. It is not just about risk assessment; it is about dynamic risk assessment. This is about balancing what we are building into our future, what we can keep open and to what we can expose our kids. I am not talking about coronavirus; I am talking about their education, their societal well-being and their mental health. That is why we need a collegiate voice from our Executive Office. That is why we need our First and deputy First Minister standing side by side, giving that message, not contradicting each other and knowing what each other is saying. That is what the people of this country deserve regardless of where they are from.

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: Absolutely.

Mr McGrath: The point that I was making earlier, and that you are reiterating here, is on the issue of not coming to this place to give the information. The press is incredibly important. It has very important questions to ask, but its members generally get only one question each across about half a dozen outlets. If Ministers come here, there are potentially 89 other people who can get up and ask questions, and we can drill right down into the detail of what people are contacting us about. That is why this place is the most important place to come to give the information because there is very little room to hide in here, whereas there is room to hide in a very controlled environment with the press.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for his intervention. I wholeheartedly agree because one of the things that was missing from here when we went into restricted Assembly business was that we had a reduction in written and oral questions. That is not the case now. We perhaps missed an opportunity in the summer when the mechanisms did exist. We could have come in here to bring in the regulations a number of weeks ago. We could have come in, in short turn, to do small amounts of business. Perhaps, as the Member has rightly said, that would have reduced the risk of conflicting and mixed messages.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: Absolutely.

Mr Sheehan: On that point, I know that people like to grandstand at times about that and say, "We should have come in over August. We should have come in over the summer". The agreement that we all made was that the staff in the Assembly also need a break. They had been working extremely hard from the time when the Assembly got back up and running. It is the case that many of them can take leave only when the Assembly is in recess. So let us forget about the grandstanding. Deal with the issues as they exist.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for his intervention, but I think that he is totally off skew. This is not grandstanding; it is stating facts. The Business Committee, on which I sit, agreed to those mechanisms if there was a need. I would suggest to the Member that there is a need because we are in a crisis situation. These are unparalleled and

unprecedented times. It is not grandstanding; it is not politics. It is the lives of my family, of your family and everybody in our communities. Really, could we not have come in for half a day? This is not days of work; this is a two-hour debate happening today. It is important that we do not grandstand, to be fair. It is important that we do not politic and thrash the life out of things that do not need to be discussed. This is about improving what we do. Ensuring that regulations like these come forward in good time to get the level of scrutiny that they deserve. Why? Because we need to give the public every single bit of confidence that we can. We need to show leadership, adhere to the restrictions ourselves and ensure that we set that example as political leaders and public servants.

Ms Bradshaw: I rise to support the health protection regulations as amended. Before I move to the substance of my speech, I would take exception to the comments made by Robbie Butler. I do not believe that these are petty squabbles. The concerns that I am going to raise very much reflect what my colleague on the Health Committee said, are not petty and we are not politicking. We are raising legitimate concerns on behalf of our constituents. This is a debating Chamber. We have every right to do that, so do not try to quash that. The Member said that it is almost impossible to find and access the relevant information, and that is the concern that we are raising today.

In this case, it is not quite as necessary as last time to point out that the regulations run profoundly contrary to my party's liberal instincts. As for the No. 2 regulations applying from 24 July, we have at least had them the right way around. They specifically make prohibitions on public health grounds rather than not allowing us to cross our front door without specific reason.

For all that, we remain in a situation in which civil liberties are remarkably constrained and we do not have constant scrutiny to ensure that that is absolutely necessary for the sake of public health. Because I am so annoyed, I will raise a point that came up at the Health Committee last week. We received notification that it was not always going to be possible to have a departmental official to come along and speak to us about the proposed health protection regulation changes. It is ludicrous that the scrutiny body for health protection regulations is not going to be able to get the draftsman of changes to come along to support its deliberations and its thinking around that.

We cannot shut down scrutiny just to protect a Minister; we are not going to do that.

11.15 am

Mr Butler: Will the Member take an intervention?

Ms Bradshaw: No, I will not. I took enough nonsense from your party over the weekend. Thank you.

If there was one advantage to how previous regulations were worded or implemented, it was simplicity. Everyone knew that they could cross their threshold for specific purposes only. As we have opened up, things have become more complex. What we are aiming for at all times is voluntary compliance. If enforcement becomes a significant issue, it is because we have taken a wrong turning. Voluntary compliance will come about if the rules are clear and if the reasons for them are provided in a transparent manner. It has to be said that there is nothing

in the announcements by the Executive Office and the Department of Health over the past 10 days or so that qualifies as either clear or transparent.

They have piled on more and greater confusion. On the one hand, restrictions were to be tightened; on the other, they were to be eased. We ended up with the farce of a press statement from the Department of Health that restrictions applied in certain areas while the annex to the press statement announced that they applied to certain other areas, too. Having spent a week trying to work out whether Castlereagh was in Belfast, we ended up having to include all of Northern Ireland. Providing such a confused response does not bode well for public confidence in what the Executive Office is doing with the regulations, nor for the practical likelihood of public compliance, not least since we have seen so many people who are unsure what the rules are and where they apply.

Communication is about creating understanding. None of what I am about to say is aimed at discouraging compliance — quite the opposite. However, the public needs to understand the rules, and the reasons for them, in order to comply with them. There should, at all times, be absolute clarity. If, for example, our concern is social gatherings in urban spaces, apply the rules to all social gatherings in all urban spaces. It should not have taken 10 days to work that out. What is more, make the rules simple, understandable and enforceable, as once we start trying to determine one rule for the work garage, another for the living room, and yet another for the garden, we have lost people.

I was not going to raise the issue of the Holylands, but, again, there was a side swipe at me about it in the Chamber yesterday. I have been raising the issue of the Holylands with the Health Minister and the Chief Medical Officer since the start of March. I chair and facilitate the Holyland and Lower Ormeau, HALO, group in the area and have been working with the residents for years. Therefore I am acutely aware of the issues there. I said that parties had been going on in houses since June. I misspoke. I meant that, once the restrictions started to lift and people could go back to their houses, the parties had resumed.

I have been receiving communication all morning from residents in the area and from people in the HALO group, because the parties were still happening last night. Six people were standing on one side of the garden wall, and there were people standing in the street. However, in order to avoid detection, they have now moved into the alleyways to have their parties. Despite all the words said in the Chamber in the past week about how compliance would be enforced, it is not happening.

As the Chair of the Health Committee pointed out, I asked, last week, if we could have guidance. Whether it is guidance for HMOs or for students, I do not care, but we have to have something that relates specifically to the people in that area. As I keep pointing out, whether in the Chamber, the Health Committee or in the media, we have up to nine people living in these houses and they are deemed to be one household. They go home at the weekend, play for their sports club or visit their granny. Many of them have to go home because they do not even have washing machines because of how the houses have been developed.

There are specific circumstances in the Holylands. Some of HMOs are occupied by members of the Roma community, many of whom work in meat-processing plants, and we know that there are specific vulnerabilities with those workplaces. Not least, then, we have the settled community in the area, and I know of residents in their 80s and 90s. It is a horrendous place. There is only one corner shop, young people go into it not wearing masks and not social distancing, and the local people are feeling incredibly vulnerable.

As I say, I do not appreciate getting side swipes in the Chamber because I continue to raise this issue. It affects not just my constituency; it affects the whole of this country.

I am also concerned by our inability to enforce guidance in any meaningful way. For example, people who have booked weddings for 200 guests face the choice of losing thousands of pounds of deposits or of proceeding with them, even when they recognise weddings to be at high risk. There is no specific rule that enables them to cancel in the interests of public safety and be assured of a refund. Risk assessments seem to consist too much of people marking their own homework. We need to consider whether guidance, based on sound scientific advice, should, in fact, be enforceable or at least whether events that are bound to breach it may be preventable.

As I have just referenced, even for face coverings, which is the topic of two regulations in this set, the rules are too complex. In most other jurisdictions, the rules are much simpler. As soon as you enter a public building, you are obliged to wear a face covering, with the exception of when you are seated to eat or drink, and, obviously, some people with health conditions will be exempt. At the minute, you need to wear a mask in a shop, but you do not need to wear one in a coffee shop. You need to wear one in a bar, but you do not need to wear it a restaurant or a hotel. That is overcomplicated, confusing and counterintuitive, but it does not need to be that way.

In conclusion, I think that there is still goodwill towards the Executive and the messaging, not least given the fact that people are still so supportive of our health service and other front-line workers and the sterling work that they do, but the missteps over the last few days have eroded confidence, and there is mass confusion now. With regard to these regulations and the guidance around them, we need to communicate better, with less confusion and more clarity, to deliver full compliance.

Mr Sheehan: We have been here before: we have discussed all these coronavirus regulations. This set has, by and large, already been overtaken by other regulations. I want to make a couple of important points about all the coronavirus legislation that we have brought forward in the Assembly, most of which has been draconian. Under normal circumstances, we would not be bringing legislation such as this to the House, and most of us certainly would not be supporting it.

There are two important aspects to all this. Paula just made the point that there needs to be clear, easily understood messaging that people can act on and that can be easily enforced. The other aspect to all this is that we are effectively asking the population to enter into a contract. We are going to introduce draconian legislation, but it is for your own good. In order to help you, this is what

we are going to do: we are going to test; we are going to trace; we are going to ask people to isolate; we are going to support those who have to isolate; and we are going to make facilities available to treat people who contract the virus. I am not going to be too critical about the regulations because I appreciate that it is difficult to get things right. I have to say that I admire the loyalty of the members of the Ulster Unionist Party in circling the wagons around the Minister, and I have to congratulate Alan on his sterling work in the Committee.

Mr Butler: I appreciate the Member giving way. It is good that there is some levity in here at times. Alan's work is outstanding, and he does a good job on the Health Committee. I had a phone call this morning about a lady who is just under 60 and is now on a ventilator due to COVID. I live in BT28, and restrictions were put in place there. By the way, I agree with you that some of the restrictions feel draconian, but, in a time of pandemic, we must ensure public safety, and it is important that we do not confuse the messaging in here in any shape or form. Whether an MLA is speaking in a Committee or elsewhere, they need to be up to date on all the information and ensure that they are there with regard to the messaging from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Officer.

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Member for his intervention. I do not disagree with anything that he said. I am not here to criticise the Minister as such, but I will relay my experience. I made the point that we have entered into a contract with the population, and one aspect of that contract is that we are going to provide testing and provide a system whereby people do not have to jump through hoops to get tested. I will tell you about my personal experience from Sunday fortnight ago when my four-year-old daughter developed a temperature. It was not a very high temperature and she had a bit of a runny nose. If COVID was not here, I would have said that she has a bit of a head cold. She started into primary 1 the previous week and she has picked something up. She had not lost her appetite or stopped running about; she was OK. Under normal circumstances, she would have gone into school on Monday morning. However, after discussion with the wife, we decided that, because she has one of the symptoms, we should seek some advice. So we phoned 111. The advice that we got was that they do not give out advice about children as young as that and I needed to phone the GP the following morning, which I did. I got through to the GP, which was good because a lot of people at the moment are saying that they cannot get through to GPs. In fact, we recently did a survey in the Whiterock area to see how many people usually get the flu jab but are having problems this year. A large number of the people that we spoke to told us that they could not even get through to their GP on the phone. So there are problems there as well.

To get back to my story, I phoned the GP surgery and was advised to phone 119 and book a test. I went on the phone and I stayed on the phone and I stayed on the phone and I stayed on the phone and then the phone cut out. I went back on the phone and I stayed on the phone and, eventually, I just gave up. I was on the phone for nearly an hour and a half trying to get through. I said, "OK, I will go on the website and try to book a home testing kit." I went online and, lo and behold, "no home testing kits available at this time". I decided that I have started this so I may finish it. I went online to try and book a drive-through test.

It came back with availability in Stranraer. This is not an isolated incident. I put it up on twitter that evening and got a boatload of responses from people who were also being sent to Stranraer, some were being sent to Wales and one was being sent to Telford in Shropshire. A lot of people were experiencing the same problems.

In our WhatsApp group this morning, one of our MLAs shared that a constituent of theirs in Newry and Mourne has been offered a test in Stranraer today. Now, I know that it is not possible and people are not going to travel to Stranraer, but it exposes the problems in the testing system.

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Mr Sheehan: Yes.

Mr McGrath: Does the Member agree with a point that I have made at Committee: if we made home testing kits available in places such as pharmacies, you could have been down to the pharmacy and back at your house within about 10 minutes, the test probably would have been posted later that afternoon and you could have had the result the next day? If there are no testing kits, we need to get them. Making them very easily accessible to people would increase the speed of the testing process and would have helped you in a situation like that.

Mr Sheehan: Absolutely, I agree with that. As you make that point, I visited a community pharmacy in my constituency on Friday and spoke to the staff about a number of issues, including the provision of the flu jab. The community pharmacy is providing the jab to health workers free of charge, and, for others, it is charging £12. I asked whether there was capacity within the community pharmacy system to carry out COVID tests, and the staff in that pharmacy felt that there was. With a small amount of training, they could carry out testing or at least deliver home testing kits, or some system, to deal with the difficulties in the current system.

11.30 am

Anyway, to get back to my own story, everything I have told you so far happened on the Monday. I could not get anything. I went back on on Tuesday morning and was able to order a home testing kit. The kit did not arrive until teatime on Wednesday. The guidelines in the kit tell you to, first of all, that you are to post it in a priority postbox — I did not know that there was such a thing until this — but that you cannot post it unless it is in the box at least an hour before the last collection. The last collection in the area where I live was at 4.45 pm, so it was too late. I had to do the test the following morning, which was Thursday, and then post it. It was going to Glasgow; presumably it was not arriving until the Friday. We were then into the weekend and, to cut a long story short, the result did not come back until Tuesday. Of course it was negative, as I expected it to be, but the upshot of it all was that, first of all, my four-year-old child missed over a week of school. My eight-year-old child also missed over a week of school, and my wife and I had to self-isolate, with all the difficulties that go along with that. What I am telling you is not unique. There is a problem in the testing system.

Mr Catney: Thank you for giving way, and I trust your child has made a speedy recovery — well, she has made a speedy recovery, and everything is all right, so that is good.

I do not want to mention any names, but on the outskirts of Lisburn there is a facility that got a large amount of money in order to set up its business. I see that a former British Minister who was sent over here sits on its board. The shambles that has gone round on that testing, and the amount of public money that went into it from Northern Ireland in order to set it up, has to be a serious concern that we need to take on. Having that facility where we have it in Northern Ireland, simply by the amount of public money that went into it, should mean that the tests are rolled out much more quickly to our inhabitants here.

Mr Chambers: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. We seem to be getting a little bit off the theme of the motions. We are talking about testing, and I do not see anything on the Order Paper that refers to testing. I wonder if you might rule on whether we are moving a little bit off the subject matter that is in front of us this morning.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I have to say that I have allowed a fair bit of latitude on this debate. I think, to be fair, that it would be a bit of an anomaly in this debate if we did not at least touch on testing. It does have an impact, and it is difficult to say that you cannot talk about it when it is an issue, and the regulations do refer to health protection. I have allowed that degree of latitude to inform the Minister and to inform the debate.

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Member for his intervention.

I made the point at the outset that I think the regulations are part of a contract. As political leaders, we have to provide a proper system for testing and for ensuring that we prevent the spread of this disease as much as possible. There is a problem with the testing, and it needs to be sorted. If people do not have confidence in the system — I had to jump through hoops, but I know that there are other people who would give up at the first hurdle, or the second hurdle, or the third hurdle. People are just not going to get tested, but it is important that they do.

I will just give you one other example. One of our councillors had been out socialising the previous weekend. The next weekend, he woke up at 8.00 am and had a high temperature. He took his temperature, and it was 40°. He said, "Right, I had better phone for a test", and that is what he did — he booked a test. At 10.00 am he took his temperature again, and it was back to normal. What he said was that, if he had waited until 10.00 am when his temperature was back to normal, he probably would not have gone for a test. He would have thought it was some aberration — that he was warm during the night, had too many blankets on the bed or whatever. That is one of the reasons why testing is so important and needs to be streamlined so that, when people need a test, they can get a test.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Iarraimse ar Órlaithí Flynn labhairt. I call "Orlay" Flynn.

Ms Flynn: Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. It is pronounced "Or-lee-ah", thank you.

I rise to support these regulations, and I do so as I think about the rise in new coronavirus cases in our communities and in the health service. As others have said, the virus is still with us, and we cannot downplay that fact. It has been said before, but it cannot be said enough, that these regulations would not be considered if we were not in a public health emergency.

I want to address two themes today, the first being the impact that the regulations have on people and, secondly, the need for support. I believe that it is essential that we do not forget the impact that each of these regulations have on individuals, families and communities. Many have already acknowledged that point, but it is vital that this is to the forefront of our minds as we consider and discuss the regulations. There are so many knock-on impacts that need to be addressed where families are unable to spend time with one another, including being unable to visit loved ones in care homes or hospitals and the many out there who are now dealing with the stress of the breakdown of a normal work-life balance. However, these regulations, I feel, are necessary, although they have since been overtaken by the recent changes as of last night.

In my opinion, the promotion of face coverings was slow. At the start, they were advised only for public transport and then shops and retail outlets were included. I believe that the lack of urgency, when the evidence pointed to the use of face coverings, did little to promote their uptake at that crucial time. I urge everyone who can wear a face covering to please wear one. It should not be seen as a muzzle but as a sensible precaution against a virus that we know is spread by droplets from the breath.

Similar to some of the points that Colin, Paula and Pat touched on earlier regarding communications, I also urge the Department and the PHA to undertake a more thorough public health messaging campaign around face coverings and provide a more general update around the restrictions that were announced last night. I am detecting a certain level of fatigue and confusion around what is in place now. For example, when the regulations appeared before the Health Committee last week or the week before, I raised the issue of face coverings and the use of face shields, which I have seen being used increasingly in restaurants and retail outlets, not only by members of staff but by the public. It turns out that face shields:

“are not considered to be a face covering in the context of these regulations.”

For many people, that will come as a surprise, but, again, on the important issues around this, where is the public messaging campaign and where is the direction and the clarity for the public and workers, who are using these face shields as in the example that I gave, from the Department of Health or, indeed, the Public Health Agency?

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Ms Flynn: Yes, I will.

Mr McGrath: Following on from the crucial point that you have made, and which was made to us at the Health Committee last week, that face shields are not considered appropriate, many people in a work environment wear them because they are much more comfortable to wear — they almost slip on like a pair of glasses rather than an actual face mask. That highlights the confusion where, under the regulations, people are not required to wear any covering in their workplace because sometimes the message might be that, if somebody is wearing a shield in their work, they are not wearing the right item yet they are not required to wear the item. That just aids the point that we need to have a clear message that we send out to people.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Member for his intervention, and I agree with everything that he said. Although a lot of the conversation has focused on face coverings today, that is only a microcosm of everything that is contained in the regulations and the broader confusion that can exist in the public.

Before I finish, I want to make the simple point that much has been said about the fact that we all now need to live and learn to live with this virus, and that is absolutely correct. However, it should not mean that we let the virus pass us by without doing anything. So, I completely understand the need for the regulations that the Minister has brought forward and I believe that we must all look at, consider and scrutinise all of the options that we are faced with in our efforts to help and protect the public throughout the pandemic.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for bringing these regulations before the House. While I appreciate that this is a time of terrible turmoil, I, like the Minister and many others in the Chamber, note that some of these regulations have been superseded by events and time.

By my nature I am not someone who likes to see restricted movements of people by the Government; it does not sit easily with me that there are restrictions on civil liberties. Nor does it sit easily with me that restrictions have been imposed that mean that our economy is being compressed, which places jobs, our economy and families under real strain. However, I understand that our economy can rebound whereas people's lives cannot.

As the Minister said, we are at a critical time in our fight against the virus and we must redouble our efforts to suppress the virus, protect the health of our population and to protect the health and well-being of our front-line workers, especially healthcare workers.

While much has been done, I fear that the public's buy-in to the fight against COVID-19 is being tested. People are fed up of hearing about the coronavirus/COVID-19. They are frustrated with restrictions on their lives and they get really angry when they are making a real effort to comply with the regulations while others, especially those in leadership positions, do not. But however uncomfortable or inconvenient it feels it is imperative that we persevere and we must all lead by example.

I acknowledge the community effort in the battle against COVID-19. I know that in my local area, and indeed, across the North and this island, the GAA has been the backbone of the community response. Be that in delivering food hampers or hot meals during the toughest times of the restrictions, or just checking out for people who are lonely at home, they have been unbelievable. On this day 18 years ago my Armagh teammates and I won the all-Ireland — I could not be prouder of the GAA and all that it stands for.

Mr Storey: Will the Member give way?

Mr McNulty: No. I know what you are going to say, so there is no point.

I also express my gratitude to the front-line staff in our hospitals and healthcare settings who have fought the good fight, and who are fighting the good fight under incredible pressure and duress, particularly nurses, doctors and healthcare workers in the community, nursing homes and in our hospitals. We owe them a deep and

sincere thanks. I especially note the medical teams in Daisy Hill Hospital and Craigavon Area Hospital for their commitment, dedication and devotion. In the face of COVID outbreaks, and while so many staff are off self-isolating, they are still stepping-up and caring for the patients.

As a member of the Committee for Education I must also pay tribute to the teachers, school workforce, parents and children who have had to change their whole way of teaching and learning. They are showing the rest of us just how we can stand and how we should be able to adapt to what has become the new norm.

I have sought to abide by the regulations and the guidelines. Like many others, I could not visit my parents in their home. I could not attend the funerals of people who I knew — people like John Dallat and John Hume. Some of the messaging has been unclear, behaviour from those who should know better has been inconsistent and messages around the regulations and the communications, especially around those regulations, have been mixed. We need to sharpen our message and we need to lead by example and to suppress the virus.

Mr Catney: People need clarity because they are confused about what they can and cannot do. We recognise that this is not black or white and that a level of confusion is, unfortunately, inevitable.

However, the joint First Ministers need to be clear with the people if they want compliance.

11.45 am

We recognise that restrictions are a necessity. The SDLP has always been led by the medical and scientific evidence. Businesses and workers will need support, and businesses need clarity in order to survive. As my colleague from south Armagh said, when I think of those out working in the economy, I recognise that our lives are mixed; they are interwoven. It is part of who we are to work and to see the success of our labour in order to build healthy, strong lives. Later today, at 1.00 pm, my colleague from West Belfast will have an all-party group (APG) on mental health. These are some of the outworkings of all of this. No doubt our Minister knows that well — much better than I do.

I will take this moment to thank the Minister of Health. His door has always been open to me. I understand the great burden that has been placed on him. No one knew or could have foreseen this when he accepted the post. I realise that where we are and what we have to do is for the greater good.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. I thank the Member for giving way. The clarity of the messaging has been mentioned several times today, as has the level of support provided to people to self-isolate. However, I previously asked the Minister a question about his Department's spend on the public messaging campaign. He has not had an opportunity to answer, but maybe he can give us some information on that today, as well as information on what has been spent on providing support for people who need it to self-isolate.

Mr Catney: Thanks very much. Businesses and workers will need support. We are hurtling towards a cliff edge, with the furlough scheme closing next month. I hope that

it does not close, but it is starting to close anyhow. People are frightened about their lives but also their livelihoods. It is hardly laudable that no economic recovery strategy has been produced by the Executive. How will we get out of the crisis and build back better if we have no plan? The Executive need to get real about investing in infrastructure, green energy and other timely interventions that will help us to kick-start the economy again.

Mr Chambers: Over the past few weeks, I, along with everybody else in the House, I am sure, have received an avalanche of emails from a small group of people. Some of them run to 5,000 words with lots of links to YouTube and all sorts of statements on social media. Frankly, I do not know where those people get the time to do what they do. The theme is that all of this is some sort of government conspiracy, it is not real and it is really a huge attack on our human rights; in fact, just last week, we had a musician penning a song that included the words "fascist bullies". That is pretty strong language to apply to people who are trying to do something good, something to save lives. To go back to the point about human rights, the most basic human right is the right to life, and that is what this is all about and what we all should endeavour to protect.

There has been a lot of talk this morning about how complicated the regulations are. People are saying, "They are complicated. I don't understand them. I need more clarity". I do not think there is anything complicated about it. When I was bringing up a young family and we had a open fire in our living room, I did not need a statutory regulation to tell me to put a fireguard on it to protect my children from falling into the fire. It is called common sense. The virus is out there. It wants to kill people. It is killing people. We have heard about the disastrous situation in the two hospitals. There may well be other hospitals affected before this is all over, and there may well be dozens or hundreds of people this winter who will die as a result of the virus. What is complicated about trying to stop it in its tracks? What is complicated about using a bit of common sense? Why do we all need to be told and to have it spelt out to us what we can do and what we should not do and when we should do it? It is common sense.

Mr McGrath said that he had put something on social media and a lot of people were saying that they did not want regulations. I suggest that the people who do not want regulations are maybe the type of people who are invading sports pitches or maybe the type of people who, even as we speak, are organising house parties for this weekend. Maybe they are the type of people who are running mad around the Holylands. Those are the sorts of people who do not want regulations and who do not care about the rest of us. They have no sense of civic responsibility. If they did, they would not do what they do.

We also hear about the way that the regulations are getting pushed through quickly. I understand that. We keep saying that, in normal times, we would not tolerate certain things that are happening. We all know that, when a law goes through the House, it is a laborious, lengthy journey from start to finish. We are producing laws here and pushing them through in hours and then coming back a fortnight later and changing them, because that is the nature of the emergency that we find ourselves in.

I am not going to defend the Executive; they should be here this morning to defend themselves.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Chambers: Yes.

Mr Gildernew: I am just reflecting on what you said about these being common sense. It needs to be said that, while there are elements of common sense, we must be conscious that we are asking the public to do things that are extraordinary. These are unprecedented times, and we should not minimise or dismiss the impact that it is having on the public. We should provide a clear rationale and provide them with the support that they need.

Mr Chambers: I will address that later.

In yesterday's debate about dementia, the Minister or Mr Dickson — I cannot remember which — said that it was good that we were in the House talking about something that affected every home and talking about our personal experiences. The public sometimes think that we sit up here in a bubble and do not really know what is going on out there, but, in the dementia debate, we all had personal experiences to talk about. It is the same with the virus. The Ministers and Members are not sitting up here trying to find ways to make life difficult for the public. I will always remember my days in local government, when we had to make hard decisions around increasing the rates. People would say, "Why are you doing this? What is your rationale?", and my reply used to be, "I am a ratepayer. My family are all ratepayers. I am not doing this to make life awkward for anybody. I am certainly not a turkey voting for Christmas". That is the case here: we have to make regulations that we do not like, and they affect our families and our way of life too.

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Mr Chambers: Yes.

Mr McGrath: On the Member's point about the rates, I am sure that the response would not have been, "The reason that we are increasing the rates is that it is common sense". You would have put together an argument for it. I think that, on the point that you make, we are all on the same page, just coming from different directions. If we have to have the regulations, clearly articulating why we have them and what they are might stop a lot of people out there who are confused and do not understand the rationale automatically going to the fourth base of "Nah, we do not want any of it". It is about that clear message. If we could get to that, it would be much more helpful.

Mr Chambers: I rather despair of anybody who does not understand how serious the situation is and what their civic responsibilities are. I really despair for those people.

We had a situation in which the junior Ministers used to come to the Chamber to present the SRs. That reflected more evenly and fairly the fact that decisions on the creation of the SRs are Executive decisions. This morning, the Health Minister, who is in the middle of fighting a pandemic and is helping to fight it with a dedicated staff around him, has had to come and do something that the junior Ministers could maybe have done on his behalf. The Executive Office withdrew that. I am not sure why. I have asked a number of questions for written answer to establish why that is the case, but it is what it is.

I want to go on to some of the comments that Members have made. At the start of her speech, Ms Bradshaw indicated that her party supported the regulations but went

on to point out many of the shortcomings and contradictory parts in them in relation to face coverings in restaurants and shops and all the rest of it. At the end of the day, it was an Executive decision and the Alliance Party has a Minister on the Executive. You cannot have it every way. Ms Bradshaw also talked about confusion and clear messaging. I remind her that, back in June at the Health Committee, she said:

"We are pretty much through ... the pandemic".

That was on the record at the Health Committee. We are supposed to provide leadership, and people in the House have called for leadership. I suggest that that was quite irresponsible leadership, and I am glad that, on that occasion, the Minister and the Chief Medical Officer called her out on that. We still have not had an apology for that or a retraction of that remark.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We talked earlier about affording a bit of latitude, and I have afforded quite a bit of latitude —

Mr Chambers: I ask the Deputy Speaker to show the same latitude to me as he has shown to others.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): If you reflect on your comments in Hansard, you will see that I have done exactly that. If we could, perhaps, move back again, please.

Mr Chambers: OK. I will refer to some of the other comments that have been made.

Mr Gildernew talked about spending money and asked how much had been spent on advertising and stuff. I will comment on that in a moment.

Mr Sheehan commented that the Ulster Unionist Party was protecting its Minister. There are a couple of issues there. I remind Pat that, just one week after the Bobby Storey funeral, he said at the Health Committee, "Let's move on. Let's put this behind us". That was one week after the funeral, when the consequences and the outcomes of it, in medical terms, would not have been known. As to spending money and advertising, the Executive and the Government could spend millions on advertising, but the events at that funeral would have totally neutralised any message and any amount of money that was spent on messaging. Senior Ministers, the deputy First Minister, MLAs and MPs attended that funeral in complete contradiction of all the regulations and advice. We need to get real on these things.

The Member talked about protecting the Minister, but I do not think that the Minister needs protecting.

If people think that my job on earth is to protect the Health Minister, I say to them that it is one of the easiest jobs that anybody could ever be given, because I think that the public agree, the media agree and, begrudgingly in the House, even we agree that he is doing a great job.

12.00 noon

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Doug Beattie. Doug Beattie?

Mr Beattie: Sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. You were speaking into my bad ear.

I thank the Minister, Robin Swann, for being here today. I do not care whether people think that I am here to protect Robin Swann. I will say, and I will say it with facts, that Robin Swann as a Minister has been in the Chamber far more than any other Minister. He has answered questions for oral answer far more than any other Minister. He has responded to motions far more than any other Minister. He has attended Adjournment debates more than any other Minister. He has given detailed answers. He has taken —

Mr Sheehan: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beattie: Not just yet, Pat. In a wee while.

He has taken the criticism in here, online and elsewhere. He has fronted up at the media briefings. He filled the gap when the First Minister and the deputy First Minister had a spat and could not. Moreover, he has done all of that while he deals with the legacy of the crisis in our health service.

Now I find out that the Health Minister sits on the Executive enforcement working group while the Justice Minister does not. Let this sink in: during this unprecedented crisis, the Justice Minister does not sit on the enforcement working group. That *laissez-faire* approach to COVID-19 by the Justice Minister is genuinely shameful, and people need to be calling her out for it. Not only should she be on that working group but she should be chairing it. Pat, I will give way to you now.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks very much for giving way. The Ulster Unionists should not get too defensive about the allegation that was made earlier on. It was a light-hearted comment. There is no need to get so defensive. Robin has done a reasonably good job. I would be the first to say that. I congratulate him in particular on his decision to call a public inquiry into the events in Muckamore. That was a very good decision, so well done.

Mr Beattie: Pat, thank you for your support of the Ulster Unionist Party. It is always very welcome.

I will add to what my colleague said. We now have the Health Minister having to move these regulations, whereas once it was the two junior Ministers. The Executive Office, with four Ministers, therefore no longer take responsibility for this, but the Health Minister does. As has been said, a lot of these regulations come from the Executive, and they are proposed by the Executive Office. Thank goodness that the Ulster Unionist Party climbed out of the trenches and over the parapets and took up the Health portfolio while the rest of —

Some Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Beattie: — the parties turned their noses to the wall.

At the end of this crisis, Robin Swann will be able to stand tall, euphemistically. *[Laughter.]* Others will be looking at their dereliction of duty. There are some, and I have pointed one out.

There are many who will complain about the regulations, and they have the right to complain. Everybody has a right to complain. Everybody has a right to give a point of view. It is easy to create a scenario to unpick the regulations. We could all do it, and that is what people are doing. They are creating outlandish scenarios purely to unpick the regulations. There are those who do not like wearing face masks. I do not like wearing a face mask. There are those who will say that face masks do not help. I disagree. I will be clear: if, by wearing a face mask, I stop just one person

— just one person — from getting sick, I will wear a face mask. If, by wearing a face mask, I stop any elderly people being frightened or concerned, I will wear one. I say this to everybody: it is a matter of discipline; have it in your pocket; put it on when you need to; show some discipline; wear a face mask.

We have talked about messaging. Everybody is absolutely right. I do not think that I can argue with anyone here about the messaging not being right. Some of the decisions that are coming from the Executive are confusing, but, please, everybody, do not focus your eyes on the Health Minister. Focus on the Executive, where we all have a Minister, and on the Executive Office who should be driving —

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for giving way. We are getting very defensive over the Health Minister — I have certainly defended him much over the past number of months —

A Member: Hear, hear.

Mrs Cameron: — but the responsibility for actions during the pandemic falls across the Executive, all Ministers and the House. Does the Member agree that it would be more useful to ask people to keep sharing the message, because it changes daily, as we understand it must, to deal with the pandemic? The most useful action, today, to address the confusion, would be for the deputy First Minister to apologise for her actions at the Storey funeral, show the public that it was the wrong thing to do, prove and show that she is sorry, and for other Members to do the same, and to say that the right thing to do is to abide with the regulations and guidelines.

Mr Beattie: I thank the Member for her intervention. She is right: the crux of the problem is that some of our politicians have given ammunition to the people who are trying to undermine our Health Minister. However, I say this — in the most gentlest way — to my friend, and to all those on this side of the House: Sammy Wilson is a disgrace. He is an utter disgrace for the way in which he has undermined our health message. He has an opinion —

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beattie: Just a minute. As an MP, he must be careful, because he is an influencer and he has damaged our message. For reference, Sammy can put a mask on, go into a shop, buy an ice cream, step outside, take off the mask and eat his ice cream. It is P1 common sense. That is the fundamental problem.

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Beattie: Just a minute, Pat. I have said that to this side of the House, but I look to the other side of the House. How embarrassed must you be talking about these regulations when your leader — your deputy First Minister — has been called before the police to account for her actions with regard to COVID regulations. If the police find that she is guilty of any wrongdoing, she must resign, because we cannot pile bodies higher due to COVID-19 because of the actions of Michelle O'Neill. Get the moral courage to tell her that. I will get the moral courage, and I will tell her. Pat.

Mr Catney: I wanted to respond to what you said about Sammy, but it is also relevant to what you have just said. It should be all sides of the House. I am supportive of what you said concerning Mr Wilson, and anyone else who lapses or breaks the law.

Mr Beattie: Pat, you are right. I will finish. The tenor of what I have said has been argumentative — I get that — but I have a real, fundamental problem with the fact that, at this time, we are still sniping at each other. We are all in defensive mode, and I accept that I am too. We are in defensive mode, because people took us down that road. However, it was not our Health Minister who took us down that road. People need to step back. I am happy to step back if others step back. People need to account for themselves and for what they did to exacerbate this health crisis.

Mr Allister: Any nation, after six months, would have difficulty in holding matters together in respect of the draconian measures to which we have been subjected. I do not think that there is anything surprising about that. Of course, the aggravation is quite distinct in this part of the United Kingdom as to why it is difficult now to hold things together.

There are three reasons. The first was touched upon. Put simply: once more, yesterday, we had a law-giver giving out the law who is a law breaker. Dress it up and duck and dive as much as you like but that is the inescapable reality. When Michelle O'Neill stands behind any podium, particularly upstairs, and pontificates about what needs to be done, and what regulations are going to be made, she utterly lacks any credibility. It is not just she who suffers the lack of credibility; in consequence, the regulations that she makes suffer a lack of credibility because she is the law-giver.

We all know that Michelle O'Neill has no apology to make for breaking the regulations. She has had ample opportunity on no fewer than two occasions. I presented her with the opportunity in the House yesterday to apologise for breaking the law — but no, she has a higher loyalty to something much more nefarious. That is the first fundamental underminer of these regulations, and it is not going away. Sinn Féin may wish it away, they may try to talk it away, but it is not going away.

The abiding issue when it comes to the saleability and credibility of these regulations is that she who made them did not keep them. Unless and until that issue is addressed, regulations from that source will never carry any credibility. I pity the Health Minister in those circumstances because he is doing his best but doing so with an Executive who have undermined him, through the deputy First Minister, from those early days. No matter with what diligence and sincerity the Health Minister seeks to convey his message — and I do not agree with it all, by the way — much of it is washed away by the actions of a deputy First Minister who gets into her official car, whose junior Minister gets into his official car, whose Finance Minister gets into his official car, whose Communities Minister gets into her official car, and all, at public expense, travel to a funeral where the law is to be flouted.

Then we are surprised that there is a leakage in public confidence, and slippage in adherence to the very regulations from that source. That is the first remediable reason — but, as yet, unremedied reason — why any regulations on COVID are fundamentally undermined.

12.15 pm

The second reason that the regulations are undermined is the inherent absurdity that lies within some of them. We

had an example again last night. You cannot go to your children's houses or your parents' houses, but you can go to a pub. You cannot meet those whom you can trust as to how they conduct themselves, but you can meet in a wet pub with 100 people whom you know nothing about. That is so inherently absurd that it undermines the message. Of course, when I listened to the deputy First Minister this morning, for what it is worth, she seemed to be telling us that students who party all week in the Holylands can go home at the weekends and live in the family home over the weekend but the grandparents of that family home, who keep themselves to themselves and are no risk to anyone, cannot go to the same home. If the deputy First Minister is right in her interpretation of regulations that, it seems, she drafted, that is equally absurd. It is the absurdity of those aspects of the regulations that undermines their credibility.

The third thing that undermines the stickability of the regulations is whether there is the necessary proportionality between the regulations and the reality of the disease. Surely, the restrictions that you bring in should be proportionate to the number of deaths and the number of hospital admissions, not the number of cases. Happily, there are many people who, while not happy that they are contracting COVID, are happy that it is not overly affecting them. There are many cases, but there are very few, relatively speaking, hospital admissions and, happily, even fewer deaths. Should the proportionality not be between the number of deaths and the number of hospital admissions — remember that the restrictions were initially to protect our health service — and the severity of the restrictions, instead of the severity of the restrictions being linked to the number of cases?

That brings us to another issue. When we hear all the statistics promulgated and are told that, in so many weeks, there will be so many cases, are we getting the worst-case scenario again? Remember that we got the worst-case scenario six months ago: 15,000 dead. We were never told what the best-case scenario was, and, to date, we have worked out much closer to it than to the worst. Are we again getting the worst-case scenario with concealment of the best-case scenario? I am not sure that you can do that twice and hold public credibility.

There has to be a particular focus on two things. Those who are evidently vulnerable need that ring of steel of protection, and those who flagrantly breach the law need to find no mercy, be that in the Holylands or Healy Park, which, I note, the Chairman of the Health Committee boasted of attending on Sunday. He talks about example and common sense. I am not saying that he was out in the middle of the pitch, but he was there. Then, he comes to the House and tells us about leading by example.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Certainly.

Mr Gildernew: The Member should check his facts before he comes to the House and makes assertions. I was not at the game.

Mr Allister: Sorry?

Mr Gildernew: The Member should note that the GAA makes a fantastic contribution to our communities. If he takes a look at Dungannon's COVID response, he will see that Thomas Clarke's club provided assistance to vulnerable people throughout the pandemic.

Mr Allister: The Member says that he was not there. Why, then, did he tweet the following:

"I didn't get a ticket for Healey Park today" —

sorry —

"so decided to head to #dungannon park instead"?

Sorry. My apologies. It is a different place. However, it was still a public gathering. Was it sensible to be at a public park? I do not know what happened at Dungannon Park, but we certainly know what happened at Healy Park. The Member is quick to defend the GAA. It was GAA supporters who gathered on the ground at Healy Park. It was GAA supporters — part of the outreach, I suppose — who went into the pubs of Dungannon to sing IRA songs. There was not much social distancing there. Therefore, although I misspoke about which park the Member was at, I make the point that, if we are going to talk about personal responsibility and leading by example, that is exactly what we should do. That should lead a Member such as Mr Gildernew to be unequivocal in condemning the gathering on the pitch in Healy Park, the gathering in the pubs, the singing of the songs and the spreading of the virus.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Just one moment, please. The Member has repeatedly made known his concerns about that, so they do not need to be rehearsed a number of times. I would prefer it if the Member moved back to discussion of the regulations.

Mr Allister: Mr Storey will bring me back to that.

Mr Storey: I thank the Member for giving way. We have heard a lot of eulogies about the fantastic work that the GAA has done in our constituency — that of the Health Minister, Mr Allister and me — but, for completeness, will the Member add to his list the most disgraceful display that we had in Dunloy when Dunloy beat Loughguile at hurling? There was a band parade — the irony of it — in Dunloy for which — thanks to confirmation from the Parades Commission — there had been no notification or 11/1. Not only did they flout the health laws in Dunloy at the party that they had — it is on social media — they also flouted the laws that they, in that very village, tell us that we must keep. The hypocrisy of the Members opposite bears no resemblance to reality. It is shameful. I ask the Member who represents the area to comment.

Mr Allister: Mr Storey's point is well made. It cries out for an answer. I do not hear one.

The fundamental at the end of this is that, in a society that is threatened, as we undoubtedly are, there has to be a bounden, compelling personal responsibility on every citizen. Every citizen is capable of catching the virus, and therefore every citizen must take their own defences. Of course, those who do not threaten everyone. The Minister has an uphill battle of a home-grown variety in the Executive: home-grown by the deputy First Minister and home-grown with muddling regulations.

Mr Carroll: Since rushing to reopen the economy prematurely and force thousands of people back into work, the political establishment here has engaged in a blame game that seeks to scapegoat ordinary people for the spread of COVID in order to cover up their own failures. Recent changes seem to be, at least partially, about shifting blame for the spread of COVID away from the Government and onto individuals' behaviour and the

sphere of people's private lives. It reaches the point of absurdity when, for example, MLAs are up in arms about COVID spreading in homes with more than six people while forcing thousands of people back to work and doing nothing about clusters in workplaces. Where is the evidence that COVID spreads in living rooms but not on shop floors or in workplace canteens? I put that question twice last week to the First Minister, who did not give a clear answer or provide the evidence. I am glad that the Health Minister is here, and I hope that he can shed some light on that question.

The regulations essentially say, "Don't visit your grandparents but take them anywhere you want as long as there's a till to spend money". It is so farcical that it defies description. Such hypocrisy is not only unfair; it is dangerous, because it feeds the worst elements of the scepticism about the health advice on COVID.

The recent spread of the virus is a failure by this establishment not by ordinary people. When we had infection rates down to controllable levels, the Chamber lifted restrictions on workplaces and opened the door to a second wave; indeed, since the onset of the crisis, ordinary people generally have been ahead of the Government. They forced the shutting of schools when Ministers refused to act, and, in some workplaces, at the start of lockdown, workers walked out of their jobs to protect themselves. The level of communal and community solidarity with workers and the vulnerable has been remarkable throughout the crisis. Almost every day since, we have seen examples of the hypocrisy of the Government in dealing with the virus starkly contrasting with the efforts of communities and front-line workers. In the final instance, the Government are ultimately about prioritising the needs of profit and capital over people's health, from people being told not to visit family but to get back to work to employers cramming workers back into unsafe working conditions, poor people being forced to choose between poverty and risking their health, financial provisions being stripped from people, the elderly dying in care homes and politicians flouting —.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for giving way. Is he saying that schools should not be open, that the economy should not be open, that the health service should not be open and that we should all stay at home and wait for the virus to pass?

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for the intervention. I did not say that the health service should not be open: it needs to be open to treat people.

Mrs Cameron: Workers?

Mr Carroll: Workers, obviously, have been working. The point that I was making, if the Member had listened to what I said, was that the Education Minister refused to act and workers and parents were forced to act to protect people and stop the virus spreading in schools. He failed to act and was forced to do a U-turn. Since then, he has been forced to do four or five U-turns. That was my point.

The hypocrisy fuels the worst reactions against the health advice. It is no accident that, around the world, the far right is hitching itself to conspiracy theories on the threat of COVID, from Trump in the US to the small but dangerous fascist and far-right groups here in Ireland. The question of masks is crucial, because, while DUP Members in the Chamber attack students for having parties, we have the likes of Sammy Wilson, a man who holds a PhD in

political ignorance, dismissing our medical doctors and undermining the most basic health advice on masks.

People like Sammy Wilson are a disgrace, and they are playing with fire and risking lives.

12.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker, should people be made to wear a mask in any and every circumstance? Of course not; however, I firmly believe that wearing a mask is an act of solidarity with my fellow human beings and that workers have a right to work as free as they can from the dangers of being affected by others. That includes bus drivers and retail workers. Buses, trains, shops and hospitals are all someone's workplace. People may have a right not to wear a mask in an abstract ontological and theoretical sense, as well as if they have underlying medical conditions, but they do not have a right to enter workplaces without one and put workers' health at risk. You can smoke to your heart's content, but you do not have the right to smoke in a confined workplace and possibly damage the health of others with second-hand smoke. This is not about the narrow confines of individual rights versus society; it is about class politics. Therefore, I appeal to people to respect workers and to wear a mask.

Finally, Stormont and Westminster have so far failed to deal with this crisis, but working-class solidarity and struggle with people coming together can help us to get through it and to build a better world after it.

My final, final point is this: I will echo the points that were made about the notification that we received last week that Department of Health officials may not be able to attend future briefings of the Health Committee. That is a disgrace. Whenever I ask questions — other Members can speak for themselves — about some of the SRs and some of the changes, I think that there is often detail that we do not get. We need more info. Sometimes we get people who can answer questions; sometimes we get people who do not answer them or are unable to. If the Minister can address that concern and assure us that somebody will be there to address the changes to the regulations in the future, that would be helpful.

Dr Aiken: I rise, of course, to support our Minister, because he has one of the most difficult jobs anywhere across these islands. Everybody can agree that he has been exemplary in how he has carried out his duties.

Let us go back nine months. Nine months ago, at the beginning of this year, nobody, apart from a few people in China, knew that COVID was on its way or of the implications that it would have. COVID is a pandemic. It is a completely unexpected event. It is an event that had the potential to significantly disrupt the global system, stop globalisation and create enormous health issues. Every single one of those things has come to pass.

The efforts that have been made and that need to be made to enable us to deal with this have been complex, because nobody has had to deal with something like this in over a century. The implications for everybody in Northern Ireland are huge. There are implications for those many small businesses and self-employed entrepreneurs who have no access to the £53-odd million that the Economy Minister handed back to the Finance Minister and for those in schools who cannot understand from one day to the next what the particular rules and regulations are going to

be and how they will follow them. There is confusion out there, and there is confusion because we are dealing with a situation that none of us has had to deal with before.

If we go back to the Belfast Agreement, when we decided to re-establish democracy and devolution here in Northern Ireland, we see that we are supposed to be allowing the people of Northern Ireland, through the Assembly and the Executive, to take responsibility for their life where they have to. One of the most significant issues that we have had to deal with is COVID. The health of our people is the most important thing that we all have to realise and support. A fully joined-up approach needs to be taken to the health of our people, and that means a joined-up approach across all the Ministries. When we were talking about the Holylands yesterday, we heard a Justice Minister decide that she was not accountable or responsible for anything. We have seen a deputy First Minister — I am not going to go on about this, but it must be said — fundamentally undermine the message that we need to get across about following rules and regulations. There is one job for a leader, and that is to lead, but there has been a massive failure in leadership.

The Executive Office, which has two First Ministers in the First Minister and deputy First Minister and two junior Ministers, seems to be incapable of doing even the most basic administration to bring these issues to the House for us to debate. Every issue that has "health" in it seems to reside purely with the Health Minister. Those of us who have heard debates in here since we came back in September know that everything seems to be the Health Minister's responsibility. Although we, in the Ulster Unionist Party, would quite like to go back to running Northern Ireland again, I am pretty certain that everybody else in the Assembly wants to see all political parties working together to make the situation work. Everything seems to be headed in the direction of the Health Minister, but the reality is that this is the responsibility of the Executive Office. If it were not the responsibility of the Executive Office, why did the First Minister and deputy First Minister decide to make sound bites yesterday and present press conferences? Why did they appear in the media? It seems that, if there is a situation that they want to gain something from, they take their opportunity. If there is something that is difficult or fundamentally unpopular, who do they give it to? They give it to the busiest person and the hardest-working Minister in the entire Executive: the Health Minister. I know that he is well up for the job, but that is not what should be done. If the two junior Ministers are not capable of doing it, maybe we should do a bit of saving, take their money — I think that their combined salaries are £110,000 a year, plus a bit of pension money — and use it for something more appropriate, such as supporting our health workers. If the Executive Office is unable to deliver, what is going on?

I appeal to every political party that has Ministers sitting round the Executive table: get together, get out there and get the message out there. Everybody is sniping about bits being confusing. What is confusing for the people who will, very shortly, go to ICU and have tubes put down their throat? What is confusing for the elderly people — many of us have elderly relatives — who are going to have to shield again and are raising concerns? Why can people who seem to be bright enough to be selected to go to university in Northern Ireland not understand even the basics of keeping socially distanced? Why is that the responsibility

of the Health Minister and some other politicians? Why is that not the responsibility of the individual, who is bright enough to pass GCSEs, AS levels and A levels and get to university but cannot even be bothered to read a government website?

We, as politicians, have a responsibility to make sure that our message is clear and that there is no confusion. Above all, we have a responsibility to show leadership. We need to tell the people out there who think that they can flout the rules and think that, somehow, they are immune from COVID that they cannot and are not. I say again: if they are capable of going into an off-licence and buying beer and then joining with other people, they are more than capable of reading the government regulations. For once, they should stop putting themselves first and instead put the people of Northern Ireland first, which is what our Health Minister has done.

Mr Swann: I welcome today's debate on the five regulations and everything else that was discussed. I thank the Members for the contributions that they made.

We all want to see a return to a more normal way of living, but, unfortunately, that has been disrupted, once again, by the recent increase in cases. As Members will already be aware, our R rate is now above 1; the transmission of the virus will increase, resulting in more cases, hospitalisations and deaths. The greater the value that R is above 1, the more rapid the increase. It is predicted that it will not be long before we see pressure on our hospital system and an increase in deaths. Our seven-day incidence, which is based solely on new positive cases, is now at 53.4 per 100,000 people. Our 14-day incidence is 85.9 per 100,000 people. Community transmission remains widespread, associated with multiple small clusters rather than a small number of larger outbreaks. Unfortunately, much of the transmission is still occurring between small social or family gatherings and casual mixing between households. As I have stated previously, I will not step back from wider or stronger restrictions should they be required.

I now turn to some of the points that Members made during the debate. I will focus, in particular, on aspects relevant to the regulations but also cover some of the wider contributions.

In his opening comments, the Chair of the Health Committee acknowledged the five regulations that have been brought today. I thank the Chair, his Committee members and the staff of the Health Committee for the work that they do in scrutinising and taking forward these regulations. I can provide the clarity that Mr Carroll was seeking in regard to a comment that I am led to believe that an official made. Officials will be made available for the Health Committee as we take forward any change in regulations; I can give that commitment. I think that it was a misunderstanding from the official that I do not want to be expanded. The officials who are working through these regulations are a small team within my Department who have taken on an increasingly high level of work over the last number of months.

In his opening comments, the Chair also acknowledged the transition — Ms Bradshaw acknowledged it as well — from our No. 1 regulations to the No. 2 regulations and what was prohibited rather than what was prescriptive. We had seen in the debates on the regulations that, in light of ever-increasing changes and amendments, the No. 1

regulations were becoming unwieldy, so it was right to completely rewrite those. However, the important thing, which has been raised by a number of contributors, is that these will be in place only for as long as they are strictly necessary. At this minute in time when we see an increase in the number of cases of coronavirus, they are necessary.

A number of Members referred to the consistency of public messaging. That is vital. It has been raised numerous times in here, and I will comment later on a number of specifics that Members raised. We need that consistent, clear message.

As the Chair and many Members raised, we also need compliance and enforcement. For these regulations to be credible, they need to be enforced. That will mean actions being taken that will not be politically palatable to some in the House and they will not be palatable to many of the public on social media. However, if we are to be serious about the enforcement of these regulations and the steps that we need to take, those actions will need to happen.

Mr Gildernew then spoke as health spokesperson for Sinn Féin. I share his thoughts. There is not a normal way of doing business. That change and adaptation that we have seen across Northern Ireland in the past number of months is not something that we can go back to easily or quickly. However, vitally, we must reinforce the message that I gave. It is a message that all in the House should be sharing no matter what they think of these regulations or the guidance that comes from my Department. Social distancing, good respiratory hygiene, good hand hygiene and wearing face coverings works. It worked to get us to where we were in July and August. We did that collectively, and I ask that we get back to that point now. These regulations are there to protect our loved ones. That is where I come from in drafting them, delivering them and even standing here today in the House supporting and moving them.

The Deputy Chair of the Health Committee, Mrs Cameron, opened her comments on the importance of the return to school and that very clear message about school settings. It is crucial that we acknowledge the challenges that that has put in place for all those who work in our education system as much as our health system.

The challenge that it has presented to parents, as in Mr Sheehan's example, of whether their child needs a test has been replicated across this country. Access to testing was not good enough. We have been working, and continue to work, to make that better. However, his experience, the example that he gave to the House, shows the importance of our health service in supporting parents to get their children back to school. We all know the importance of education.

12.45 pm

On the questions specific to bubbles, what is permitted is bubbling with one other household. The maximum size of that household is six. It is a restriction. It is a restriction on the way in which we want to interact. I challenge the narrative, "We can't meet in our house but we can meet in a pub". When we bubble to support those who need care, including childcare facilities, it can be done. However, it must be done responsibly. Families who bubble can be in only one bubble. You cannot be in multiple bubbles. When you come together to form that one unit, whether

for support, healthcare or childcare, it must be done with consideration and care for the entire bubble. I will give way to Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: I am grateful, because it is important that there is absolute clarity about this. Is the Minister saying that the bubbling from six o'clock is exclusively for the purpose of giving support and not bubbling just because you want to visit the person? Is that right?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. The guidance is on nidirect, as it has been since we brought in the first restrictions. There is bubbling with one other household. The bubbles are for caring responsibilities, including childcare, and support services. A bubble is not just for social interaction, because that is where we are seeing the spread of the virus.

When I first brought in regulations and said that they were draconian, Mr Allister gave us a history lesson on who Draco was. I do not want these regulations to be in that place. They are for a short, specific period. We do not know how long that will be, but I sincerely hope that it will not be for the same period as the first regulations. At first, these regulations were introduced by postcode. That is when we thought that there was an opportunity to manage the situation through that process. In the past number of days, in the BT43 area of Ballymena, which a number of Members represent, we started to see a small decrease in cases. So, we can see that these actions work. What we also started to see, unfortunately, was the spread of positive cases across the entirety of Northern Ireland, which meant that that specific geographical restriction was no longer of benefit.

Mrs Cameron's reference to the enforcement of and compliance with these regulations was repeated across the House. That is why I was fully supportive of the establishment of the Executive group on compliance and enforcement. So far, it has met twice and focused solely on what happened in the Holylands. That remit needs to be wider now. We relied so much on the goodwill of the people of Northern Ireland to respect and enforce the first set of regulations. I think the people need to see that we are willing to step up and bring to bear the weight of the law that is behind the regulations on enforcement and compliance.

Mr Colin McGrath raised the need for a united Executive approach. I could not agree more. It makes my job so much easier. At times, it is much more challenging because we are in that unique situation where we have a five-party Executive. Will there be confusion? Will there be complications? Yes, it is in the nature of our politics. As Health Minister, I cannot afford to allow that confusion to take over the message that comes from our Public Health Agency, our healthcare sector and our health workers. That message, to me, is vital and paramount.

Mr McGrath was the first Member to say that the message was confusing. I say to Members of the House who go down that line: look for the answers; search nidirect. Mr Butler, who is not in the Chamber, said that when questions came into his constituency office, he sought the answers for people from the question and answer section of the nidirect website. To me, explaining that message is part of a public representative's job, because these are not easy messages to give out. Our first message was easy:

stay at home. That was the easiest message to convey to everyone at one time.

However, we now have a more nuanced response to COVID-19 where we look for the exceptions, we look for clarity and we look to provide additional freedoms to those who need them, but we place additional restrictions where they need to be enforced. That is why this set of regulations, and the set that will be introduced from 6.00 pm tonight, is simple in what it wants to do. However, when we get multiple questions such as, "Does this mean I can do this?", it takes time to go through the multiple layers of what the precise implications are. Our team is not the same as those in other national Governments who are making regulations. However, these regulations have the same requirements and purpose at heart: to save the lives of the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr McGrath: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Swann: I will give way.

Mr McGrath: We are all coming from the same perspective on this. However, having the opportunity to ask questions is critical. The answer you have just given to Mr Allister contradicts what is on the nidirect website. The website says that you can have a social bubble and, in the next line, that you can go into a house for the purpose of childcare, and that it is not the same thing. We need to tease out that information because the public will read that and get confused. It is good to talk and ask questions if we are in the Chamber, and if you cannot answer them then your officials will know exactly what questions we will email to you at the end of the sitting, which would be worthwhile.

Mr Swann: If it was about social bubbles for their own sake, that would defeat our purpose of trying to prevent the spread of the virus. This virus does not spread itself: we spread it. So the number of interactions that we have in a day increases the possibility of this virus spreading. If we all take time and think about where we are going to be in the next seven or 14 days and cut down the number of interactions, we cut down the opportunities for the virus to spread. That is what the regulations are about. I will repeat this again: it is about support for our loved ones, our families and also the healthcare workers.

When Members commentate in the media that people feel confused, let us be careful that we, as politicians, do not insult the general public of Northern Ireland. Mr Butler also made this point. When the general public of Northern Ireland see and hear these messages, some understand them. For the most, they understand and comply with the messages, as they did in July and August. Again, I thank Mr Butler for his support.

In an intervention, Mr Sheehan said that it was good to see the Ulster Unionist party circling its wagons around me. Trust me, I was leader of the party for two years and it was not always so, Pat. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Aiken: We love you. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Swann: I will move on to Ms Bradshaw's contribution. I share her concerns about the risks associated with student and multiple occupancy households. I am disappointed that our students have ignored all of the health messages and held house parties in the Holylands area of Belfast. However, I do not think that they represent young people across Northern Ireland who have made sacrifices to protect their families and friends. The scenes

that were witnessed in the Holylands demanded swift and coordinated action by the relevant authorities, the city council and the universities. I am glad that the PSNI have moved in and have started to take those actions. Mr Aiken also made the point that it is necessary for those people to realise the implications of their actions, but I do not want young people to be the scapegoats for an increase in COVID-19 in Northern Ireland. That is why I also welcomed the establishment of the Executive working group to tackle the enforcement of the regulations to ensure compliance.

I apologise to Pat Sheehan for what he and his family had to go through. I apologise to all those families across Northern Ireland who found themselves in a similar situation when it came to testing. Testing is at the forefront of how we defeat the virus and how we arrest that second challenge. We have been working with our colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) on the specific issue of postcodes, so I am surprised to hear about the Newry situation. We were told that that has been sorted because it was all to do with postcodes and the closest testing unit. People in the east of the Province were being sent to Stranraer because the computer said that that was the closest testing site without realising that there was a body of water in between. My Welsh colleague, Vaughan Gething, was seeing the same thing there because the computer was sending people across the Bristol Channel. I was assured that that had been addressed, but I will pick up on that.

I will now turn to the opportunity for further exploration of issues with Community Pharmacy. I want to take time today to commend the work that is being done across our health and social care system, including by Community Pharmacy and those people who stepped up at the height of the pandemic to make sure that there was access to a supply of medication and that prescriptions were delivered. They went the extra mile for many small local communities.

Órlaithí Flynn talked about face coverings and while we have been in here, I have had guidance from the Chief Scientific Adviser. A face covering means a covering of any type that covers a person's nose and mouth; so, a face shield may be used as a face covering. However, we advise the use of cloth face coverings as they provide better protection from the risk of the COVID-19 virus. The face shields may be used and that is recognised in the regulations.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I am sorry, Minister, but I am going to have to interrupt you. The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1:00 pm today. Therefore, I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2:00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time. This debate and the Questions on the motions will resume following the question for urgent oral answer.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58 pm.

On resuming (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Justice

Paramilitarism/Organised Crime: DOJ Update

1. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her Department's work in addressing paramilitarism and organised crime. (AQO 709/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Members will be aware that, while the Executive action plan is co-ordinated in my Department, the programme is a cross-Executive one. The five-year funding period for the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime programme ends in March 2021. Consistent with commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach', the Executive have confirmed their support for an extension of the programme contingent on financial support from the UK Government.

Good progress has been made, but we must do more. Lessons learned from the first phase underline the enduring, pervasive nature of paramilitarism and the need for a long-term, genuinely collaborative approach. Extending the programme will facilitate a renewed focus on keeping people safe from harm by building resilience and creating fairer, safer communities free from paramilitarism, criminality and coercive control and, at the same time, help to ensure the success of the wider Executive objectives. Planning for the new phase is under way across the Executive. The newly reconvened political advisory group, which I chair, will provide fresh political leadership on those important issues and ensure that the programme and Executive actions are focused on delivering a positive impact in communities.

As part of that wider Executive effort, my Department is pressing ahead with legislation on committal and the commencement of the Criminal Finances Act 2017. Two public consultations are also under way: one on legislative proposals for new organised crime offences and another on a new multi-agency draft strategy to protect individuals, communities and businesses from organised crime.

Mr Allen: As the Minister is well aware, paramilitarism and organised crime have affected far too many lives across Northern Ireland. Organised crime bosses prey upon many of our impressionable young people and get them to do their bidding. What engagement has the Minister had with her colleague, the Minister of Education, around creating an education programme to prevent our young people getting caught up in organised crime and paramilitarism?

Mrs Long: Clearly, diverting young people away from the criminal justice system and tackling the underlying vulnerabilities in the community is something that the Education Minister, the Health Minister, the Communities Minister and the Executive Office are engaged in as part of the programme. It is hugely important that we look not only at education to build resilience but at the community

conditions that lead to people being vulnerable to paramilitary activity and being vulnerable, as the Member rightly says, to exploitation and abuse by those behind paramilitary organisations.

Mr Givan: The Minister knows that paramilitaries seek to exert control in many facets of our society and, indeed, in our institutions. She will be aware of the ongoing efforts at Maghaberry prison at Roe House. Efforts are being made to hold a mass protest outside Maghaberry prison on Saturday. Will she assure the House that, in no circumstances, will any protest or 24-hour camp be facilitated within the compounds of her facilities at Maghaberry prison? In doing so, she can be assured of my full support in stopping it.

Mrs Long: The Member refers to the situation that has developed in Maghaberry over recent weeks. It is important that I clarify the situation in respect of that before I move to his substantive point.

Members will be aware that there are prisoners in the republican separated unit at Maghaberry who are refusing prison food. We are now at approximately day seven of that protest. It is in response to the fact that a prisoner had to be removed from the prison for medical treatment and, on return, had to go through the normal COVID procedures of entering an isolation unit for two weeks. The situation has developed in protest at that.

We put the safety of our prisoners and staff at the forefront of all we do in the prisons. It is hugely important that we keep COVID out of the prison, and, for that reason, it is vital that people go through that process. Over 1,000 prisoners have gone through that process already, and we have been very successful in that only one prisoner has tested positive for COVID.

I am aware of the protest. We will liaise with the PSNI and other statutory agencies to ensure that it is handled appropriately.

It would be inappropriate for me to give guarantees ahead of those discussions on what may or may not be the appropriate way forward. As with all protests, the focus will be on ensuring that public order and life are protected throughout all stages of the protest. We will liaise with the police to ensure that those living in the immediate area and those going to and from the prison for work or other purposes are not disrupted.

Dr Archibald: The Minister's original answer referred to a "collaborative approach". Will she confirm that community involvement in the development of strategies to tackle paramilitarism and organised crime will be at the centre of her Department's approach to the issue?

Mrs Long: It is hugely important that the tackling paramilitarism programme has been successful to date in building those bridges into communities and working with local communities in how we develop our proposals. The political panel gives an added impetus to that in that there is political leadership, elected by communities, to oversee what happens and to feed back into those communities the sort of actions that we want to take.

It is hugely important work. It is not just about punishing those who are guilty but about building resilience in communities so that they can resist the lure of paramilitarism and have full confidence in the police, the councils, the Housing Executive and Members of

this place to help them in their resistance to paramilitary activity, which damages their local community.

Mrs D Kelly: Tackling criminality and paramilitarism is not just down to the Minister's Department. I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. The Minister may be aware that the director general of the National Crime Agency (NCA) is due to give an updated report to the Policing Board in December. Will she support the Policing Board in calling for the NCA to start to target, in particular, organised criminal gangs that might be below the threshold at which the NCA gets involved in organised crime elsewhere? It is imperative that those resources are available to us.

Mrs Long: In answering that question, I first pay tribute to the PSNI and the NCA for their excellent work in tackling organised crime. Over recent weeks and months, they have had major successes that we should welcome.

I certainly have no issue with the NCA working in close cooperation with the PSNI under the scrutiny and direction of the board in how they want to go about their work. It would be inappropriate for me to give direction on operational policing matters, but they are well aware of the priority that I place on tackling paramilitarism and organised crime. I think that most people in the House and an increasing number of people outside would readily admit that, in many cases, there is a paper-thin distinction between those who are engaged in organised crime and those who claim to be paramilitary organisations.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I advise Members that question 3 has been withdrawn.

Drug Misuse: East Antrim

2. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Justice what action her Department is taking to address drug misuse in East Antrim. (AQO 710/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department is working on a number of levels to address the issue of substance misuse across Northern Ireland. In partnership with the Northern Ireland Policing Board, we provide funding for policing and community safety partnerships (PCSPs). Those partnerships, in each district council area, have a lead role in identifying and addressing community safety and policing issues. The PCSP covering East Antrim has identified drugs misuse as a high priority and is delivering various initiatives to tackle misuse, including the provision of information and support to those at risk in order to raise awareness of the effects and risks of using and misusing illegal and/or prescription drugs. The PSNI is also involved in the delivery of a multi-agency drugs strategy in the mid and east Antrim district. That ensures that collaborative working is in place and that there is information sharing on threats, harms and risks so that they can be identified and enforcement action is taken against those intent on harming our communities. Since the introduction of the strategy in the mid and east Antrim district, PSNI supply and possession detections have increased. The PSNI is also referring more people to the relevant agencies to help them to get the support that they need to deal with the root causes of their vulnerability. That multi-agency approach also enables a range of support services to be directed to those identified as vulnerable and in need of protection. The Executive action plan for tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime supports a number of

projects operating in mid and east Antrim to address the harm caused to communities by paramilitary organisations, and the paramilitary crime task force (PCTF) is a specific resource that is focused on tackling the criminality associated with paramilitary groups, including the supply of drugs. Finally, the successful operational partnership working of the drugs subgroup of the Organised Crime Task Force was very clearly demonstrated only last week, when the PSNI, National Crime Agency and other partners successfully removed £1 million of cocaine from the drug supply entering Northern Ireland, disrupting the activities of that group of criminals.

Mr Hilditch: I pay tribute to those who are working on the front line in a difficult situation.

Anyone who watched the local news last night will be aware of the specific difficulties that criminal gangs bring upon East Antrim. The area is currently awash with the drug MDMA. There have been serious incidents involving young people, and we are lucky that we have not had a fatality. If it had not been for the emergency services, there may well have been at least two fatalities. Will the Minister use whatever influence she can bring to bear to rid our communities of these criminal drug-dealing gangs?

Mrs Long: The Member has my assurance on that regard. I want to see those drugs off our streets, and I want to see those who are vulnerable supported in such a way that they are no longer vulnerable to those who deal drugs on the streets. It is clear that, for many young people, even one experiment with drugs can end in tragedy. It is important that we get the message out that there is no safe amount of drugs that people can take. There is no safe threshold for experimentation with drugs. Young people should not risk their lives. People who are feeding that habit and feeding those drugs to young people need to take responsibility and be dealt with proportionately.

Ms Rogan: As the Minister will be aware, drug misuse affects all communities in all constituencies. Often, it derives from a more deeply rooted cause. That was recognised with the introduction of a trial of the substance misuse court. Can the Minister give an update on that court?

Mrs Long: The substance misuse court is one of a number of opportunities that we have taken in the Department to try to tackle the causes of crime as well as the outworkings of it in the community. It provides an opportunity, as a problem-solving court, to pilot more innovative ways forward and to address those issues. The substance misuse court is part of an overall strategy that is there to help individuals tackle the issues directly or indirectly associated with substance misuse.

We also have support hubs, enhanced combination orders that operate in specific areas, a family drug and alcohol court that is currently being evaluated and the mental health court, which is currently subject to a scoping study. We are finalising a draft problem-solving justice five-year strategic plan based on evidence from the independent evaluations of those initiatives that includes consideration of options for their roll-out to other areas to produce the right outcomes for individuals, families and communities.

Mr Beattie: Having received another phone call this morning from the police outlining a new threat against me from the south-east Antrim UDA because I dared challenge them about their drug activities in that area, I

ask the Minister to confirm absolutely that any of those people who are arrested for drug offences will not find themselves in a separated prison regime?

Mrs Long: First of all, I condemn those who are behind the threats against the Member. It is completely unacceptable that any Member of this or any other House, is subject to threats by illegal organisations for speaking their mind and representing the people who elected them to do so. I find it particularly invidious when they are being threatened for standing up for the rule of law. I condemn those who are behind those threats and offer my support to the Member in question for what he has been put through on the issue.

With respect to the allocation of people to the separated regime, as the Member is well aware, the decision on whether a prisoner enters the separated regime is not one for the Department of Justice; it is a decision that is made by the Secretary of State according to the rules laid down by the Northern Ireland Office. The duty of the Department of Justice is to support those in our care once they have been committed to our care.

Brexit Transition Period: DOJ Preparations

4. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her Department's preparations for the end of the transition period in December 2020. (AQO 712/17-22)

Mrs Long: My officials are working at pace with law enforcement partners, other Northern Ireland Executive Departments and the UK Government on operational readiness to ensure that my Department and our justice partners are as prepared as we can be for the end of the transition period on 31 December.

Relations between our Northern Ireland justice agencies and their counterparts in Ireland are also good. However, a non-negotiated outcome remains a possibility, and there remain unresolved issues around what measures will be available to law enforcement partners to tackle pan-EU crime and cross-border crime in Ireland.

2.15 pm

Until we have more clarity on the outcome of the negotiations, and until the outworking of the Northern Ireland protocol is fully implemented, we will be unable to prepare fully for exit from the transition period. The Internal Market Bill, recently introduced at Westminster, has created further confusion and uncertainty. The UK Government's intention to undermine the withdrawal agreement and the Northern Ireland protocol has the potential to impact upon the negotiations on the future security partnership with the EU. That is to be regretted.

I met the Home Secretary on 10 September, and, as part of a very constructive meeting, I took the opportunity to reinforce that a lack of detail about the negotiations and about the implementation of the Northern Ireland protocol is hampering our ability to plan fully for exit from the transition period.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her response. The clock is ticking to the end of the transition period; we are running out of time. Does the Minister agree that lack of agreement thus far on data adequacy and civil justice measures poses a real risk?

Mrs Long: The Member is correct: there is currently no agreement on data adequacy. I have reinforced to UK Ministers the need for measures to mitigate any negative impacts that might arise from a loss of unrestricted cross-border data flows.

Data sharing is crucial to law enforcement in Northern Ireland, particularly in tackling cross-border crime. It also underpins many of the EU criminal justice tools and measures relied on for the detection and prosecution of pan-EU crime. I am concerned about the potential loss of access to those justice measures that support the fight against such crime. Loss of access to vital tools such as the Schengen information system (SIS2), the Prüm Convention, and the European criminal records information exchange system (ECRIS) would be detrimental, with the potential to seriously compromise Europe-wide investigations. Therefore, adequate, efficient and effective data sharing with EU countries in the future will be vital in maintaining operational capacity, particularly with Ireland. The PSNI share and receive data with other law enforcement partners daily. We have been engaged with Home Office colleagues to ensure that that future security partnership will be able to take things forward.

With respect to the issue of civil justice, it is being negotiated not as part of the future security partnership but as part of the wider trade negotiations, and, as such, is not a priority for the UK Government at this time.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answers so far. Brexit will probably mean the loss of access to some of the important EU justice and security cooperation mechanisms. I wonder, in the light of that, whether the Minister has had any meetings with her Southern counterpart. If so, can she detail what those meetings have been?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for that question. I have, indeed, had discussions with Minister McEntee, and, obviously, Brexit is one of the issues that has been highlighted. It is also worth Members noting that should the future security partnership not be agreed, as it is coupled at present with the trade negotiations — both have to be agreed for either to be implemented — we would be entirely reliant on the protocol to be able to negotiate bilateral arrangements with Ireland in order to move forward. Therefore there are challenges if we do not have the protocol, in that we move back to the cliff edge.

There are about 40 EU justice and security measures that would fall under a no-deal Brexit. Their loss would impact significantly on the ability of the UK law enforcement agencies to address pan-EU crime, including cross-border crime on this island.

Mr O'Toole: It seems, from what the Justice Minister is saying, that we face a crisis at the end of this year in law enforcement if we crash out without a deal. Will the Minister confirm that the protocol does not cover justice and security measures? Will she further confirm that her permanent secretary told the House of Commons Select Committee this time last year that not having the European arrest warrant would increase the burden on law enforcement agencies to swap information across the border? Will she further raise as a matter of urgency at the North/South Ministerial Council the need to ensure that we

have adequate protections in North/South law enforcement on 1 January next year?

Mrs Long: There are a number of threads to the question. First, the future security partnership is making much better progress in negotiations with the EU than the trade partnership appears to be making at this remove. The future security partnership is in everyone's interest. Much of the crime that we have in Northern Ireland is not generated here; equally, crime that is generated here can happen anywhere in the rest of the EU, so there is mutual benefit to us finding an agreed way forward. The difficulty comes if it remains coupled to the trade negotiations and those trade negotiations are unsuccessfully concluded, because we will end up with neither a trade agreement in place nor a future security partnership. It is true to say that, if we do not know exactly what the trade arrangements will be, we risk creating a much more complex landscape for our justice agencies, because we will have layers of non-compliance, from those who are ignorant of the requirements on their business, to those who are deliberately ignoring the requirements on their business, to those who are in the black market. What we do not want to do is punish people who genuinely want to comply with the law by creating any grey areas and forcing them into an area of non-compliance.

It is a hugely important and serious issue. We could end up in a situation where, for example, European arrest warrants and other key tools that we have been able to use have to be renegotiated under bilateral agreements with each individual country, if we are not able to do that as part of the overall agreement that is reached with the UK at that level. I do not believe that that is a helpful way forward. We have those tools in place. I think that our focus has to be on getting an agreement on, if nothing else, the future security partnership so that we can at least secure the future and make our population feel safe, even if we do not get to the point where we have an agreed trade agreement.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage Members to continue to rise in their place if they still have a question to ask.

Miss Woods: Can the Minister outline what budget has been allocated in the Department of Justice to address Brexit issues and whether any funding issues have arisen in the last couple of months?

Mrs Long: I do not have figures to hand on the amount allocated so far to EU developments, but I know that, at the moment, we do not have any additional budget issues. However, we, as responsible account holders, have raised with the Department of Finance the potential for this to become a very expensive process if we end the transition period without an agreement, because, obviously, it will become very difficult and, potentially, more cumbersome for law enforcement agencies as well. At this point, we are not in that situation. As you know, Brexit issues are being handled separately from the normal Budget, so it is not causing pressures in the Department's budget at this point.

Legal Costs

5. **Mr Frew** asked the Minister of Justice what plans she has to support those facing the cost of professional legal representation due to repeated legal action by an ex-partner. (AQO 713/17-22)

Mrs Long: Legal aid for some family cases is subject to a means test and a merit test, which means that there are circumstances when only one parent will be entitled to legal aid. There are, however, a number of protections in place to reduce the potential for abuse. When considering a legal aid application, the Legal Services Agency may consider an applicant's legal aid history and other factors such as inter-party correspondence, information from the instructing solicitor and previous proceedings or court orders. Anyone concerned about the use of legal aid funding in a case can also write to the agency. It is also possible to make an application to the court, or for the court, of its own motion, to make an order preventing further applications for contact or residence without leave of the court. While it is important to have those checks in place, it is equally important to recognise that parental disputes that revert back to court can involve a degree of acrimony that makes it unlikely that arrangements for children will be sustained. Supporting relations between parents is key to avoiding that acrimony and the potential negative and financial consequences of parental disputes. I am working with the Department of Health to consider actions that might be introduced to improve outcomes for families and children.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for her response. This encroaches on the issue of access to justice for many people, and I understand that. Given the fact that some use court as a weapon against an ex-partner by running down their resources and savings, which can hurt and affect children in the short term and long term, is there anything that the Minister's Department and the court processes can do, apart from what she has outlined here, to protect those people who find that their, in many cases, lifelong savings are dwindling? Is the Minister actively looking at her Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill to try and achieve something in that regard?

Mrs Long: Of course, the Member is right. All of us, as Members of the Assembly, will have been approached by parents who believe that there are vexatious returns to the family courts to try to exacerbate loss of income and earnings and the cost of legal representation. To be clear, the family courts, in general, are supposed to be there to try to get mediated solutions, and should not be a combative place. However, you are correct that, once somebody has legal representation, things will dramatically escalate. The merit of applications and how they progress is a matter for the judiciary and they are best placed to assess the need for an adjudication and to manage how parties engage to guard against such vexatious behaviours. In considering applications relating to children, the paramount consideration under the legal framework — The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 — is the welfare of the child. The impact and the degree to which litigation furthers child welfare will inform those judicial decisions. It would, therefore, be very difficult to develop an alternative framework for moderating the exercise of parental rights and responsibilities or preventing applications being issued. However, as part of the work that we are doing around the Domestic Abuse Bill, you will be aware that we want the family courts to be able to take cognisance of the fact that, if someone has had a conviction, under the Domestic Abuse Bill, that should be taken into account when they are making their decisions.

Ms Flynn: Does the Minister have any plans to reform the legal aid system?

Mrs Long: The legal aid system was extensively reformed by David Ford, during his tenure as Justice Minister, and it is not my intention to undertake major reform of the legal aid system at this time. However, there are some areas of legal aid that do require further consideration and the Department is taking those forward at the moment to ensure that the system is fair and accessible to those who need it, but also that it does not create the sorts of disparities and issues that Members have already referred to during this session.

Mr McNulty: Further to Mr Frew's question and supplementary question, what protections are in place to protect someone who has been subjected to persistent unfounded legal action?

Mrs Long: I have already referenced that the judge can, of their own volition, decide that the case is vexatious and can make an order that, for any further hearings to be brought before the courts, they will require leave of the court to do so. If that is not happening as a result of the judiciary acting independently, the person who feels that they are being vexatiously pursued through the courts can, of course, appeal to the judiciary; they can write to them to ask them to do that.

Antisocial Behaviour Review: Update

6. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the antisocial behaviour review. (AQO 714/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department carried out a consultation in 2018, inviting public opinion on a number of legislative proposals aimed at addressing antisocial behaviour. A full summary of responses was published on the Department's website in December 2019. Since then, my officials have established a multi-agency review group to consider the effectiveness of current antisocial behaviour legislation in managing antisocial behaviours, as well as any new legislation that may be required. In parallel, my officials have commenced a scoping exercise to identify, where possible, an evidence base that will indicate how successful some of the proposed legislative measures, as introduced in the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 and as set out in the consultation document, have been. Recognising that legislation alone will not resolve this issue, the review group's work is also seeking to inform discussion on the barriers and solutions to managing non-legislative responses to antisocial behaviour, including greater use of preventative and early intervention initiatives to address behaviours and any structures to allow for partnership and collaborative working.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Minister for progressing this really important work. Does she have capacity in her legislative programme to strengthen the law in this area before the end of the mandate?

Mrs Long: It is very important to say that responses to the consultation were very mixed. There were no conclusive areas where everyone agreed that we should take forward additional legislation, which is why the cross-sectoral working group has been set up. As a result of that, there is some complex work going on to develop an evidence base. It is, therefore, unlikely that we will bring forward new legislation in this mandate to deal specifically with antisocial behaviour. However, the non-legislative approaches, which I have referred to, may be able to take that forward.

2.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of our time for listed questions to the Minister, and we now move on to topical questions.

Illegal Dumping: Border Areas

T1. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Justice what action she has taken to prevent illegal dumping in border areas. (AQT 401/17-22)

Mrs Long: Responsibility for illegal dumping lies primarily with the Department of Agriculture, rather than the Department of Justice. However, there have been a number of operations that have taken place jointly over many, many years, particularly where that illegal dumping is also related to organised crime or other illegal activity.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister for her answer. I believe that there is an area in Newry and Armagh which is known as the Carrigatuke viewpoint, which is at Fews Forest. There have been a number of dumpings over the last number of years, but more so over the COVID period, and commercial waste has been involved. I ask the Minister to engage with her Southern counterpart and the Agriculture Minister to try to prevent that kind of illegal dumping at Fews Forest.

Mrs Long: I will be more than happy to do so. It would be helpful if the Member could write to me giving more detail of the particular allegations. I can get those followed up with the Department of Agriculture and, indeed, on a cross-border basis.

Contempt of Court

T2. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice, while following up Paul Frew's question and referring to questions that she has previously asked the Minister, whether a more streamlined contempt of court system could be introduced, given that, especially during the COVID restrictions, with the issues going on and on and on, the time during which absent parents cannot see their children is growing longer. (AQT 402/17-22)

Mrs Long: The first thing to say is that the handling of individual cases is a matter for the judiciary and not something in which I can intervene. When cases take slightly longer than is perhaps ideal, that is not something on which I can intervene personally. However, we are making every effort, given COVID, to recover the system as rapidly as possible, and we have focused on those areas where there are particular harms that could accrue from not being able to access a judgement.

As you will be aware, earlier during the coronavirus crisis the Lord Chief Justice's office published guidance for families who are struggling with family contact in order to put in place measures where they could actually seek the support of the judiciary where orders were being broken. These are very sensitive matters, and they require sensitive handling. I understand the point that is being made, but it is really for individuals who find themselves in that situation to pursue that with their own solicitor and with the judge who is in charge of their case.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answer. On the second point that Mr Frew made about the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, we know that at

Westminster children are part of their domestic abuse Bill. We also know that, for many parents out there, there is good reason why an absent parent should not be seeing their children; there certainly is good reason behind that. However, for many there is no good reason. Will the Minister look at that in the domestic abuse Bill? Not seeing their other parent is abuse against a child.

Mrs Long: There is obviously an issue where the court has already made a ruling. I think it would be fair to say that relationships between parents have already broken down, and so the children are already disadvantaged in that regard. It is much to be preferred if, at the break-up of a relationship, parents can work together in the best interests of the children and form a cooperative relationship at that level. Once it gets to court, things always get more fraught, and that is part of the challenge that we face.

With regard to the domestic abuse Bill and children, we do have issues. Children are an aggravating factor within the Bill; if a child is exposed to domestic abuse in the home, that will be taken into account. We have also listened very carefully to the Committee with regard to the importance of the family courts, recognising that where someone has, for example, been found guilty of a domestic abuse offence in the past, that should be considered in looking at things like child contact and how that may be arranged. However, as I said in answer to Mr Frew earlier, it is hugely important that we recognise that the family contact arrangements that are operating in the courts are there for the benefit of the child, and solely the benefit of the child. Often they are not welcomed by the parents, but they are there in the best interests of the child and protecting their access to both parents.

Charlotte's Law

T3. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Justice, given that she will know that Lisa Dorrian's family is from North Down, and that she will have received correspondence from that family and from the family of Charlotte Murray as part of their campaign for Charlotte's law, for an update on her position on the proposal to change the law. (AQT 403/17-22)

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for the question. First, anyone who has heard the story of Lisa Dorrian and of Charlotte Murray will recognise the huge pain and the added anguish that not knowing where their remains have been laid creates for the families as they deal with their grief. I had planned to meet Charlotte's and Lisa's families prior to COVID restrictions being introduced, but those meetings have had to be postponed. My office has been in recent contact to try to reschedule those meetings as soon as regulations and guidance permit us to do that.

I acknowledge that such matters are routinely considered by the Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland when assessing prisoner suitability for release on licence. However, I have already commissioned a focus consultation with key stakeholders on Charlotte's law, or Helen's law, as I think it is known in England, to run in parallel with finalising the outcome and next steps flowing from the sentencing review, including legislation where that is appropriate. As part of that, I have asked my officials to very urgently engage with the Parole Commissioners and with other stakeholders, and I will give

detailed consideration to the way forward in light of those discussions. There is an Assembly motion scheduled for next week seeking the introduction of legislation similar to Helen's law, so I will also be listening to that debate very carefully and reflecting on the points made there as we seek to take this forward.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her response. The body of Lisa Dorrian has never been recovered to date. There is a bench in Castle Park in Bangor in memory of Lisa, and one of the hardest moments for me is when people ask what the bench is for. It is to remember somebody whose body has never been found. Will the Minister join me in encouraging anyone with any information whatsoever to bring it forward to the police so that we can enable the recovery of Lisa's body?

Mrs Long: I have no hesitation whatsoever in doing so. It is part of the grieving process for any family that has been subjected to such a traumatic loss to be able to bury the remains of their loved one and also to be able to revisit their grave, to be able to spend time there and to come to terms with the loss that they have suffered. To not only rob a family of their family member but to rob them of that opportunity for grief and for healing is, I think, a despicable act. I encourage anyone who can help any family in that situation to come forward and be of assistance.

Case Processing Times

T4. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the findings of the statistical bulletin published last week by her Department on case processing times for criminal cases dealt with in courts in 2019-2020. (AQT 404/17-22)

Mrs Long: I think that everyone will recognise that this has been an incredibly difficult period for the court system, and it has been a challenging period for us in being able to take forward the normal justice system. We have had to work through that, and we now, as you know, have been able to restart work on jury trials. We have also now been able to start to reopen courts in addition to the first one that reopened in Laganside last month. We are intent on being in a position to start to deal with the backlog, but there are many moving parts to that. It requires the cooperation of the police, the PPS and the judiciary itself in scheduling those cases. We are working through that, and, thankfully, to date, through the Criminal Justice Board, we have been able to achieve a stable way of going forward.

I think that the criminal justice system has had to respond very rapidly and innovatively, because we need to maintain confidence in the system not just with our own staff but with the public who use the system and those who are in our care. We are looking at a model for when backlogs will be cleared so that we can give people some certainty around that. In general, there is clearly a significant backlog, but it is one that we are determined to try to work our way through, and we are using some innovative means, including looking at alternative venues, to be able to expedite that process, particularly focusing on those vulnerable victims for whom long waits may lead to higher attrition rates with those convictions.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, thank you for your answer. Although on paper there is a 10·8% decrease in the median time taken for a case to be dealt with, in reality, for most Crown Court cases, the average reduction was only from 866

to 861 days, which is not much of an improvement for victims. Will the Minister take steps to ensure a significant improvement in these case times?

Mrs Long: Post-COVID we expect those times to increase and I think that that is the reality of where we are at. I think that we were very fortunate going into the crisis that we had had that 10% reduction in terms of with regard to case progression. It is also worth noting that in the autumn I intend to bring forward a committal reform Bill, which should expedite the system and allow for cases to be heard much more quickly than is currently the case. The Assembly and the Committee will have an opportunity to scrutinise that Bill, and hopefully not before too long.

Interfaces: North Belfast

T5. **Mr Humphrey** asked the Minister of Justice, after associating himself with the Minister and Mr Muir's remarks about the Dorrian family — indeed all families who find themselves in that dreadful situation — whether she agrees that interface structures, whether gates, walls or fences, can be removed only with the support and agreement of the community on either side, given that she will know that there are more interfaces in North Belfast than in any other constituency in Northern Ireland and that, in a normal society, we would want those interfaces to be removed. (AQT 405/17-22)

Mrs Long: We in the Department are committed to working on interface structures and, of course, not all of them are in the ownership of the Department. We are committed to working with people on the ground to build the trust and confidence that is necessary. I think that we also need to be honest and to say that we cannot always wait for the slowest moving part to agree to those interface barriers and structures being amended and changed, because to do so would mean that no change would ever happen. There is, of course, anxiety when we remove those structures because people rely on them for a sense of safety and security. Therefore, it is important that, as we move towards the removal of structures, we bring the community with us, and also that we put in place alternative mechanisms for people to deal with their anxieties and with community and dispute resolutions in a way that is more constructive than perhaps has been the case in the past.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Minister used the word "trust" but in many cases that trust is not there for very obvious and understandable reasons. I thank the Minister for her words but there can only be — and we will only support — the removal of those structures if that trust is there in both communities. I want to see society normalised as much as the Minister does, absolutely. Last night I visited lower Oldpark where three homes have been attacked in the last eight days — there have been sustained attacks on that community. People are very nervous right across North Belfast, where we had a very difficult summer, and the Department and the police must take those views, concerns and fears into consideration.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member and I assure him that we absolutely do take those fears into consideration. We also have to be conscious that this is not a normal society — much as we wish that it were — and we recognise that there are huge anxieties which stem from historical — and

also current — incidents of intercommunal violence in those neighbourhoods. We always try to proceed with the precautionary principle in that we want people to be confident and to feel safe in their homes. That is the purpose of the work that the Department does and I assure the Member that people's fears will not be disregarded by my officials.

Prisons: Segregation

T6. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Justice what actions she is taking to address the inconsistency of the fact that, as party leader, she opposes segregation, division and duplication and, yet, as Justice Minister, she presides over segregated prisons. (AQT 406/17-22)

Mrs Long: There no inconsistency because I inherited a system seven months ago that is as it is, and it is my duty to ensure that everyone who is committed to our care, whether they in the separated system or they are in the main body of the prison, are properly cared for, and that responsible measures are put into place to take care of them. I, like the Member, would like to see an end to separation because I recognise that it is an anomaly, and an unhelpful anomaly within the system. It is also a costly one, so I by no means try to diminish it. However, I believe that the solutions to separation in the prison do not just lie within the walls of our prison system, they also lie with the community outside.

Mr Nesbitt: I ask again, what steps is the Minister taking to address this issue?

Mrs Long: Again, I remind the Member that the arrangements on separation lie with the Northern Ireland Office and the Secretary of State. When they commit someone to our prisons and to the separated regime then my duty is to ensure that that person's wishes are respected and that the prison system does its job. It is not my duty to direct the Secretary of State.

2.45 pm

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Potato Crop: Wet Weather

1. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the impact of the recent wet weather on the potato crop. (AQO 724/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): My Department's assessment is that the recent wet weather in August has caused some localised flooding in parts of the Kilkeel and Newcastle areas and has led to some disruption of blight control programmes and difficulties with the desiccation of potato crops across Northern Ireland. As we now move into the main period for potato harvesting, DAERA staff will continue to monitor the situation as the effects of waterlogging on a potato crop are difficult to evaluate until a number of weeks later, usually at harvest. Furthermore, the DAERA staff will continue to provide technical advisory support to Northern Ireland potato growers to maximise business performance.

Mr Nesbitt: I believe that there has also been flooding on the Ards peninsula, but, of course, flooding is not a responsibility of the Minister's Department. How well does he think the relevant Departments are coordinating and coming together to help the growers?

Mr Poots: Well, thankfully, we have had a couple of weeks of drier weather, and, for some people, potato harvesting has already started. There is an outstanding issue over an EU-imposed obligation that material that was previously used to burn off potatoes is no longer available. That has caused considerable problems in the desiccation of the potato crops. One suggestion was that, if the plants do not desiccate properly and the stem does not separate from the potatoes, the farmers could flail the potatoes, flail the tops. However, the wet weather has a consequence for that, and it is clearly unsuitable to put heavier tractors and flails in to do that. Farmers would not be capable of doing that, so that is a cause of significant concern.

Ms Dolan: Will the Minister update the House on the application for approval for an emergency use of diquat for 2020?

Mr Poots: I have had several submissions on that. I had a conversation yesterday, and I am to receive a further submission today. The chemicals regulation division (CRD) is the advisory body, and CRD has advised that we should not use it at this stage for a number of reasons. It has come from the European Union, in the first instance, that it is not something that it wishes to be used any longer. However, the recommended replacements are not working, and therein lies the problem. When farmers go to harvest their potatoes, they find that it has not done the job properly. Therefore, this year, I need to consider whether I can allow farmers to use diquat as a means to burn potatoes off. That is something that I am giving consideration to. I know that a number of countries in Europe have already given exceptional consideration to that and have granted its use.

Mr Allister: On the same theme, Minister, I would certainly encourage you to take that step on the diquat. Denmark, Finland and Austria have all given approval. What is the timescale for you reaching a conclusion? Time is now of the essence as far as potato harvesting is concerned.

Mr Poots: As has the Republic of Ireland. Two applications have been made to CRD, and it has rejected both applications. However, it is very apparent that the materials that have been recommended are not fit for purpose for the job that is required. Diquat was not removed from the market because of the danger to consumers; it is more about its users. However, these are all significant issues. There has to be another material found to replace it, and I have to take all those matters into consideration but have asked for further updates so that I can take everything into account and give a final decision on it very soon.

Flora and Fauna: Invasive Species

2. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action his Department is taking to address invasive species of flora and fauna. (AQO 725/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is aware of the negative impact that invasive alien species (IAS) can cause to the local environment, with an invasive alien species strategy

launched by the then DOE in 2013 detailing actions such as targeted eradication, awareness raising, research and development. The ongoing strategy has brought together many different stakeholders, including local councils, NGOs and other Departments and agencies such as the Department for Infrastructure, Forest Service, the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) and the Loughs Agency to work towards dealing with the threat of IAS.

The Invasive Alien Species (Enforcement and Permitting) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 came into force in December 2019, giving the Department more effective enforcement powers to take action against 66 species of European Union concern, including 11 widely spread species. The underlying EU regulation not only makes it an offence to permit the spread or release of any of those species but makes it illegal to sell, keep, import, breed or cultivate any of the 66 — 30 animal and 36 plant species — with a special emphasis on the 11 widely spread species. There is now an expectation, as part of a national obligation, on landowners to manage and remove those 11 species from their land. The Department has commenced working proactively with landowners in relation to the 11 widely spread species, to advise them of their responsibilities and to secure management measures from those landowners on how they plan to manage and remove the species from their land. My officials are currently following up on over 60 of those queries with a variety of landowners, including farmers, business owners, councils and other Departments and agencies.

My Department has also produced multi-agency plans for high-risk species that have not yet arrived in Northern Ireland, such as the Asian hornet, along with pathway action plans with a biosecurity focus to endeavour to close down potential routes for IAS to arrive in Northern Ireland. The Invasive Species Ireland website, managed by departmental officials, provides full guidance on confirming ID, management techniques and legislation, and the associated social media streams provide up-to-date news and information. My Department continues to encourage and fund, via the environment fund and environmental farming schemes, many community groups, non-governmental organisations, farmers and landowners to carry out management and removal of invasive species from their land, prioritising designated and high-value biodiversity sites.

Mr Easton: Will the Minister outline what the Department is doing to help control giant hogweed?

Mr Poots: Giant hogweed was recently designated as a widely spread species (WSS). For WSS, the regulation requires effective management measures to be put in place, so that their impact on biodiversity, the related ecosystem services and, where applicable, human health or the economy is minimised. Management measures consist of lethal or non-lethal physical, chemical or biological actions aimed at the eradication, population control and containment of a population of species of Union concern. My Department is, therefore, being proactive and following up every record of giant hogweed entered via the official monitoring scheme and is requiring detailed management measures to be supplied by all landowners.

Miss Woods: The Minister will be aware of the devastation and difficulties that are caused by Japanese knotweed. Will the Minister outline whose responsibility it is to deal

with and remove Japanese knotweed at Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) sites, such as Redburn Country Park in my constituency?

Mr Poots: The EU Invasive Alien Species Committee is responsible for the listing of species of Union concern, as opposed to my Department. The EU IAS Committee explains that some well-known IAS are not listed, either because they do not have a risk assessment, the risk assessments do not include some of the information required by the regulation or there was insufficient evidence that the species met the criteria for listing. In this instance, there was insufficient evidence for the committee that inclusion of Japanese knotweed on the Union list would effectively prevent, minimise or mitigate its adverse impact. As a result, the IAS Committee decided that the listing would not be able to make a significant difference to a species that was already so widely spread throughout the European Union.

Mrs Barton: Minister, can you please detail what action the Department is taking to address the invasion of zebra mussels in our inland waterways, particularly Lough Erne?

Mr Poots: Again, all these species are, first and foremost, the responsibility of those who have ownership of properties. The zebra mussel issue has been going on for some time, I understand, particularly in Lough Erne. It is a big problem for boat owners, and it is certainly something on which I am happy to correspond further with the Member.

Plastics: Food Packaging

3. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how his Department will promote a reduction in the use of plastics in the packaging of food. (AQO 726/17-22)

Mr Poots: We must be careful not to demonise all plastic. Plastic packaging has many beneficial properties, such as prolonging the life of food, which reduces harmful carbon emissions from food waste. Plastic packaging not only protects food from damage but is very light and significantly reduces the transport-related climate emissions of the many food items that are shipped around the UK. That said, DAERA has joined the other UK Administrations in becoming a member of the UK Plastics Pact (UKPP). In contributing to the pact, the Department is directly funding the work of its organisers, the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), to develop and disseminate approaches to reduce the environmental impact of plastic packaging. Membership of the pact also enables the Department to use its contact networks to share innovations, data, analyses and reports with businesses.

Packaging technologists at DAERA's College for Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) have assisted the local food and drink sector with 50 knowledge and technology transfer projects this year. As well as helping local businesses to select the most appropriate packaging type for their product to optimise its quality, shelf life and cost-efficiency, CAFRE's technologists actively support businesses wishing to explore sustainable alternatives to plastic packaging. CAFRE is working with food and drink processors from the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA) to facilitate better engagement between the manufacturing sector

and policymakers to help create an improved, shared understanding of the use and potential reduction of plastic in food packaging.

A further significant area of work by the Department is on the reform of the UK-wide packaging system, leading to an extended producer responsibility (EPR) scheme. That places responsibility on producers for the full net cost of managing their products once those products reach their end of life. Producers will be incentivised through the introduction of modulated fees to reduce unnecessary and difficult-to-recycle packaging and to design and use packaging that is recyclable.

Ms P Bradley: As a shopper, I am becoming increasingly aware of the overuse of single-use plastics and of aluminium cans that we use every day. We all have a responsibility there.

I notice that Scotland is to introduce a deposit return scheme (DRS) by 2022. When are we likely to see something similar in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: My Department has consulted already on a deposit return scheme. We have asked for further evidence and analysis to inform a decision on the way forward. I want to make sure that any deposit return scheme is right for Northern Ireland, draws on the evidence and on what works elsewhere in the world and achieves our goal of reducing litter from drinks containers and improving their recycling. Specific details on a scheme will be developed and presented in a second consultation.

I know that there are concerns in the industry about the DRS. I have seen evidence of other ways of doing it. For example, a barcode could be put on an item. You could then deposit it in your green bin, but that would mean that it was going to be recycled.

There is potential to do it other ways, such as returning the barcode to reclaim your deposit. It may not be about sending all the material back to the initial manufacturer. There may be other and better ways of doing it.

3.00 pm

Ms Mullan: Considering that, globally, we dump 8 million tons of plastic into our oceans each year and that, unless we act decisively, there will be more plastic than fish in our oceans by 2050, is the Minister willing to go a step further and consider a total ban on all non-essential plastics?

Mr Poots: I would consider it, but, as I indicated in the first paragraph of my initial response to this question, plastics are not exclusively bad. Nonetheless, we need to reduce the amount of plastic that we are using, particularly plastic that is used from virgin materials, and we need to ensure that that plastic is recycled and reused and does not end up in our oceans or landfill. It is important that if we are going to use plastic, perhaps on occasions when there may not be a better alternative, that we ensure that it is used appropriately thereafter and does not end up in our oceans.

Mr McGlone: I thank the Minister for his answer. The thread of what he is saying is that it is important that businesses are informed and incentivised, as is happening, thankfully, through CAFRE. Has he considered the third option, which is where Ms Mullan was taking us, of enforcing a reduction in the use of plastics that are not required?

Mr Poots: Absolutely. That is something that the Department will look at. CAFRE provides the most amazing services to businesses, including in food development. We are privileged to have the facility at Loughry college in Cookstown, which is in the Member's constituency. A lot of work is done there on packaging, because it is critical that we do packaging well and in a way that has least impact on the environment. That is the goal of everyone in the House.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for the range of information that has been provided. I do not think that I missed this piece of information. Is there a date or time frame in which we can expect to see a proposed plan to eliminate plastic pollution, as promised in New Decade, New Approach over eight months ago?

Mr Poots: There is no date as yet, but it is a course of work that the Department is doing. There has been a considerable reduction in the use of single-use plastic bags, for example. I need to consider the reusable bags, because there is a fair bit of evidence that a lot of people are not using them a lot more than once. They may buy a reusable bag but use it only once. I need to look at those issues and consider upping what we are charging for single-use plastic bags, as well as putting an additional charge on reusable bags so that we can encourage people to reduce the number of bags that they use. That has been a big success story so far, and I trust that we can build upon it.

Ms Sugden: Has the Minister considered hemp as an alternative to plastic and an opportunity for farmers to grow a versatile, sustainable crop now that licences are available in Northern Ireland?

Mr Poots: People and businesses are looking at a range of products, including hemp and eucalyptus, and the opportunities that they offer. Some of the alternatives will use huge volumes of water, which is not good, and some will be considerably heavier and therefore have a greater impact on the transport industry, take up more space and, in turn, be less efficient. All those things will be looked at. Some larger companies are working hard to ensure that they can meet their environmental obligations. We will support, chivvy along and encourage — and seek to enforce, where necessary — companies to do their bit to ensure that we produce a better environment.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage all Members, and the Minister, to use the microphones so that Hansard can pick up everything that is said, and Members can hear clearly.

At the commencement of Question Time, I omitted to advise Members that questions 6 and 9 have been withdrawn.

Air Pollution: Impact of Homeworking

4. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department has carried out an assessment of the impact that homeworking has had on air pollution in our towns and cities. (AQO 727/17-22)

Mr Poots: Apologies, Mr Deputy Speaker. I like to look at the person who I am responding to.

My Department continually monitors the quality of air across Northern Ireland. That includes monitoring

pollutants such as particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide. Given the respiratory nature of COVID-19, my officials continue to monitor air quality levels across Northern Ireland on a daily — and, if necessary, hourly — basis. Where necessary to protect public health, a high air pollution alert is issued.

Throughout the lockdown period, officials provided weekly updates to the departmental operations centre and to the Committee, as required. Officials are working with external contractors to look more closely at the trends in pollutants during lockdown to consider the relevant atmospheric chemistry and reactions that occur between pollutants, and to assess the extent to which any changes brought about as a result of lockdown, such as an increase in homeworking, have had any influence on trends in air quality.

My officials will continue to monitor the data collected. I encourage everyone to download the new Northern Ireland Air app to receive the most up-to-date information on the quality of air across Northern Ireland.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his answer. I hope he agrees that homeworking, although forced upon us because of the pandemic, is, potentially, hugely beneficial in dealing with transport and associated air pollution problems, which kill too many people in my constituency, and in other constituencies, every year, especially when it comes to those who are able to work from home and prefer to do so. Will the Minister, with his Executive colleagues, commit to exploring the benefits of allowing people to work from home in the long term if they so wish?

Mr Poots: What has been forced upon us, in terms of people working from home, has demonstrated that there was a much greater opportunity to work from home than was recognised before COVID-19. It is important, however, that people are brought back to their places of work, where it is possible to do that safely. Even in the Departments, by not having as many people in our offices, we are not fulfilling our roles just as well as we otherwise would. At the same time, there are massive opportunities for people to be at home for two, three or four days a week. That will, obviously, have significant benefits in reducing travel, pressures on the roads and all of that.

I am totally with you on people working from home but not to the detriment of the service that they are providing. Government and, indeed, others need to reflect on that.

Dr Archibald: Although the pandemic has been an international tragedy, one side effect has been a brief reprieve for the environment. Global carbon emissions fell by as much as 17% at the height of lockdown. Greenhouse gas emissions are predicted to be down by as much as 8% over the year. What steps are you taking, with your Executive colleagues, to ensure that we do not lose some of those gains as we restart the economy?

Mr Poots: As part of my green growth strategy, we will look at all opportunities where we can support businesses and agriculture to continue to grow but in a more sustainable way. I want to see growth on the one side and a reduction in emissions on the other, so that we are reducing greenhouse gases and the carbon that goes into the atmosphere whilst allowing growth to take place. That is essential for our economy and it is essential for our young people as they go out looking for jobs. We cannot go backwards and be regressive when it comes to creating

opportunities for our young people to get jobs here. It is important that, on the one hand, we get that growth but, on the other hand, seek to challenge issues around the environment.

As part of the green growth strategy, we will be setting up — I will certainly be requesting that it is set up — an inter-ministerial group that will oversee that. Through that group, we will work appropriately with the other Departments to ensure that we have a cleaner and greener Northern Ireland going forward. We should all aspire to that.

Mr Catney: I have seen this at first hand because my children have been lucky enough to be able to work at home. Does the Minister intend to encourage and support working from home as we try to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic?

Mr Poots: The Government's instruction remains that people should work from home if they can, and many people across the Province continue to do that. On the one hand, I am very supportive of people working from home, but I also want to ensure that we get 100% productivity, and, for many people, that will be case. However, in some areas, it is a little more difficult if we do not have people in offices. With some of the services that we provide — for example, DAERA Direct offices — we need people in offices to provide that face-to-face service, with social distancing and all of that. That is critical going forward.

Ammonia Emissions

5. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on his Department's work to reduce ammonia emissions. (AQO 728/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is developing a comprehensive strategy to address the ammonia challenge. The draft strategy will propose a series of farm measures to reduce ammonia, conservation actions to improve the condition of habitats, and a revised operational protocol for the assessment of air pollution effects. We intend to publish these proposals for consultation soon.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his answer. The Minister stated in AQW 256/17-22:

"The Department's current operational protocol for the assessment of impacts of ammonia emissions"

was based on

"best practice guidelines ... rather than on specific legal advice."

Is the Minister confident that the policy in question and his instruction to Shared Environmental Services (SES) on how to assess ammonia from any potential development are lawful under the EU habitats directive?

Mr Poots: I believe that they are, yes, particularly in the light of the fact that we are working extremely hard to bring forward proposals that will, in actual fact, reduce ammonia. In instances where ammonia could actually be reduced because a new building was replacing an older building and better practices were in place, SES was arriving at decisions and refusing those proposals. That was entirely illogical, because you were getting an investment in a business and reducing the ammonia coming out of that business but the business was still getting a refusal. That

type of thing has to be knocked on the head. We are working to ensure that, over the next number of years, we will see real reduction in ammonia. Why continue with a planning procedure that is not working when you have the opportunity to put in place something that will work? I would have thought that the Member from the Green Party would want to ensure that we have a better environment and would be supportive of what we are doing in this instance, because we are working to ensure that we get a significant reduction in ammonia.

I should add one other thing in reference to our peatlands and bogs. A bigger issue than ammonia in our bogs is the dryness, on many occasions, of our bogs, and the wetting of peatlands would achieve more in capturing carbon than what was being proposed on ammonia, what was being done on ammonia and even what we would do on ammonia.

Therefore, a series of tools has to be used to reduce the carbon footprint and protect the environment.

3.15 pm

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his response. He will be aware that any proposal that is brought forward to reduce ammonia could have a disproportionate impact on smaller hill farms. As the Department begins to assess the impact of proposals, does the Minister have any mitigations in mind to avoid a disproportionate impact on those small farms?

Mr Poots: I am happy to work with the farming community and other parties on how we bring this forward. Doing nothing is not an option. We need to reduce the amount of ammonia that is currently going into the environment in Northern Ireland. We also want to encourage people to be able to have a business that will support their families. I believe that both are achievable. I will work with the hill-farming community and other members of the community to deliver on that.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Justin McNulty for a quick question.

Mr McNulty: In the '80s, there were 5,000 breeding pairs of curlews. Now, there are 130. That is a 97% reduction. Many other species are also threatened. The disproportionately high level of ammonia production on this part of these islands is having an adverse impact on the environment. Given the destructive impact of ammonia on the environment, and the threat that it presents to many species, is the Department exploring any innovations to ensure that that destructive agricultural by-product is utilised in an environmentally safe way? I know that reduction is probably less difficult —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I had asked for a brief question, or we will have a very brief answer. I ask the Member to finish his question.

Mr McNulty: Reduction is probably less difficult than utilising a different approach.

Mr Poots: I encourage the Member to visit Glenwherry hill farm, where there has been a massive increase in the number of curlew, hen harrier, snipe and all the other species. That has been done on the basis of good management. I would like to see that spread out right across Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That is the end of the period for listed questions. We will now turn to topical questions.

SPS Checks: Points of Entry

T1. Ms Ennis asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he is committed to implementing those elements of the protocol that will ensure that his Department is operationally prepared at the end of the transition period in relation to sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks at points of entry, and whether those designated points of entry will meet EU specifications. (AQT 411/17-22)

Mr Poots: A good question is whether everybody is prepared to do that, because, at this stage, one of the issues outstanding relates to IT. There seems to be an issue with an IT system that has been used in the UK for many years and the EU's non-acceptance of it, which will almost certainly ensure that we are not operationally ready. There is quite a number of issues where that is a live problem.

Ms Ennis: The Minister will be aware that Warrenpoint port resides close to an area of special scientific interest (ASSI). Can he give assurances that any point-of-entry infrastructure at Warrenpoint port will not intrude on the ASSI?

Mr Poots: That is not a matter that I am taking forward. The senior responsible officer is looking after it. I do not wish to see any further point-of-entry developments at Warrenpoint port. I have made that clear to George Eustice and others. However, the UK Government wish to see it. They want to pay for it. They have given very clear expectations to the senior civil servant in this case who is taking it forward. That is the case. I have no legal remit to stop it, in that all the advice that has come from the Departmental Solicitor's Office and indeed the Attorney General indicates that a ministerial direction to an official which would oblige that official to break the law is not one that would have any standing.

Native Species: Ammonia Pollution Levels

T2. Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given that he will be aware of the devastating biodiversity loss arising from ammonia pollution levels exceeding critical nitrogen thresholds across our special areas of conservation (SACs) and protected habitats, to detail how his Department is working to prevent any further ecological damage and to reverse the declines that are evident in native species. (AQT 412/17-22)

Mr Poots: Yes, we can. I would like a wide and potentially all-embracing means of addressing those issues, and ammonia is a key part of that. We believe that we can reduce ammonia emissions by, for example, stopping slurry spreading that uses the traditional splash plate in most instances and moving to a low-emissions spreading operation by 2025. We are giving people some time to acquire the appropriate equipment. That is a course of work that will help.

Covering open tanks would also reduce the amount of ammonia, and there are opportunities from having more separation of slurry because it is when the urine and the

faeces mix that you get the greatest release of ammonia. So, if we can have more separation in the slats that are provided for animals to lie on, that will be part of a range of work that will proactively reduce ammonia levels.

We can probably get a reduction of 15% to 20% quite quickly, which is significant in and of itself, but getting much further than that will require significant investment. The capacity to make that investment does not exist in agriculture, and it will therefore require support from the Government if we are serious about it.

I have asked my officials to bring forward proposals that would look at how we can get to net zero in agriculture. Those proposals will include ways for us to deal with the ammonia issue at the same time. That will involve a capital infrastructure programme, which will mean that we, as an Executive, will need to support it financially.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his answer. The fact that 86% of our special areas of conservation exceed critical nitrogen levels by over 200%, and in some cases by over 300%, raises serious questions over how that was allowed to happen. Will the Minister outline what failures in monitoring and enforcement have been identified by his Department and how they will be addressed?

Mr Poots: Northern Ireland has seen a lot of growth in agriculture over that period. The Member must remember that Northern Ireland, as small a country as it is, produces around 10% of the food for the needs of the United Kingdom. So, we are punching well above our weight in agriculture. We can also punch above our weight in delivering our agriculture in an environmentally responsible way. That is something that we can work on with the farming community. Going into a circumstance and starting to direct people on what they should be doing generally does not get the best response. Going in with a spirit of cooperation, assisting and helping where possible, will deliver real results. That is what I am about: results.

We can make a really big impact for good on a lot of the reductions, and not just in agriculture. We can do a lot to become carbon neutral in Northern Ireland over the next 20 or 30 years. For example, over 40% of our power comes from renewable sources, which is way above the proportion in any other part of the UK. We can go much further than that. If you want to make big savings in terms of environmental benefits, agriculture, the energy that we use and transportation are the three key areas. We can tackle all three areas and make this one of the greenest places to live in the world over the course of the next generation.

Ordnance Find: Ardglass

T3. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he agrees that the comments of the Member of Parliament for South Down, Mr Chris Hazzard, regarding the World War II ordnance that was accidentally picked up by a trawler out of Ardglass were, at best, unhelpful and appreciates the bravery and skill of our Army bomb disposal teams who dealt with the incident and who, during the years of the Troubles and beyond, had to deal with many unexploded and volatile devices that were left under cars, in roadside ditches and in close proximity to schools by people such as those after whom the MP's office is named. (AQT 413/17-22)

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. I suggest that it is more embarrassing than anything for the Member of Parliament for South Down to come out with the statement that he did, given that, as I believe, the ordnance dates back to the Second World War. We should be glad of anybody who was prepared to risk their life in order to make the ordnance safe. I am greatly appreciative of the people who served in the Second World War, such as Captain, now Sir, Tom, who demonstrated bravery to us not only back then but bravery and resilience to us now in their response to COVID-19. Perhaps the MP from South Down could learn something from someone who served in the British Army, like Captain Tom.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I again encourage the Minister to use the microphone so that everyone can hear clearly.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister for his response.

Rural Uplands: Biodiversity

T4. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the rural upland areas and the role that they can play in building biodiversity. (AQT 414/17-22)

Mr Poots: The rural uplands have many opportunities. We have a lot of blanket bog in Northern Ireland, which captures vast amounts of carbon. Sometimes that blanket bog has been undermined by, for example, inappropriate tree planting, and the trees have absorbed a lot of the water that would end up in the bog. The drier the bogs, the more carbon they release and the less carbon is captured. We are looking at that. However, for those farms that have reclaimed land around bogs and are benefiting from it, that land will end up being wetter and therefore not as useable, so we need to identify and compensate those farmers so that we can ensure that the carbon capture takes place and that it is not one individual or a number of individuals who take the pain of doing that through loss to their business.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. What biodiversity success has been achieved in Glenwherry hill farm?

Mr Poots: Glenwherry hill farm is very exciting in that it has straightforward good management practice. We have seen the reintroduction of many species such as the hen harrier, snipe, curlew, red grouse and many other bird species indigenous to Northern Ireland that were lost or whose numbers were way down. In fact, we recently had a golden eagle at Glenwherry.

Agricultural practice on the farm is done in a way that still delivers growth rates of, for example, 1.2 kg per day for each suckled calf whilst delivering huge environmental benefits. It is about how we can develop and use that skill base on facilities like that and apply it to other farms so that they can maximise what can be achieved environmentally whilst maximising what they can achieve agriculturally by producing good-quality food.

Puppy Sales: Coronavirus Pandemic

T5. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the apparent boom in puppy sales during the coronavirus pandemic. (AQT 415/17-22)

Mr Poots: Unfortunately, puppy farming has not gone away, and I think that the Member and a number of other Members have asked questions about the export of pups through our ports here in Northern Ireland.

People's dogs produce pups, and many people are doing that in a very sustainable and appropriate way. They love their dogs, and a female dog may produce a litter or two in its lifetime. Those people sell the pups, and that is entirely reasonable. However, there are others who are exploiting dogs and selling them to people who do not realise that they are buying something that has come from a puppy farm.

More needs to be done. A number of Departments could be involved in that, as well as local government, to ensure that animal welfare is a high priority and, therefore, that the welfare of dogs and pups is made a priority.

3.30 pm

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the Minister's commitment to animal welfare. Does he acknowledge concerns that an apparent boom in puppy sales could see an increase in abandoned puppies? If so, what steps is he taking to encourage responsible puppy sales and to support animal welfare shelters?

Mr Poots: A range of Departments and, indeed, local government have a significant role to play in the registration of dogs, licensing and all of that. It is critical that each of the Departments that have a role plays that role to ensure that we identify and address any issues. We have issues with people who produce pups in less than desirable conditions. Where that is brought to our attention in the veterinary sciences end, our vets will deal with that. They will follow that up and ensure that animals are kept in welfare-friendly conditions. I give the commitment that our veterinary division will follow up any complaints or where its attention is drawn in any way to animals being kept in less than appropriate conditions.

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

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Health

COVID-19 Restrictions

Mr Speaker: Ms Claire Sugden has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Health. I remind Members that, if they wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who tabled the question will be called automatically to ask a supplementary.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health whether the latest COVID-19-related restrictions apply to those working from and providing services at their home.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I thank the Member for her question on the regulations. The restrictions exempt any person working from and providing services from their home. However, they must comply with the existing requirements to carry out a risk assessment and put suitable mitigations in place.

Ms Sugden: I remain disappointed that Members have to seek the limited opportunities to scrutinise Executive statements that should be made in the Chamber rather than in the Long Gallery. I am also disappointed that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have not come to the House to respond, given that it was their statement yesterday that has caused confusion among the public. However, I appreciate the attention of the Health Minister, and I further ask him whether we can expect additional restrictions, particularly in public spaces, such as the cafe and restaurant restrictions that we heard about from the British Prime Minister today?

Mr Swann: I am not sure whether the Member is aware, but there is an ongoing two-hour debate on the regulations that are already in place. I said during that debate that I would take questions on the regulations that are being brought forward. Her point about the Executive Office previously heading up or answering these debates has been made numerous times. That duty was passed to me last week, and I responded to the regulations.

I will be frank with the Member: I did not hear what the British Prime Minister said today because I was in the Chamber all morning. However, I have said that, if these regulations and restrictions do not curb the spread of COVID-19, we will have to look to further measures. I do not know the detail of what has been announced for England, but I make it clear to the Member that any restrictions for Northern Ireland will be brought forward by the Northern Ireland Executive through the House. I assure the Member — I will do it in the debate about the regulations — that I brought forward all five regulations today so that we could get up to date with the regulations that are currently outstanding. Any regulation that is brought forward has to undergo due process through the Health Committee, which I am fully supportive of. I will be open to the House for questions at any time, as I

have always been and as I have been every day since the House recommenced after the summer recess.

Mrs Cameron: I, too, have been inundated with queries about the NI-wide restrictions that come into effect at 6.00 pm tonight. Given the volume of criticism and the talk of confusion and mixed messages, will the Minister explore new ways of communicating the message on a country-wide basis and explaining the logic and the science behind every decision that is made?

Mr Swann: I thank the Deputy Chair of the Committee for that question. I apologise to any Member here who took part in the debate on the regulations: there will be duplication in my answers to the supplementaries to the question for urgent oral answer and my closing remarks in the debate on the regulations, which will take place directly after this question.

The communication plan was raised by Members in the debate earlier. There is an Executive Office budget and communication plan. There are further steps for wider communication on social media, and there will be radio and TV ads to emphasise the changes that have been made. The changes that we will make from 6.00 pm tonight across Northern Ireland were already in place across Belfast, Ballymena, BT43 and BT60 as of last week. The regulations are not new; they are new to the whole of Northern Ireland from 6.00 pm tonight.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat to the Minister for coming to the Chamber to answer this important question for urgent oral answer, which is reflective of people's views and concerns. Given the new restrictions and measures that have had to be taken now, does your Department plan to review or revisit the guidance around visiting in care settings, particularly maternity services and care homes?

Mr Swann: I thank the Chair of the Committee for that vital question. It is one about which I met the Chief Nursing Officer during the break. We are looking at specific guidance for hospital settings. We are all too aware of the restrictions that we need to put into hospital settings to protect patients and our staff. That updated guidance will come out. There will also be specific guidance for maternity settings. I said in answer, I think, to Chris Lyttle yesterday at Question Time that we are aware of the support that is needed for mothers coming into maternity units. That guidance will be updated. There will also be additional guidance for care home settings. We are aware of the challenges for residents and families, especially during this time when we see increased community transmission, and we want to ensure that visiting can proceed safely.

Mr Speaker: I call Pat Catney.

Mr Catney: My question has been answered, Mr Speaker. Sorry about that.

Dr Aiken: This is a point that has already been raised by the Member for East Londonderry; I had to get that right. I notice that the First Minister and deputy First Minister made themselves available to the media — one in the Great Hall and one outside the Building — less than two hours ago. Does the Minister agree that the Executive Office has been failing in its duty to provide messaging and communications appropriately to the Assembly and that, in some respects, bearing in mind that they have two junior Ministers, they are being disrespectful?

Mr Swann: I have made it clear in previous debates — I made it clear this morning — that I value the duty of the House to scrutinise all Ministers, all regulations and everything that comes forward. I have always made myself available to the House for questions for urgent oral answer, Adjournment debates and all-party debates and to take forward regulations such as earlier today. It was previously the work of the two junior Ministers in TEO to take the regulations through the House. However, I note from Hansard that what the First Minister actually said when she indicated to the House that the duty would fall back to me was that the junior Ministers would help to navigate the health regulations through the House. Given the pressures that TEO is now under, including developing the high street task force and in other areas, the duty to take forward the regulations has come to me. I cannot shirk that duty. I cannot shirk that duty as Health Minister, given the aim of the regulations. I will not play politics with it. I never have, and I never will.

Ms Bradshaw: Following on from this morning's debate, Minister, I raised with the deputy First Minister yesterday the issue of sharing best practice around the memorandum of understanding. I came across this, which is what they have in Dublin around the restrictions. As you know, I pushed from the start for us to introduce sign language to the press briefings. I also think that we need very clear imagery. You hear a radio or a television, but it is hard to digest. Can we look at using something like this across all the websites and social media platforms?

Mr Swann: I apologise to the Member. I do not have my glasses on, so I cannot see the detail from here, Paula. I will happily take it from you. It is vital that we make the messages as clear as possible so that everybody can understand them and we get as much compliance as possible across Northern Ireland so that we set about what we aim to do, which is to prevent the spread of coronavirus. I will happily take that off the Member later.

Miss Woods: Mr Speaker, my question has been answered.

Mr Carroll: Considering that the Tory Government recently told workers to get back to work only to U-turn on that in the last few hours, does the Minister share any frustration at the zigzagging and U-turning going on at Westminster? Given that the Executive have followed their approach on a number of occasions, is the Minister concerned that some quarters of the Executive at least may be following the Westminster line too closely with little independent thinking?

Mr Swann: I have never been accused of not having independent thinking. Presbyterians from north Antrim are assured of our independent train of thought. I assure the Member that I do not follow direct direction from Westminster. I follow the guidance and advice of our Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) to make the right decisions for the people of Northern Ireland at every opportunity. That is why the Executive guidance is clear that those who can work from home should still work from home, especially as we get into this next phase of the pandemic.

Mr Easton: Is there a timescale in place to assess whether the new measures will work and whether any further measures will be needed?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point about timescales. The only timescale that is critical here is the timescale of the virus. It will not follow any calendar, any rule or any regulation that we set. We have always maintained that we will look at measures every two weeks. We review our regulations every 28 days to see if the two-week period of incubation that the virus has is having an effect.

In fact, as I said in this morning's debate, we were seeing a decrease in positive cases in BT43 and the Ballymena area due to the measures brought in over a week and a half ago. So, we have evidence that introducing and applying measures that are adhered to across Northern Ireland has an effect. I ask anybody listening to this, and anybody who wants to take a message from this question for urgent oral answer, please, re-engage with the vital health message of social distancing, good respiratory hygiene, good hand hygiene and face coverings.

3.45 pm

Ms Ennis: I draw the Minister's attention to the guidance issued for assisted living settings. I have spoken to various stakeholders over the last few days, and there seems to be a bit of confusion on the part of the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) and the Public Health Agency (PHA) over the interpretation of the guidance. Meanwhile, places like Camphill in Killeel, which is in my constituency, are caught in limbo. Will the Minister commit to reviewing that guidance, taking cognisance of the fact that there is fundamental difference between a care home setting and an assisted living setting?

Mr Swann: Again, the Member has made a valid point. As I said earlier, I met with the Chief Nursing Officer, and it was specifically for care home and hospital settings. I will take the Member's point away and make sure that, if there is a need for clarification in future communications on the change in regulations, it is communicated.

Mr Durkan: I concur with the points that other Members made about the need for clear, concise and cogent messaging on what are, on the face of it, pretty complicated regulations. Will the Minister confirm what, if any, implications the introduction of the new restrictions will have for separated parents and their access and childcare arrangements?

Mr Swann: There should be no implications. From the beginning, it has always been clear that, in regard to separated partners having access to their children, the regulations should not be used as an excuse not to have access or as an excuse to deny access.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his responses today. My clear view is that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister should be in the Chamber today giving us more details on this, but that issue has already been discussed.

The communication around the recent regulations has been, frankly, suboptimal. This morning, I had people on the phone who were in tears, not knowing whether visitors were allowed into homes if essential maintenance was needed, or whether they were allowed to bubble with single-person households or multiple-person households. Some of this arises from the fact that the nidirect information does not mirror the legislation. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that the information on the website that people refer to mirrors what is in the legislation?

Mr Swann: Very much so. Now that this has been expanded across Northern Ireland, we are facilitating a further question and answer session on topics on the nidirect website to cover all eventualities and a number of the questions that we have been asked today. That is to provide clarity and assurance to people who we are asking to follow this. It was Mr Sheehan who referred, in this morning's debate, to the contract. We have an obligation to make sure that the contract is understood so that people adhere to it. That work is ongoing. Will we cover every eventuality in our regulations and our guidance? I will say no, because there are so many peculiarities when trying to take a measured approach that allows certain freedoms in certain areas for the individuals who need them. However, when we see those peculiarities being raised and addressed, we will look to give the correct guidance and advice to those who seek them.

Mr Allister: If I understood the Minister's response to Ms Sugden correctly, when it comes to a domestic home that is used as a B & B, that service can continue and guests can still come to that house. However, that person's neighbours and wider family cannot come to the house. Is that correct?

Mr Swann: The Member is referring to the utilisation of a home as a business. The local restrictions allow those working from home to do that. Therefore, the regulations exempt any person who is working and providing a service from home. However, they must comply with the existing requirements to carry out risk assessments and put suitable mitigations in place. If people are using their home as a B & B, meaning that it is operating as a business, those mitigations must be in place, and they must take all reasonable measures to limit the risk of coronavirus transmission.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagraí. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Given the deteriorating situation, North and South, has the Minister had any communications with his Southern counterpart to coordinate measures and restrictions? Has the Minister any plans to publicise the new daily cases per 100,000 in the North?

Mr Swann: The new daily cases per 100,000 are published by local council area for the past seven days, and the seven days before that, so you can see a change in the trends and incidence of cases. The information is available on our dashboard.

I last spoke to the Minister of Health in the Republic of Ireland at 9.45 last night. I wanted to give him a specific indication of what we are doing in these regulations and to see what further steps he is taking, given the high incidence of the virus in Donegal and Louth. We are concerned and want to make sure that there are no interactions on either side of the border that are affecting the spread of the virus.

The Member may also be aware that a North/South Ministerial Council meeting in the health sectoral format is scheduled for 2 October. The meeting was due to take place in Armagh, and it will proceed. However, we will take cognisance of all the regulations.

Ms Flynn: My question has been answered.

Mr Gildernew: We have discussed the theme of confusion. Can I highlight the issue of the many foreign

nationals who work and live here, and who are already struggling to keep up. They are often some of the most marginalised and vulnerable in society. I know you have indicated that materials have been issued in some languages. In my constituency of South Tyrone, there are, potentially, fourteen languages, though some are spoken by smaller pockets of people. What direct engagement has there been with those communities, or can you expedite communication directly with their leaders?

Mr Swann: The issue of foreign nationals was particularly looked after an outbreak in a meat processing factory. We are aware that those workers need additional support and information. The PHA provided leaflets — I will check this — in seven different languages to make sure that we covered everyone who was working in that facility and lived in the local area. Again, we are fully aware that no matter what we say in here, on the BBC, or in the 'News Letter', 'The Belfast Telegraph' or the 'The Irish News', it is not being picked up by our ethnic populations who are living in Northern Ireland. So the translation of the guidance is being provided by the PHA.

Mr McGrath: Maybe some of your departmental officials can help us with *déjà vu* as you have been answering so many questions in the last few days, and no other Ministers have been.

The question for urgent oral answer specifically asks about the restrictions applying to those working from and providing services at home. Have you had any conversations with the Minister for the Economy, given that there will be many tradesmen and others who will not be able to go into people's homes to provide services, which will leave them with a loss of income?

Mr Swann: The Executive brought forward these regulations. The Minister for the Economy is fully aware of these regulations. Some of the restrictions, mainly relating to household gatherings, allow building or maintenance work or the services of any trade or profession. However, that is taking into consideration all reasonable measures and a risk assessment to limit coronavirus transmission.

Mr McAleer: Do the latest COVID regulations have any implications for the use of community halls?

Mr Swann: The focus of these regulations is solely about restricting household gatherings. We may have to bring forward further regulations and restrictions for larger social and sporting gatherings should the virus progress over time. The regulations are to do all that we can to prevent the social actions that spread the virus in household settings. I hope that the restrictions will have the desired effect. If they do not, we will have to take further actions.

Mr Speaker: That concludes this item of business. Thank you all very much. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

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

Executive Committee Business

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We will now resume the debate on the health protection regulations. I call the Minister of Health to continue his winding-up speech.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. If you missed the highlights from this morning, I am sure that you can catch up with them and the answers to the urgent oral question in Hansard. I will try not to repeat any answers that I gave in the debate this morning because we are debating a serious issue.

In my responses to Members, I got round to answering Justin McNulty, who signalled the concern that we have been echoing for quite some time, which is about complacency. We saw throughout the summer months that when the weather was good, the number of cases was low and very few people were in hospital. The feeling was almost as if we were through the worst of it. That feeling started to set in and, at that stage, it was an easy message to understand and an easy position to accept. However, it was the wrong one, because we now know that we are where we are. Mr McNulty recognised the importance of a community effort, because we have relied on community groups throughout the pandemic.

Pat Catney talked about the mental health challenges that are out there. We know the challenges that we have faced and we know about those that will come after the pandemic. That is something that the Health Committee has kept bringing back to the table. From the very beginning, when we started to speak about the pandemic, Órlaithí Flynn sought the reassurance that our mental health action plan and mental health strategy are still on course. It is still on course, and we have added COVID-specific detail to it. We have appointed an interim mental health champion, who is doing sterling work across the sector.

Alan Chambers spoke about the need for a common-sense approach. If common sense was in such abundance that we did not need the regulations, I would be assured and would be more than glad that we could take that approach. Unfortunately, it is not, and we are seeing the outworking of that — in a very small minority — across Northern Ireland. However, those actions have repercussions where people think that it is OK to do that, and that is where we see the spread of the virus.

Mr Chambers also mentioned one notable musician from Northern Ireland who has made some interactions. To paraphrase him, the regulations are about bringing us from the dark end of the street to the bright side of the road. It is not an easy move to make and that is why we are asking the people of Northern Ireland to stick with the message that the health professionals give.

4.00 pm

Moving on, Mr Allister referred to the challenges that come with delivering a message, and he is right. After six months, this message is not easy to keep giving and it is one that is not easy to keep hearing. However, it is one that I need to give and that people need to hear, because we are seeing an increase in cases. He rightly spoke of proportionality. Just to realign the focus on cases, when we see an increase in the number of cases, that leads to an increase in the numbers of hospitalisations, people in intensive care beds and deaths. The regulations we are bringing are in proportion to those increases. Today, 33 people are in hospital and five are in ICU. I want to arrest that increase now. We are doing that by advance testing, so we are seeing more cases, but it is about the translation from positive cases to hospitalisation and ICU. As I said in response to Alec Easton's question, there is a two- to four-week time lag. So there are —

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give way? The Minister said that all this, Province-wide, limited restriction is about suppressing the spread of the virus, but how and when do we ever get off this roundabout? Is this virus going to die out? Are we going to have to wait for a vaccine? Or does there come a point when we face the fact that we are going to have to live with a virus which, frankly, is not adversely affecting the greater number. Certainly, it is serious for some, but not in the proportions of the past.

Mr Swann: I know where the Member's line of questioning comes from. The Member says it is not serious for the greater number, but my duty is to protect that small number. It is our Executive's duty to protect them, and the House should take reasonable steps to protect them as well. He talks about the roundabout. If I knew when this would finish, I would not be here. I would be somewhere else, making an awful lot more money and doing different work.

We are seeing the development of vaccines. Members recall where we were with seasonal flu vaccines, and that is important. This is about that six-month period of how we manage to live with this virus. That is the important phrase that often gets lost when people hear it. We live with this virus by bringing in regulations, like these, to prevent the spread of it, so that more people get the opportunity to live. That is where the challenge comes with the messaging. The Member was right about that, and he highlighted the challenges that come with a five-party Executive. It is not all plain sailing, but there is one thing that reassures me. The message is that we do what we can to save lives, by bringing in these regulations and the support packages. I wish actions matched those messages as well. That debate has been had, and it is not something that needs to be expanded.

I turn to Mr Carroll's contribution. Gerry, I fully support your call for solidarity in the wearing of face coverings. I have no problem with that, or the advantages and benefits that it brings. Those who can wear face coverings should do so. We know, and have seen, the difference it can make.

Mr Aiken commented on the small minority. Unfortunately, these regulations, their enforcement and compliance, is about making sure that those in that small minority adhere to the message.

To conclude, much has been said about communications and messaging. Many Members have emphasised the

need for clarity of messaging, and I agree. It is very important that we are careful not to create confusion. However, it is also important that everyone appreciates that we are responding to a very rapidly changing and dynamic situation. We have measured a significant increase in positive cases in the past week, and rapid changes in policy are required to address the increasing risk to the health of the public.

The Chair of the Committee raised a specific question. Discussions are regularly taking place between the four nations of the UK on a range of matters, including the communication of public health information. Our overall messages should be aligned and consistent: regular hand washing, social distancing and the wearing of face coverings. The Executive have set out their own road map to recovery and renewal, and decisions on the unfolding local context are based on medical and scientific advice. The Executive Office will deploy a high-impact public information campaign, using television, radio, print and digital platforms, to ensure that people in Northern Ireland understand how to stay safe and to save lives. The Chair of the Committee asked about the funding for that in my Department. The money for that communication side rests in the Executive Office through the Executive information service.

I hope that I have answered as many as possible of the Members' queries and questions on the five regulations and as part of my response to the urgent oral question, which was part of and fitted well into the debate. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask Members to take their ease while we change the Chair.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

United Kingdom Internal Market Bill

Mr O'Toole: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises that a trade deal between the United Kingdom and the European Union is critical in protecting the interests of everyone living in Northern Ireland; expresses deep concerns about the UK Government's approach to negotiations and the terms of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill; rejects any argument that the Bill is necessary to protect the Good Friday Agreement; further rejects the unilateral move to undermine the authority of the devolved institutions contained in this Bill; affirms its commitment to upholding international law; mandates the First Minister and deputy First Minister to take a formal position opposing the UK Internal Market Bill; and calls on the Prime Minister to respect the will of the people of Northern Ireland and the principles of devolution.

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

Mr O'Toole: As I rise, I am again reminded that we are living in the midst of the greatest public health emergency of our lifetime. That, in turn, has caused a profound economic crisis. None of us yet know how big the proportions of that crisis will be. We are just 100 days from the end of the transition period and a potential further shock to our economy. That is for no reason other than unbending ideology.

In moving today's motion, let me first reiterate a message from a previous Assembly motion that I moved on Brexit that the transition period should be extended beyond the end of this year. It is both economically reckless and immoral that the UK Government refuses to do so.

4.15 pm

Today's motion is about the Internal Market Bill. First, it makes it clear that it is overwhelmingly in the interests of everyone living in Northern Ireland — indeed, everyone in these islands — that a trade deal be struck between the UK and the EU in the coming weeks. If a deal is struck, it is unlikely that it will be anything more than the thinnest possible arrangement providing zero tariff and zero quota trade between the UK and the EU. Even that, however, would be better than the extraordinary act of self-harm that no deal would represent. If that were to happen, the UK would have the same trading relationship with the EU as is enjoyed by Mauritania or Mongolia, a remarkable position to end up in, given the claims made during the referendum campaign, including claims by some on the Benches opposite, that the EU would rush to give the UK unparalleled access to the single market. Anyone who thinks that we do not need the protections provided for in the protocol should consider that. If there had been no protocol and the UK had left the transition period without

a deal, trade between businesses in Dundalk and Newry would have taken place on World Trade Organization (WTO) rules. In trading terms, the North would have had less access to the market on the rest of this island not just than Singapore or Canada but than Madagascar or the Solomon Islands, all of which enjoy preferential trade partnerships with the EU that go beyond WTO rules. All of that, Mr Speaker, is to state why the protections in the protocol, though imperfect, are essential. That is why the attempt by the UK Government to nullify the provisions in the protocol via the Internal Market Bill is so serious.

Over the past few years, the speed of events and the volume of information and change that all of us have had to process have been dizzying. That sense of bewilderment is, in many ways, one of the most effective tools of the populist, and Boris Johnson is certainly a populist. Therefore let us remember what he said about the deal that he is now repudiating via the Internal Market Bill:

“it is oven ready ... you just put it in the microwave and there it is.”

However, anyone watching the House of Commons two weeks ago will have seen the Northern Ireland Secretary stand at the Dispatch Box and say that the UK Government intended to repudiate the Bill by undermining it and breaking the law in narrow and specific ways. That is not how international law works. The international rules-based order is not based on countries arrogating to themselves the power to break their obligations as and when it suits them. If you do not believe me, take it from none other than the Brexiteer former Attorney General, Geoffrey Cox:

“we simply cannot approve or endorse a situation in which we go back on our word, given solemnly not only by the British Government ... but also by Parliament when we ratified this”.

Take it also from that other famous closet pan-nationalist and liberal Remainder, Michael Howard:

“How can we reproach Russia, China or Iran when their conduct falls below internationally accepted standards ...?”

Many Brexiteers and, indeed, some Members opposite have been quick to criticise prominent US politicians, including the Democratic candidate for the presidency, who have warned against the UK breaching its obligations in the withdrawal agreement and, by extension, its obligation in the Good Friday Agreement. Let me say this: think about who is speaking out on this. Think about the reputation — I say this with the greatest of respect — of the country that you are passionate about remaining part of. The current UK Government are fast developing a reputation as an irresponsible actor on the world stage.

Let me move on to some of the specifics and specific problems of the Bill. First, it has been claimed loudly that it is about protecting the seamless flow of goods, especially food, from Great Britain into Northern Ireland. That is a remarkable claim, since nothing in the Bill makes provision for the movement of goods from Britain into Northern Ireland; it all relates to goods moving the other way. Just another casual lie and misrepresentation from Boris Johnson and his populist Government.

We want the protocol to operate as seamlessly as possible; I cannot state that enough. However, that is

not what the Bill does. It gives UK Ministers the power to disapply unilaterally certain provisions of the protocol. That would plunge Northern Ireland into legal and administrative chaos. The protocol and its requirements would still exist — indeed, the UK Government claim that they intend to uphold the protocol, notwithstanding the specific and narrow breaches — but we would be left in an extremely invidious position in relation to our access to EU and UK markets. That is not a position that any of us should want our economy to get into, especially not in the current circumstances. I go back to what we have been discussing and debating in the Assembly today and in the House of Commons at Westminster. Does anyone think that it is acceptable for our economy to be plunged into chaos at the end of this year in the middle of the biggest global health emergency in a century?

There is a further fundamental problem with the Bill: it represents a clear undermining of the devolved settlement not just in Northern Ireland but across the UK. Part 6 provides UK Ministers with sweeping powers to spend money however they please on the full range of devolved competencies. That Part, which is less than half a page long in the Bill, is in fundamental contravention of the principles undermining devolution. It is no wonder that the Scottish and Welsh devolved Administrations are opposed to it. Let me say this: it was the Labour Administration in Wales, not a nationalist Administration, who opposed it. It also undermines the Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act, which puts the provisions of the Good Friday Agreement into effect.

There has been much commentary about what is and is not in the Good Friday Agreement. Let me clear: a hard Brexit and all that goes with it, including the Bill, contravene the agreement in, to use the British Government's language, narrow and specific ways. For example, of the dozen specific areas of North/South cooperation mentioned in the agreement, all but a few are either underpinned by or interact with EU law; indeed, coordinating the delivery of EU funds is, in itself, one of the North/South implementation areas specifically mentioned in the agreement. The Bill, as I have said, attacks the devolved competencies provided for in the agreement. Paragraph 3 of strand one states:

“The Assembly will exercise full legislative and executive authority in respect of those matters currently within the responsibility of the six Northern Ireland Government Departments”.

Paragraph 4 states:

“The Assembly — operating where appropriate on a cross-community basis — will be the prime source of authority in respect of all devolved responsibilities.”

Clearly, Part 6 of the Internal Market Bill is in direct contravention of that.

More broadly, the Bill is another example of the shock to the central nervous system of the relationships and assumptions that underpinned the agreement and remain critical to the functioning of our institutions and the broader set of relationships across these islands. Those relationships are precious to us and to my party. To those who are frustrated and bored by us constantly talking about them in the Assembly and at Westminster I say that we are not going to stop. We will not stop talking about

them, we will not stop bringing motions to the Floor of the Assembly and we will not stop tabling amendments to the Bill at Westminster, using our colleagues there.

To unionist colleagues who are uncomfortable with the notion of checks in the Irish Sea, I want to say this: I acknowledge those concerns. I particularly acknowledge those concerns coming from members of the Ulster Unionist Party, many of whom sincerely voted to remain. I have said throughout the process that the entirety of a hard Brexit is a shock to the principles underpinning the Good Friday Agreement, but I ask this, given the conduct of the current UK Government and the red lines that they have set out since 2017 and particularly since Boris Johnson became Prime Minister: what is the alternative? To those considering whether to back the motion today, I say this: think about whether Boris Johnson is a man to be trusted; think about how he has lied to you before; think about whether the Bill is really what our economy or our institutions need.

The UK Government have repeatedly made great claims about respecting the consent of the Northern Ireland Assembly; they even had that written into the withdrawal agreement. Let us make it clear that the Bill does not have our consent. For obvious reasons, I will not hold my breath on a clear statement of intent from the Executive, but let us be clear that the Assembly rejects the Internal Market Bill, upholds the principles that have underpinned our institutions and affirms that commitments made in peace agreements and international treaties should not be the plaything of demagogues. I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Mr Givan: This feels like round two, as we debated the issue yesterday; indeed, the Member for South Belfast repeats the same arguments, and I have no doubt that we will hear the same arguments again from those on the Benches opposite and the Alliance Party, as part of the nationalist movement on the issue. Nevertheless, we will confront them and expose the hypocrisy around the issues being raised. The motion, to which, it goes without saying, we will object, because it is flawed in its content, talks about a UK-EU trade deal being “critical” — so it is, so it is — but, by 1 January, in three months’ time, will that be achieved? There is a huge question mark over that. What else can the sovereign Government of the United Kingdom do but prepare for the European Union continuing to be intransigent and continuing to threaten and bully and be ready for any eventuality that does not do harm to its people or, at least, mitigates that harm? The Internal Market Bill goes some way but not anywhere near far enough. The Government have given assurances that they will address further issues in the Finance Bill with more amendments. I do not trust Boris Johnson or the Conservative Party to do the right thing for this place, because, time and time again, they have let the unionist people down. That will not stop us advocating in the interests, we believe, of all our people and the unionist perspective.

We need certainty for our businesses and consumers, and that is absent. The withdrawal agreement and the protocol hands the leverage to the European Union to use us as a pawn in a much bigger plaything. Do Members really think that Michel Barnier and those who lead the European institutions care about Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland? Do you think that the French put a priority

on this place over their fishing industry, as they seek to exploit every opportunity to get access to the UK’s waters? That is the priority for your European comrades whom you seek to have greater allegiance to. They will always give precedence and priority to their people, as opposed to what we have to do, from all perspectives, which is to represent our people.

When we think about the protocol, we are talking about tariffs, increased paperwork around regulations, declarations and imports, regulatory checks on agri-food and manufacturing being subject to certification and inspections. We think of the fisheries aspect, which the Joint Committee may well be able to subject to rules and EU customs declarations. We think about the agricultural support, with the Joint Committee again holding the power to set upper limits on farm subsidies that would be in line with the common agricultural policy (CAP). We think about the state aid issues as well. The magnitude of this is not something that should be glibly commented on by Members opposite. When you consider that £355 million is being announced for a trader supporter scheme funded by the UK Government, that should crystallise the magnitude of what we are talking about. Members opposite, supported by the nationalist Alliance Party, continue to prioritise their political ideology over the reality of the implications for our business community and consumers.

When it comes to the Internal Market Bill, what business organisation has said that they are opposed to it? They may not like the tactics that have been deployed, but, when it comes to the substance of the Bill, give me a business representative organisation that has said that they do not like the substance of it. They may not like the tactics, but I have not heard them saying that they do not agree with removing the potential for barriers. It is important that we deal with this and deal with it effectively.

I want access to both markets. I want access to our Great Britain market, and I want access to the European market. The Members opposite, supported by the Alliance Party, put precedence on the EU single market at whatever cost and in whatever circumstances. That is what they voted on yesterday. Members talk about consent and the Good Friday Agreement, but they did not worry yesterday that not a single unionist voted for their motion. No, they continue to ride roughshod over the concerns of the unionist community and their representatives. That is something that we will oppose.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for giving way. He talks about access to markets: does he agree that on the issue of free ports, for example, we should seize the opportunities that that can bring, especially for the likes of the Foyle port in my constituency.

Mr Givan: The Member makes a valid point. The UK Government have said that one of their objectives is to have special circumstances for free ports to maximise economic opportunities, but state aid rules would have implications for that and, of course, nothing will stop the predatory neighbour in the Republic of Ireland — that is what they are, when it comes to commercial activities, corporation tax, the way they go after our airports with Dublin Airport and when it comes to ports, including Warrenpoint, Foyle and Belfast — using European institutions to frustrate those economic opportunities. That is more important for the Members opposite and the Alliance Party.

We need to represent our people and act in their interests. The Belfast Agreement, whatever it is worth to the Members opposite, spoke about respecting the integrity of the United Kingdom for as long as the majority of the people of Northern Ireland wanted to.

The withdrawal agreement and the protocol breach it, but the Members opposite and the Alliance Party could not care less. I oppose the motion.

4.30 pm

Ms Anderson: Tá mé ag labhairt i bhfabhar an rúin seo. I speak in favour of this motion. The British Government, without doubt, should withdraw the Internal Market Bill immediately and retract the threat of replicating similar provisions in future legislation. The Bill undermines the Irish protocol, it amends the 1998 Act — the legislative outworking of the Good Friday Agreement — and it is an attack on our power-sharing arrangements. These are the provisions that override the protocol, attempt to block judicial reviews and erode international and domestic law.

There is a clear attempt in this Bill to give priority to the British internal market over the future priorities of our power-sharing Administration. This could have a particularly severe impact on the work here to advance equality, human rights and environmental protections.

The dreams of future generations cannot be crushed by the imposition of a Tory nightmare vision of the internal market. The provisions of the internal market risk undermining the human rights and equality protections in the Irish protocol, which states that there should be no diminution of rights. Therefore, the Equality Commission, the Human Rights Commission and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission should use their powers under the protocol to raise concerns with the specialised committee. We need to hear a clear message from the commissions, and we need to hear it this week. They need to stand up for equality and human rights and use the powers that they have to maximum effect. Now is not the time to cross fingers and hope that things will not happen. Now is not the time for silence. We warn the NIO not to undermine the significant role that those commissions have under the Irish protocol. The commissions need to be effective and robust, so the NIO must not decimate institutions that are central to the Good Friday Agreement.

The British Government will not impose their cold-house vision for rights and equality here. There is an urgent need to hardwire additional guarantees — those unequivocal commitments that were made on the European Convention on Human Rights — into the future relationship agreement currently being negotiated between the British Government and the EU. The political declaration refers to both the European Convention on Human Rights and the Good Friday Agreement. We simply — the world, simply — does not trust the British Government, given what we know of their current threats to the human rights convention. The common travel area promises are still not adequately reflected in law, policy or practice. Many are going to discover that these guarantees, and the guarantees given, are meaningless in practice. We want to see the damage limitation guarantees implemented. The Irish protocol needs to be protected, and it needs to be protected in full.

The shameful attack by the British Government has rightly been condemned around the world. It has even been

condemned within the governing party. However, it does raise an additional question. We have another option. We certainly do have another option, and Sinn Féin invites all those parties that are committed to the return of the North to the EU to discuss the scope for the development of an agreed position. Sinn Féin endorses the recent proposals from the constitutional conversations group. Sinn Féin would welcome the opportunity to discuss common ground with others. We need to engage with each other on how we are going to share this island differently in the future.

Dr Aiken: I thank my friend from South Belfast and, indeed, my friend from the Finance Committee for tabling this motion, although, unfortunately, we will not be supporting it. The reason why we will not be supporting this motion is that we have a fundamental issue today that is being discussed, 100 days out, in London between Mr Gove and Mr Barnier. The discussion is an informal discussion about how we are going to resolve the problems that we have currently.

Many people have listened to the sterility of this debate over a considerable period of time, when, to many ears on this side of the House and, indeed, in my constituency, it sounds like Boris-bashing turning into Brit-bashing. That is not something that I think is conducive or helpful for the people of Northern Ireland, particularly the consumers of Northern Ireland, who will be faced with some really significant choices in a very short period of time.

The Ulster Unionist Party has a proposal for you, Mr Principal Speaker, the Members of the Assembly and its political parties that we as an Assembly write to both Mr Gove and Mr Barnier and say to them that we have real, significant concerns about Northern Ireland being used as a political football. We have 100 days before we have to have in position things that will prevent our goods from being stopped in coming across from our own country. We are going to have to be in a position where we will have to understand what the implications of state aid rules will be. We need to understand what the role of the European Court of Justice will be because that will be a fundamental issue.

Mr Principal Speaker, what we should be doing as an Assembly and what we can do through the Chairs of all the Committees is to come together, through you, and write, as Chairs, to the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the Executive Office and to Mr Gove and Mr Barnier. As Chair of the Finance Committee, I will ask the Committee about this issue tomorrow. We will ask them to please stop using Northern Ireland as a political football. They have said right from the beginning that the single most important thing is the Belfast Agreement. The single most important thing is maintaining peace and security in Northern Ireland, and the best way to achieve that is to remove uncertainty. The best way to achieve that is to make sure that our traders, our businesses and our companies are able to understand what is going to happen on 1 January next year. That, Mr Principal Speaker, is what we as an Assembly should be debating, because the Executive Office is not bringing those things to us. We should be the ones who are now saying to everybody in the United Kingdom, Europe and the rest of the world, "Stop using Northern Ireland as a political football".

Let us do what is appropriate and what is right for Northern Ireland. Can any Member in this Assembly say that we will be better off on 1 January next year? No. Can anyone

tell me, at our Tesco and ASDA stores and everywhere else, what the impact will be on the shopping basket of the consumer in Northern Ireland, all of whom are our voters, by the way? Can anyone tell me what that is going to be like? No.

Mr Dickson: Will the Member give way?

Dr Aiken: Just one second.

Can anybody actually tell me what the European Union and the United Kingdom have agreed in the specialist committee or the Joint Committee? Have we seen any output from them? Do we have any understanding of what it means to us? We are 100 days out, but nobody seems to be paying any attention to that. I think that we as an Assembly, with all of the MLAs here, should, through our Committee structure, because no one else is doing anything, be putting that through.

Thank you for bringing the note to bring it towards the Assembly, but there is something more fundamental here. We can tilt at windmills as much as we like, and we know that the withdrawal agreement and the so-called Internal Market Bill are both deeply flawed, but who will stand up for the people of Northern Ireland if it is not us? That is what we were elected to do. We are not standing up for the people of Brussels, and we are not standing up for the people of London. We should be standing up for the people of Northern Ireland. Mr Principal Speaker, I have made a proposal, and I look forward to hearing from the rest of the Committee Chairs later.

Mr Speaker: "Mr Speaker" will be fine in future. Thank you.

Mr Dickson: There is a bit of déjà vu, but this is a slightly different debate today. It is a debate regarding the Internal Market Bill, which contains a series of provisions on the functioning of the internal market in the United Kingdom, which of course already had a part of the EU. There are issues with this, including the obvious and likely dominance of England in comparison with the other nations, as well as the impact on the devolved settlements. I realise that the Scottish and Welsh Governments rejected the Internal Market Bill's White Paper following its publication because of such concerns. Therefore, it is disappointing that it appears that there was no formal response compiled by the Executive in Northern Ireland.

However, for today we will focus on how progressing the Internal Market Bill interacts with the Northern Ireland protocol, and the arrangements to avoid a hard border with the Republic. I said yesterday, and I will be clear again, the protocol is not a perfect arrangement; the original backstop was a much better deal for Northern Ireland and the protocol —.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: No, I want to finish, thank you. The protocol is a compromise of a compromise. It is an arrangement to negate some of the problems that, unfortunately, Brexit brings to Northern Ireland, and we all know who brought Brexit to Northern Ireland.

It is a matter of deep concern that legislation is being progressed in our national Parliament which undermines an international agreement that was signed less than a year ago, and which adds further unease about the future

of businesses and people in Northern Ireland, and on that point I agree with Mr Aiken.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Dickson: No, I want to continue.

It is totally disconcerting for businesses and for people who are in employment in Northern Ireland that we are being taken down this route. Upholding international law is the sign of a responsible actor on a world stage. There is a certain amount — indeed, a great deal — of irony that the Government instructs others to follow the law and yet blatantly sets out to break the law, and is sadly followed by a number of Members of Parliament from Northern Ireland. Again, it is hard to work out what the Government is doing.

The reality is that it is within the power of the United Kingdom's Government to prevent barriers and friction by striking a comprehensive trade deal. If these issues were so fundamental to the Good Friday Agreement then why did the Prime Minister agree to these terms and then run a general election campaign on them? Even if this is a negotiating tactic, it undermines the UK's international reputation and credibility, and thus our ability to strike further trade deals.

Yesterday we heard, and it is worth repeating again, politicians from both sides of the Houses in the US that they are very concerned, and they have made it very clear that it compromises any chance of a US-UK trade deal. At this rate it seems that the UK will not have any trade deals on the table; not even one with the EU and no trade deal with the US. Of course, it is welcome that they have sealed one with Japan, but then why bother because they already had exactly the same deal with Japan through their membership of the EU. How will anyone benefit from the UK having next to no preferential trade partners?

It seems that all of the lofty aspirations of Brexit have evaporated and we are left with a gloomy, complex and uncertain future. That cannot be good for business and it cannot be good for employees, with piles of red tape and increasing barriers to business and people's lives.

Whether it is, as Mr Aiken says, our concern about the price of a bag of sugar in the shops in Northern Ireland or whether it is that they turn the south of England into a lorry park, all of those are very serious issues. We do not want borders and we do not want checks anywhere, but if a hard border happens then compromise must be made. That is where the protocol comes in because it is the basic structure to prevent a hard border with the Republic of Ireland. The UK Government should, and must, uphold its word to protect Northern Ireland from the harmful impacts of Brexit. Ministers here must ensure that the protocol is implemented before the end of this year.

Finally, I thank Mr Givan for being a cheerleader for the Alliance Party because every time he mentions our name I can hear the cheers rising amongst all of those people who voted for Naomi Long and smashed it when we elected her to the European Union.

Mr Middleton: The Internal Market Bill is a step forward. It is a recognition by the UK Government that there were defects with the Northern Ireland protocol and the potential impact that it would have on the internal market of the United Kingdom. However, more work is required. We are focused on ensuring that consumer choice and costs are not impeded as a result of the Northern Ireland protocol.

It is important that goods arriving here, in Northern Ireland, are not subject to unnecessary checks, which, in turn, will lead to increased cost and reduced choice for consumers. It is vital that Northern Ireland businesses have unfettered access to the GB market, which is, of course, so important to Northern Ireland that it is welcome that the Internal Market Bill sets out potential helpful steps in that respect. With Northern Ireland's competitors able to support their emerging sectors through government aid, it would be wrong and would place Northern Ireland firms at a clear disadvantage if we were to be restrained in a state-aid straitjacket, unlike the rest of the UK.

4.45 pm

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Middleton: I will not.

The UK Government have stated that, through the Internal Market Bill, they are delivering on commitments to provide unfettered access between Northern Ireland and Great Britain and to maintain and strengthen the integrity and smooth operation of our internal market. We all signed up to the New Decade, New Approach agreement to restore this Assembly. The commitment in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document states:

"To address the issues raised by the parties, we will legislate to guarantee unfettered access for Northern Ireland's businesses to the whole of the UK internal market, and ensure that this legislation is in force for 1 January 2021."

We must ensure that we protect the £8 billion worth of goods and sales from Northern Ireland to GB and guarantee our place within the UK's internal market. These are not new commitments. The DUP has been consistent at all levels, including at Westminster, where a lot of this really matters. We need certainty. We need legal certainty and clarity for businesses in Northern Ireland whose largest market is with the rest of the United Kingdom.

In relation to some of the specifics in the Bill for Northern Ireland, clause 40 places an obligation on the UK Government and devolved Administrations to consider Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market when implementing the protocol. That applies to trade between GB and Northern Ireland in both directions. Clause 42 gives UK Ministers the power to disapply or modify export summary declarations for goods moving from NI to GB. The Government, again, yesterday, made clear that the declarations that would be disapplied through this clause would be those that do not recognise or respect the fact that Northern Ireland is part of the customs territory of the United Kingdom.

The Government talk about a "safety net". I think that "safety net" is a reasonable description, given the fact that, if these issues cannot be resolved through the Joint Committee, there absolutely needs to be a safety net in place. That is what any responsible sovereign Government would do.

My party colleagues at Westminster, yesterday, clearly articulated our position in regard to the Bill and, indeed, the amendments that were tabled in our name. The Government have indicated that many of these issues will be addressed through the finance Bill. We will wait and see what happens in that respect.

We will not be supporting the motion. Our views have been well rehearsed. I note that the Members opposite continue to table these motions. They are more than entitled to do so. However I would urge them to respect the fact that many businesses at the moment are struggling in a wide range of areas, and I think that we should be mindful that, whilst it is great that certain Members want to have their voices heard in this Chamber, the focus should be on ensuring that the United Kingdom's internal market is protected and that the businesses are properly heard through the relevant channels.

Mr Lynch: Just when we thought the issue of Brexit was sorted, with the withdrawal agreement and the protocol, the British Government announce that they are going to break an agreement that was made only last January. Their announcement to break international law was not surprising, although, this time, they did it publicly. As a result, we are in the midst of another British-inspired Brexit crisis: the Good Friday Agreement is under threat; the fragile economy of the North is at risk; and we are facing a real possibility of a crash out of the European Union.

The power grab clearly outlined in the Internal Market Bill gives authority to British Ministers to directly impinge on the workings of this Assembly and ignore the protocol and the withdrawal agreement. The protocol stated that nothing is to enter or be on sale here unless it meets EU standards, even if it comes from Britain. However, clause 45 gives the British Secretary of State the power to ignore any EU requirements for goods coming here.

Like many Members, I have talked to many businesses, their representatives and individuals about Brexit, particularly in my constituency, and I hear no clamour from customers here to see the lowering of EU standards. In relation to the Good Friday Agreement, strand two, all-Ireland areas of cooperation like public health and environmental standards are not grounds for exemptions. Under the British Government's Internal Market Bill, Ministers of the British Government will be empowered to breach elements of the Good Friday Agreement and the withdrawal agreement.

The British Government have once again shown contempt for this part of Ireland and, indeed, for all the people of this country who voted for and ratified the peace agreement. They are bringing this Bill forward to suit their own domestic political agenda. These are the same people who supported, campaigned for and financed Brexit. To say that they are protecting the Good Friday Agreement could not be further from the truth. With British Ministers like Michael Gove viewing the Good Friday Agreement as wicked, it is little wonder that Britain, as a co-guarantor of the Good Friday Agreement, can breach it and boast about it at the same time. The reality is that Tory Governments have been undermining the Good Friday Agreement since they entered power in 2011. Therefore, to argue that the Internal Market Bill is to protect the agreement is nonsense.

Despite what Members on the opposite Benches say, there was never a good Brexit. It must be remembered that the majority of people in this part of Ireland voted against it. The protocol is not perfect, but it mitigates the worst aspects of Brexit. Brexit itself is the problem. People in the North want certainty, and I know that people opposite have said the same. They need clarity as well. They want to know that their families and jobs will be safe next year.

Their priority is to avoid any border on the island of Ireland, protect the peace process, the Good Friday Agreement and the all-Ireland economy. We in Sinn Féin will defend those as we have done in the last four years.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lynch: No, I will not. We will work with those who share those priorities in the Assembly, the Dáil, Europe and the United States Congress, in addition to standing firmly against the British Government's intention to tear up what was an international agreement. I support the motion.

Mr Humphrey: Here we are, act two, take two of this drama, and it is very clear that the Northern Ireland protocol is not good for Northern Ireland plc. The Democratic Unionist Party at Westminster opposed and consistently voted against that legislation. We warned Her Majesty's Government, and now we recognise and are glad to see that they accept the pitfalls and defects in those protocols. The Internal Market Bill is a step forward but it is not perfect.

Yesterday, in this House, during act one of this drama, we heard that many parties across the way were concerned about a hard border. Those who were claiming that there was going to be a hard border would not give way to those of us who were challenging who was going to make a hard border. The only person talking about a border on this island of Ireland — the frontier between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic — was the former Prime Minister of the Irish Republic when he claimed at the World Economic Forum last year that he could see customs returning and uniformed people — police and army — potentially returning to the Irish border. No one in the United Kingdom Government, in the Northern Ireland Executive or in this House wants to see a hard border, so let us nail that. That is just nonsense.

Then, we also had the situation on the Sinn Féin Benches that the peace process was potentially being undermined. By whom is it being undermined? I will give way to those who want to tell me by whom. The reality is that the Belfast Agreement — Are you going to undermine it?

Mr O'Toole: I am very grateful to my colleague on the Public Accounts Committee for giving way. Just as a point of information, he said that no one in the UK Government had ever said anything about a hard border. He will recognise that, in early 2016, during the referendum campaign, numerous Members of the UK Government, including the subsequent Prime Minister, then Home Secretary, Theresa May, said that there was no way that the UK could leave the European Union in a specific way without there being the recreation of border posts.

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Humphrey: That is why my party rejected her proposals, and where is she now?

The reality is that that great golden cow of the Belfast Agreement that your party sets up there — it is absolutely untouchable; we must not damage the Belfast Agreement — but, in January, the SDLP leader in the House of Commons talked about joint authority, saying that we will not go back to direct rule — such was his arrogance — we will have joint authority. Your party voted in support of the Belfast Agreement. I did not. The principle of consent is absolutely enshrined in that agreement. Where is the consent for joint authority? I will give way if you tell me

from where the SDLP gets the consent of the unionist people for joint authority.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for proactively giving way. We are not debating that statement today. We are debating the motion before us. Let me say clearly, however, the principle of consent is absolutely at the heart of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and we support it. That is what the motion is about.

Mr Humphrey: You are contradicting your party leader and are not on the same page as him. Yesterday, we even had the potato famine invoked as a great wrong done to Ireland. Of course it was, but we are in 2020. Let us be clear: the reality is that anything that hinders or impedes Northern Ireland plc trading from Northern Ireland to GB and in return is not good for Northern Ireland business. As Mr Givan said earlier, Northern Ireland business organisations are not on the same page as the parties across the way.

I understand nationalists and republicans supporting the protocol, because they want to destroy and end the Union. They cannot cost the utopian united Ireland that they talk about. They cannot cost it: none of them can. They have never been able to do it. You cannot, because it is simply impossible.

We stand for free movement and free trade. We want to see the free movement of goods across the North Channel and the Irish Sea. Northern Ireland businesses must be given unfettered access to our largest market, Great Britain. The Bill is helpful in that regard. It is not a panacea, but it is helpful. Northern Ireland parties therefore need to decide on this basis: do you want what is best for Northern Ireland, what is best for the Northern Ireland people and Northern Ireland business and what is best for your constituents and mine, or do you want to disadvantage permanently Northern Ireland business?

The withdrawal agreement is bad for Northern Ireland economically. It is also bad for Northern Ireland constitutionally. You may welcome that, but the fact of the matter is that I hear much talk about the damage to the United Kingdom and to international law. What about the damage to the free movement of people, the free movement of trade and the equality of rights for people that came from the Acts of Union of 1707 and 1800? What about those? When you are Brit-bashing, and on that basis I agree with Mr Aiken, and attacking the Prime Minister, let me be very clear —.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Humphrey: I have given way to you twice. I am not giving way to you again, so do not even think about it. You are Brit-bashing, but the reality is that the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland want to remain part of the United Kingdom. It is your job to convince them otherwise, including economic unionists. You are not able to do that, because you cannot. That is the truth of the matter. As we move forward, I want to see business in Northern Ireland protected. I want to see the Union protected: the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That is where success and everything else flows from for Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Humphrey: The protocol is not perfect, but this Bill, which is going through the House of Commons, will improve it.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Humphrey: It will not make it perfect, but it will improve it. Thank you, Mr Speaker. I oppose the motion.

Mr Sheehan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. The Internal Market Bill is a full-frontal assault on the Good Friday Agreement. I do not think that there is any doubt about that. The actual problem is Brexit, however. When the Members opposite were supporting with gusto the campaign to leave the European Union perhaps they did not have the foresight to see what the repercussions were going to be. Brexit was going to undermine the Good Friday Agreement. There was no doubt about that. We had the protocol as a far-from-perfect solution to the problems that Brexit was going to create for the Good Friday Agreement.

Now we have the Internal Market Bill. Everybody believes the Internal Market Bill undermines the Good Friday Agreement. Even the British Government understand that, but, of course, they say otherwise. They actually turn things on their head and say that the Internal Market Bill protects the Good Friday Agreement. This is a Government that would tell us that black is white and that night is day. They are a bunch of unvarnished liars.

5.00 pm

Who did they send to the United States to convince Americans that the IM Bill protects the Good Friday Agreement? Dominic Raab. Dominic Raab is the man who appeared before the NI Affairs Committee and admitted to Sylvia Hermon that he had not read the Good Friday Agreement. He was sent out as some sort of expert to explain to Americans. Luckily, the Americans are more learned than Dominic Raab. They understand the repercussions of the Internal Market Bill for the Good Friday Agreement.

I say this to unionists: try to break away from the Stockholm syndrome that you are caught up in. It is sad to see once proud unionists like Gregory Campbell and Sammy Wilson on their hands and knees, with their ears down and their tails between their legs, licking the boots of people like Johnson and Cummings. It was Cummings who said:

"I don't care if Northern Ireland falls into the [effing] sea".

That is the man you are dealing with. That is the man you are kowtowing to [*Interruption.*] Why do you not —.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member resume his seat for a moment? I ask Members to keep the debate on a temperate level. I do not want this to descend any further.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Certainly, I will try to be as temperate as possible.

There is a fundamental issue. The English Tories do not care about here. That is reflected in what Dominic Cummings said and in the jingoistic English nationalism that has driven the whole Brexit debate. I say this genuinely and honestly to unionists: the English Tories will never consider you as their equal, never. I say this to you, as a friend and a fellow countryman: join with us. The ground is shifting under your feet. Join us to build a new country, a country of equals where we will all have the same rights and freedoms. Let us join together. Let us

forget about the unvarnished liars and the other people who yank your tails. Let us — all of us together — build a country where we can all live as equals.

Ms McLaughlin: The British Government have a long history of treating people with contempt, and you do not have to look too far to see examples of that. My friends in the DUP can affirm that. In my city of Derry, we suffered greatly due to the wrongdoing of the British Government, but we had hoped that the British Government had moved away from that shameful past. It has been clear during the negotiations with the European Union that the British Government have reverted to the bad old days of treating nations, neighbours and friends with complete and utter contempt. The Prime Minister had already shown that contempt in how he played with the truth during the Brexit referendum. Now, he is going further by rejecting the withdrawal agreement protocol that he signed up to and negotiated just a few months back. By doing that, he has shown contempt for the EU, contempt for the citizens of the UK and contempt for the rule of law, and he has shown utter contempt and disregard for every person in Northern Ireland.

Do not be fooled by the further lies that are being peddled. Actions have consequences, and the protocol, as signed, is the consequence of the UK voting to leave the EU and to reject the single market and the customs union. Make no mistake: it is the UK that has put a border in the Irish Sea, not the EU. More than that, Boris Johnson and his Government are showing absolute contempt for this Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Parliament. The Internal Market Bill is a naked power grab by a power-hungry, right-wing English nationalist Government.

Our powers as an Assembly will be badly cut by the Bill. It is no wonder that Nicola Sturgeon referred to it as a "full-frontal assault on devolution". Boris Johnson and his inner cabal want that power to themselves, to have the most-centralised UK Government there has been for decades. He wants to limit the powers to govern Northern Ireland, and that should make every person in the Assembly angry. Under the Bill, any legislation that we pass that impedes the internal market will have no effect. That means that, if we want to protect the health and well-being of livestock, we may not be able to. If we want to eliminate zero-hours contracts, we may not be able to. What happens if we confirm a policy of no fracking and one of the other nations says that fracking is OK? The Welsh Government are concerned that even their building regulations could be replaced by those of England. Regulation sits at the heart of the Assembly. Without our ability to regulate, the Assembly becomes little more than a talking shop. Boris Johnson is ripping up the devolution settlement. It is the old colonial way and attitude: "If they do not like it, punish them". We want more powers, and the response from Westminster is to give us fewer. You can see the same in Whitehall. Senior civil servants give the Government advice, and, if they do not like it, they get sacked and are replaced by yes-men — and, predominantly, they are men.

Just as we hoped that we were making progress, we find ourselves going backwards, slapped down by a Government who want to exert as much control as possible. I ask the Chamber to support the motion and ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make clear our rejection of the Internal Market Bill. The Executive

need to take a formal position opposing the Bill. We know that the Government intend to ignore us if we refuse to approve a legislative consent motion. That is just one more illustration of their contempt for the Assembly and for the people of Northern Ireland of every tradition and none.

Mr Beggs: I, too, oppose the motion. I reiterate the point made by my colleague Steve Aiken: we are 100 days away, and motions that do not garner support from all sides will be ignored. We need a reality check on that. A particular phrase in the motion irks me, namely where it:

“rejects any argument that the Bill is necessary to protect the Good Friday Agreement;”

There has to be a recognition that the Northern Ireland protocol drove a coach and horses through the Belfast Agreement. I quote from paragraph 1(iii) of the “Constitutional Issues” section:

“the present wish of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland, freely exercised and legitimate, is to maintain the Union and, accordingly, that Northern Ireland’s status as part of the United Kingdom reflects and relies upon that wish; and that it would be wrong to make any change in the status of Northern Ireland save with the consent of a majority of its people”.

It continues, at annex A, paragraph 1(1):

“It is hereby declared that Northern Ireland in its entirety remains part of the United Kingdom and shall not cease to be so without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland voting in a poll”

and it goes on to explain how such a poll would happen.

Why do I say that the protocol breaches the Belfast Agreement? It creates a border down the Irish Sea. It cuts us off from other parts of the United Kingdom. We will not be governed by the Assembly or Westminster. Many decisions will be taken out of our hands and determined by the Joint Committee and the Specialised Committee, arbitrated on at a European level. It significantly alters our constitutional position. There has been no recognition of that, not by the British Government, not by the EU, not by others who claim to be guarantors of the Belfast Agreement. The Americans have taken a single-sided approach. The protocol breaches the Northern Ireland agreement, and that needs to be recognised if we are to have a solution.

Going forward, we have to recognise that, if we do not reach an accommodation, we will all be losers — all Northern Ireland consumers, all Northern Ireland workers and our businesses. We are 100 days away, and what are we doing about it? We are continuing to throw brickbats and blame Brexit. Whether you voted for or against Brexit, it is coming on 1 January. We need solutions, and, until we speak collectively and move towards solutions, applying pressure to both sides in our interests, they will ignore us and we will continue to be pawns. That is why I agree with Steve Aiken: we collectively need to take action, speak to both sides and highlight how this damages Northern Ireland, damages the Belfast Agreement and potentially damages our consumers. The cost of importing goods will go up, the prices in our shops will go up, delays will cost jobs and trade will be disrupted unless there is an agreement, so this is urgent. What are we doing about it? We are blaming one side or the other. We need to apply

pressure to both sides to try to bring about a solution. It is not good enough to continue to take a single-sided approach.

I will remind you about the trading aspect. Some £13.4 billion of our trade in 2018 came from Great Britain, and £5.2 billion came from the Republic and the rest of the European Community. A border down the Irish Sea is two and a half times more dangerous unless we get free trade flowing that way. It is not just about free trade flowing North/South; we need free trade flowing east-west. Look at our sales and our exports. Similarly, £11 billion — sorry, let me get my figures right — £6.7 billion of our goods move to the Republic or to the EU, but a much larger amount, £10.6 billion, moves to GB, so that will potentially have a huge bearing on our exporters and our jobs. We need free flow. I think of simple things. For example, there is an Asda distribution store in my constituency. If goods arrive in and are meant to have a three-day shelf life but only have a two-day shelf life, they get dumped, so the cost of transport and the cost of goods go up.

We need solutions, and we need to work together. The sooner we get together and argue against the views being brought forward by the European Community and by the United Kingdom Government —

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Mr Beggs: — in cutting us off and we begin looking after ourselves the better.

Dr Archibald: I rise to speak in support of the motion. First, let me say this: it is not rehashing the Brexit debate to reiterate that the people of the North voted to reject Brexit. They did so because the contradictions of Brexit in the context of our relationships across our small island and on these islands were apparent.

In recognition of the unique and special circumstances of the North and the need to protect the Good Friday Agreement, the EU prioritised it in negotiations, and the protocol was painstakingly negotiated with the British Government over three years in recognition of the need to offer those protections to the all-island economy, North/South cooperation and the Good Friday Agreement. As many Members outlined yesterday afternoon and again today, the protocol is a clumsy and imperfect tool, and the best outcome for it to operate in an efficient way is a comprehensive free trade agreement between the EU and the UK. As Members also outlined yesterday, safeguarding and dispute-resolution mechanisms are built in to the protocol. All efforts — “best endeavours”, to use the term — should be focused on achieving an outcome that results in a free trade agreement.

We in the North have been through many negotiations, and we know only too well that they are difficult and complex. These negotiations have been going slowly, with little progress reported on key issues, but, instead of applying themselves to resolving the issues in the process, the British Government have decided to throw the toys out of the pram and, like a petulant child, have a tantrum to get their own way. This is no childish game. The stakes for our businesses, our economy, our communities and our peace agreements are much too high to be used as a pawn in negotiations by the British Government.

As was highlighted at length in yesterday’s debate, the Bill undermines the devolved institutions. It has also been

described as a “power grab” by the Scottish and Welsh Governments. It limits the ability of the Assembly to make regulations. The three Finance Ministers for the North, Scotland and Wales have outlined their concerns about the powers that it gives Westminster to bypass the devolved institutions in funding allocations.

5.15 pm

However, what has caused a great deal of concern in the international community is the freely admitted intent to break international law. The utterances of “specific and limited” mean nothing and wash with no one. It is a clear admittance that the British Government think nothing of breaking an agreement when the ink is hardly dry. The approach that they have adopted is reckless for people and businesses here. Of course, Boris Johnson is not worried about what new red tape it will cause for his small business and whether it will be able to survive. David Frost is not a young person who hopes to study in the South and wonders whether they will be able to afford the fees. Michael Gove does not have the hassle of applying for a settlement scheme permit to keep his family here, or concern about whether he will still be able to cross the border. Those are the realities that are faced by people here. What I care about is those realities. What Members in this Chamber should care about is giving businesses and communities certainty to plan for what is only 100 days away.

What will unfettered access actually look like? What will be the definition of “at risk” goods? What will the VAT regime be? What will SPS checks actually look like? What are the labelling requirements? Those are the types of practical questions to which businesses desperately want answers, but, as yet, do not have them.

As I said in yesterday’s debate, the argument that the Bill is, in any way, designed to protect our peace agreement is absurd. I say it again: it is ridiculous. The protocol in the withdrawal agreement was negotiated to protect the Good Friday Agreement and mitigate the contradictions of Brexit on the integrated arrangements across these islands. The Bill seeks to undermine that with the flimsy excuse of giving certainty to businesses when we all know that it is simply about the British Government trying to have their cake and eat it, and not live up to commitments that they made.

The Bill has caused havoc instead of providing certainty. It has muddied the waters further and created distrust when calm heads and rational thinking were actually needed. The reality is that the clock is ticking down and time is running out to provide that much-needed clarity and certainty before the end of the year. Businesses and communities are already struggling with the impact of COVID-19. They will be devastated further if there is no trade agreement. As it is, the time frame for implementing any arrangements that were agreed is already far too short. All efforts are needed now by the British Government to ensure that there is no cliff edge come 31 December.

Mr Blair: I rise to support the motion and express my deep concerns about the UK Government’s threat to breach international law over the Northern Ireland protocol. It suggests that the UK Government have not yet come to terms with the implications of their choices and red lines on Brexit. Their claim to be doing so on behalf of the

people and businesses of Northern Ireland and to protect the Good Friday Agreement is risible. The framing of the Internal Market Bill is, in fact, at odds with the view of most people in Northern Ireland; the Irish Government, of course; and the European Union. Northern Ireland remains a divided society and contested space. The agreement brought a semblance of structure to manage those fault lines. It was made easier, many people believe, by already established relationships, including that of the UK and Ireland both being members of the EU customs union and the single market. Twenty years on, the situation in Northern Ireland remains delicate, and work to promote integration and reconciliation continues. Essentially, Northern Ireland works best through interdependence, which includes —.

Mr O’Toole: I am very grateful to the Member for giving way. In response to some of the points that have been made across the Chamber, does he agree that British and Irish citizens in Northern Ireland voted to remain, and that it is wrong to turn this into a narrow, one-identity-versus-another debate?

Mr Speaker: The Member has an additional minute.

Mr Blair: Absolutely. I thank the Member for the intervention. Indeed, some branding was done of me earlier. I ignored it because it was incredible. Democrats should accept my position as stated, and not question it or brand me in that way. With regard to the numbers that are involved and support for the Belfast Agreement or against Brexit, we have heard a lot about the will of the people and the majority of the people. Anybody who spoke about that should look back to the 2016 referendum and the 52% of the vote.

I was talking about the interdependence, which includes the free flow of people and goods east-west and North/South. Any border drawn across the island —.

A Member: Will the Member give way?

Mr Blair: No, I will not give way so soon.

Any border drawn across the island or down the Irish Sea brings emotional and political implications. However, in pragmatic terms, although east-west trade is greater in value than North/South trade, there is more movement on the island than across the Irish Sea plus there are around 270 crossing points to consider on the island versus seven across the sea.

Separate to that, any renegeing on the terms of the protocol could see that customs frontier pushed back onto the island, with pressure for checks as the EU naturally seeks to protect its economic integrity. Threatening to breach the withdrawal agreement is self-defeating both in the narrow terms that I have referenced and to the UK’s ambitions to have a future relationship with the EU and get a trade deal with the United States.

As a member of the AERA Committee, it is important for me to stress the agri-food sector’s importance to the Northern Ireland economy. It represents around 10% of activity, which is considerably higher than the UK average, making the sector a much more important component of the regional economy than it is for the UK as a whole. Furthermore, the profile of agriculture and associated industries also varies across the UK. The Northern Ireland sector is built around quality rather than scale; standards really matter and they are a matter of pride and priority

for all stakeholders. Environmental, food safety, animal welfare and labour issues are all critical considerations. With 100 days to go and with the clock ticking, it is not a good time to start rewriting the rules and redrawing the boundaries.

It is important to also acknowledge the unique situation that Northern Ireland finds itself in with the implication of the protocol. That is, of course, the inevitable outworking of Brexit, in particular the decision taken by the UK Government and Parliament to rule out a softer Brexit based on a customs union and continued membership of the single market, and the ongoing need to ensure an open border on the island of Ireland and protection of the Good Friday Agreement. Northern Ireland will, consequently, remain aligned to large aspects of EU regulation. The all-island context on matters such as food safety and environmental considerations should be, to all involved, self-evident. It would be a strange thing if the Northern Ireland Assembly did not want to shape policy within its own area of competence.

Guided by my belief in open and liberal international trade and, more importantly, by many expert voices from our vital sectors, I support the motion and urge others to do likewise.

Mr McAleer: I commend those who tabled the motion. Over the course of the debate, there has been some quite intemperate language used such as “Brit-bashing”. That is not what the motion is intended to do. The Internal Market Bill is one of the greatest acts of internal self-destruction that I have seen, and it has caused huge damage, if more damage could be caused, to the international reputation of the British Government. That analysis comes from within the British establishment; it is not coming from these Benches. We have already had Blair, Major and May — three former Prime Ministers — expressing huge concerns about it, as has Norman Lamont. We have had the House of Lords’ Constitution Committee saying that it unravels the withdrawal agreement and brings the British Government into conflict with international law. In the USA, Nancy Pelosi and members of the Ways and Means Committee have expressed concern. Indeed, the Lord Chief Justice, Sir Declan Morgan, has said that it shows a flagrant disregard for the rule of law and undermines confidence in the legal system. So, this is not a Brit-bashing exercise where we are trying to get at the Brits. The Bill has huge implications, and it is quite right that we debate it because it could have huge implications for businesses here. As Chair of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, I have a special interest in that aspect of our society.

Turning to the actual legislation, it is important to look at a number of its clauses. I took a look over the legislation earlier, and clause 42, for example, disapplies the EU declaration exit procedures and gives a commitment that there will be no new checks on goods that are going from here to Britain. It does not address unfettered access, because it has not set out what a “qualifying” good is. We do not know. We had imported 41,000 cattle and 350,000 pigs into the North by August this year. If the products that come from them are not to be qualifying goods, will they be able to go to the British market? While the Internal Market Bill aspires to have no exit declarations, it does not state that there will be checks on what goods qualify and do not qualify.

Clause 43 is about the disapplication of state aid, which might sound good to some people, but when Britain leaves on 1 January, World Trade Organization rules will kick in. The WTO rules post-transition are hugely different to the state aid rules that govern our payments and subsidies here. For example, the WTO does not set any limits at all on coupled and decoupled support for farming and agriculture. That will create a huge imbalance in the playing field for our producers compared with those across the water in Britain. As Seán Lynch said a while ago, clause 45 overrides all the other relevant laws.

To draw attention to a couple of other things that I noted, I will point out that, in clause 48, the British Government have completely and unilaterally amended the NI Act 1998. That is written into the Bill. It amends the NI Act in relation to what they term “Distortive or harmful subsidies”. They tell us that they decide what so-called distortive or harmful subsidies are, so if mother England is telling us what is good and what is bad, we cannot make up our own mind. Clause 49 amends the NI Act as well. The entrenched amendment restricts the Executive and the Assembly’s competence to modify aspects of the Bill that could have implications here. It is about the protection of the Act against modification. Again, that completely and utterly rides roughshod over our ability here to have any input. That NI Act was unilaterally amended without any consultation with or recourse to this devolved Assembly. It undermines every single one of us.

As has been said, there is no good Brexit. The best option for seamless east-west trade and North/South was to remain in the EU. Unfortunately, the democratic wishes of the people of the North of Ireland were completely discarded, and we did not get that. The backstop might have facilitated a freer flow of east-west trade. That was undermined by the DUP in Westminster when it was in hock to the Tory Government. Now we have the protocol, and the Internal Market Bill has added confusion to a huge level of uncertainty. There is no good Brexit, but, at this stage, the protocol is probably the least-worst option that there is to try to deal with a very complicated situation, so —

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Mr McAleer: I support the motion.

Mr McGlone: It was clear, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, that a trade deal between the UK and the European Union was critical in order to protect the interests of everyone living in Northern Ireland. Securing an economic recovery from the impact of the pandemic would be difficult enough in the best of circumstances. The withdrawal agreement that was reached between the UK and the EU may not be the best of those circumstances, but it is the only circumstance that both sides could agree on.

The implementation of that agreement in full remains an obligation under international law and is an obligation that the current British Government, under Boris Johnson, signed up to. Crucially, it addressed the prospect of the chaos and uncertainty that would accompany a no trade deal between the EU and the UK. It was always recognised that a no trade deal with the EU would cause chaos, particularly on the island of Ireland, and a number of Members referred to agri-food and its importance for our local economy and to the free flow of those economies and

trade in Ireland, which, in fact, happens daily. That is why it was necessary to include the Northern Ireland protocol in the withdrawal agreement. That protocol was the balance and produce of long, difficult and detailed negotiations and represents a delicately balanced compromise by all sides. It was necessary because of the many complex and sensitive issues that Brexit raised for everyone living on the island of Ireland.

The UK Internal Market Bill plans to drive a coach and horses through that delicately balanced compromise.

If the Bill is enacted, it would seriously damage political trust between the EU and the UK and, I should add, the USA, where prominent politicians have recently pronounced on the difficulties with the direction that the UK is taking and where that will wind up. It threatens to unilaterally replace that agreed approach with measures that will further erode the authority of the Assembly and the other devolved Administrations. The Bill's measures would create more difficulties for the agri-food sector on the island, damage our economy and undermine political stability. No doubt, some would look to profit politically from that instability, whatever the cost, just as there would be those who would look to profit financially from the economic chaos and uncertainty of no trade deals with the EU. The risk involved is why the UK Government's current approach to negotiations is of such concern.

5.30 pm

For all his bumbling public persona, Boris Johnson understands that perfectly well. He understands the well-founded concerns of the Irish Government and the parties in the Assembly, as well as those of the other devolved Administrations. He also understands the concerns of the EU regarding the difficulty of maintaining the single market in a no-deal scenario. It is one of the reasons that he is threatening to tear up the protocol. It is, in effect, an attempt at extortion rather than negotiation.

Even without the serious implications for everyone living on this island, there would rightly be concerns about the tactics of the British Government; tactics that were demonstrated by the introduction of provisions in the Bill that are designed to break international law. That is why Boris Johnson faces a rebellion in his party, by those on both sides of the Brexit debate, and criticism from former UK Attorney Generals. It is why the UK Government's Advocate General in Scotland was unable to reconcile his obligations as a law officer with the policy intentions of the Internal Market Bill. It is also why advice has been given to civil servants in London about what to do if they are asked to work on a policy that breaches the Civil Service code, which makes it very clear that civil servants must comply with the law and uphold the administration of justice. It also raises the question of whether the support for the Internal Market Bill would breach the Northern Ireland Executive's ministerial code of conduct, which, similarly, requires Executive Ministers to support the rule of law unequivocally in word and deed.

If we are to believe the British Government, they will seek the legislative consent of the Assembly for the implementation of the Bill. In those circumstances, I would expect, first, that the Executive would seek legal advice on that question and, if they do not, perhaps the Speaker's Office and the Assembly should seek advice. Following a plethora of statutory instruments being foisted on the

AERA Committee, we have had to seek legal advice on those and the manner in which the Department seeks to pursue them. In the meantime, the First Minister and deputy First Minister should commit —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr McGlone: — to opposing legislative consent in the Assembly for the UK Internal Market Bill when or if that is presented.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up. I call Rachel Woods. The Member has two minutes.

Miss Woods: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I do not have anything prepared for two minutes, but I will try to get through as much as possible.

As many in the Chamber have explained, and will no doubt continue to, there is no such thing as a good Brexit for Northern Ireland, and the latest shambles surrounding the UK Internal Market Bill only underlines that. The misleading claims and mistruths of ardent Brexiteers are beginning to unravel, while the future of Northern Ireland makes the front pages again and again and we all scramble for the latest scrap of detail on the post-transition plans from Boris and the Executive. Nothing new then.

Analysts consistently pointed out that the UK internal market White Paper would not be workable in full for Northern Ireland unless the rest of the UK remains aligned with the EU's regulations for goods. Given what the UK Government says that they want to achieve, it is simply impossible to satisfy both the internal market and the protocol.

What is the Executive doing? They are the Ministers who are elected to represent businesses, livelihoods, families and the best interests of people here. In July, I tabled a priority question for written answer to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to ask for their assessment of the UK Government's approach to the UK internal market in relation to the protocol and whether they had even responded to the consultation on the White Paper. Two months later, I am yet to receive a response. Judging by moves in the other devolved regions, the power grab that is the UK Internal Market Bill will be fiercely resisted. One just has to look at Scotland and the efforts of my Green Party colleagues there. Yet, there is no strong, collective voice standing up for the legislative competence of this Assembly and the principles of devolution.

As the political pantomime over the Internal Market Bill continues, livelihoods are being lost and the hope for Northern Ireland's post-transition future is fading. Post-Brexit trade deals will see the rich getting richer and the most disadvantaged suffering more. There is a perfect storm coming in Northern Ireland when it comes to food poverty, with increased grocery costs, especially for those in rural communities who rely on small retailers; the impact of COVID; the reduction in employment; and the growing numbers on universal credit. It is time for the Executive to step up —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Miss Woods: — and represent the interests of those who elected them.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Why were 11 Members who support the motion called to speak and only five who oppose it? Bearing in mind the exhortation

of Standing Order 17(5) to reflect “the balance of opinion”, how does 11:5, plus the 12th Member about to be called, do that?

Mr Speaker: The Member will also be aware that speaking rights are through d'Hondt, by and large, as is everything in the Assembly and this institution. That is to guarantee the democratic rights of every single voter out there so that their representation is proportionate. All of the Members who indicated that they wanted to speak were on the list as of right. I cannot determine how everyone is going to vote or argue when they participate in a debate. The speaking list today was agreed on the basis of the proportionality rule that, by and large, governs how we do our business in the Chamber. I have exercised discretion in previous debates, but there was no need for it here because you could not have done so during the debate this afternoon. All of the Members who spoke here today had a valid right to do so. You would have been the next Member called to speak had other Members not taken the additional minute. I cannot guarantee how everybody is going to speak or vote. That is the decision.

Mr Allister: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Each Member who spoke declared whether they were speaking for or against. Standing Order 17(5) refers, although not exclusively, to the desirability of a “balance of opinion”. How can there be a balance of opinion with 11:5?

Mr Speaker: As you say, they may have declared how they were going to vote when they began to speak. Anyway, we are moving on. All those who spoke had a valid right to do so under the proportionality principle. I stress again that I have, on past occasions, called Members, including you, Mr Allister, to speak out of turn in the Chamber to ensure some type of balance. It cannot be exercised in every single debate, but all of the Speakers do their best to do that when possible.

Mr McGrath: It is now 12:5. I shall continue. I welcome the opportunity to speak on the motion before us today and wind on the debate.

There can be no doubt that the entire process of Brexit — of taking back control and English nationalism gone mad — has been an unmitigated disaster. Just like the SDLP motion that called for an extension to the transition period in June, this debate is an essential opportunity for the Assembly to make our voice heard again. We were denied that opportunity for too long. We are able to signal to the British Government that we do not agree with the Internal Market Bill.

Since the initial Brexit vote in 2016, we have seen three United Kingdom Prime Ministers, all from the one Tory Party, and all with differing views on what Brexit really means. Brexit has rocked international relations and how the United Kingdom is viewed the world over. All the while, the public here wonder what it means for them.

Members can say what they want. Many have stated many times that the Brexit vote was UK-wide and that we must accept the will of the people. I categorically say that I do; I accept the will of the people of my constituency of South Down, an overwhelming 67% of whom voted to Remain. I accept the will of the people across the North; 56% voted to Remain. I accept the voice of the Good Friday Agreement, whose authors understood and appreciated our place in the European Union and all the assistance that the European family provided us, whether economic,

social or cultural, as we clawed our way out of so many troubled years and into a time of peace.

What I will not accept, however, is the voice and will of a UK Government that ran roughshod over their own MPs, their own Ministers and their own Prime Ministers. They negotiated another deal and then threw it out because they simply could not sell it to their own Brexiteers. I do not accept the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, who openly declared in the Houses of Parliament that his Government will have to break international law — but just a bit. That is all to say nothing of how abysmally they have treated the negotiating team from the European Union.

Mr Speaker and Members, how can we ever trust the perpetrators of such a shameful abdication of responsibility? Make no mistake, if this Internal Market Bill passes at Westminster — SDLP MPs are working hard with others to try to prevent that from happening — it will confer pariah status on this Tory Government. If this Bill passes and the United Kingdom foolishly believes that it can tailor the Good Friday Agreement to suit its needs, there will be no US-UK trade Bill. That is not open to discussion and that is not negotiable.

I will highlight a few remarks that a number of Members made during the debate. We started with my colleague Matthew O'Toole, who referred, amongst other things, to the fact that we could still be looking into the face of a no deal scenario and that that would be totally and wholly disadvantageous for us here. He mentioned, as did many others later, the internationally reckless and diabolical approach that is being taken by this British Government. He then asked a really key, critical question: do we want to be plunged into an economic crisis whilst we are in the middle of the greatest pandemic to impact on us in living memory? Is that really where we want to go?

Dr Archibald: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Go on ahead.

Dr Archibald: Last week at the Economy Committee, we heard from Richard Ramsey about how it could take us until 2024 to recover from the economic crisis caused by COVID-19. That was not taking into account a no deal outcome. Does the Member agree with me that we really need to see a focus on achieving a free trade agreement?

Mr McGrath: Absolutely. We cannot control COVID in the sense that it will have the impact that it has, and that will be terrible for our economy, but some control can be exercised over the Brexit outcome. We have seen the British Government try to opt for one of the worst possible outcomes, and that will have an even bigger impact on us.

Talking of that British Government, Matthew made this very valid point: is Boris Johnson somebody who we really want to trust with our future? Boris Johnson.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: I am going to make moves. I am over halfway through my time.

Paul Givan highlighted how this feels like it is round two today after a similar debate yesterday. What is wrong with that? What is wrong with having a conversation every day about the biggest, most seismic constitutional, economic and cultural change that there will be to these islands, impacting on everybody who lives on them? I think that we

would be neglecting our duty if we were not talking about this every day.

I also note that we are not having a debate at any stage on a ministerial statement by the First Minister or deputy First Minister. For the second time today, I get to make the point that they must be in hiding because they cannot agree on an approach. Mr Givan also asked which business group disagrees with the content of the Internal Market Bill. What about this: how many of those business groups agree with Brexit? They were all pretty vocal in saying that Remain was the best way forward.

Martina Anderson detailed the importance of the protocol and the protection of equality and rights and how those were underscored in the Good Friday Agreement. They are protected there, yet the Internal Market Bill rides roughshod over the protections of previously agreed international agreements. We need to see our commissions effectively challenge the attack and grab that there could be on our rights.

Steve Aiken referred to Boris Johnson and the potential for "Brit-bashing".

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way briefly. Can I set down in absolutely clear terms, and does he agree with me, that not only are there hundreds of thousands of British citizens in Northern Ireland who did not support Brexit, but there are people across the island of Britain who utterly reject Boris Johnson's Government and what he is doing?

I speak as someone who, until earlier this year, lived in London. It is all well and good for the Member to put his head in his hands. I lived in London, and my son was born there. I utterly reject and am offended by the suggestion that it is "Brit-bashing" to oppose the conduct of Boris Johnson and his Government, which is damaging people across these islands.

5.45 pm

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member and totally agree with what he said. I agree that it could not be further from the truth. We are interested in here. Whether it was Johnson, May, Cameron or whoever, if they do not have the best interests of here at heart, we will not support what they are going to do.

Dr Aiken also suggested that we write to Mr Gove and Mr Barnier. We did. Back in July, nearly 100 days ago, the Committee for the Executive Office, which I chair, wrote, and we still await a reply from Mr Gove. So, I am not so sure that our writing will achieve anything. However, if it is something that we can do to try to mitigate the impact of Brexit, we will certainly be agreeable to that.

He also said a few —.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way briefly to allow a short comment?

Mr McGrath: Very quickly. I am down to two minutes.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Chair of the Executive Office Committee for doing that. I am in the process of writing to all Committee Chairs. Bearing in mind that we have only 100 days left, it is very appropriate that we do that.

Mr McGrath: You mentioned a few times that it is 100 days away and that we are in peril and need to move quickly.

I have to say that that is why the SDLP asked for an extension to the transition period. We would not be staring at 100 days; we could have been looking at a year plus 100 days, if we had all supported that back then. I am sorry, Mr Dickson, that I will not get to refer to what you said because my time is moving on.

The people of the North voted to remain in Europe and, in so doing, reject Brexit. The SDLP has been steadfast in that view and its commitment to it. We are proud Europeans. We are steadfast in our commitment to our place in Europe because we know that our relationship with Europe is a mutually beneficial one. We hold the Good Friday Agreement as sacrosanct, so we will vehemently oppose this UK Internal Market Bill. We call on the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, just for once — for once — to show some genuine leadership, respect the will of the people here and realise that the Brexit agenda that he is recklessly pursuing — regrettably, an agenda that is aided and abetted by some MPs from the North, who, in the run-up to the Brexit vote in 2016, agreed with the statement that we needed to "Get the ethnics out" — will not be good for anyone. Brexit will not be good for anyone, and it will be worst of all for the people of the North of Ireland.

I am proud to support my colleague Matthew O'Toole and the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises that a trade deal between the United Kingdom and the European Union is critical in protecting the interests of everyone living in Northern Ireland; expresses deep concerns about the UK Government's approach to negotiations and the terms of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill; rejects any argument that the Bill is necessary to protect the Good Friday Agreement; further rejects the unilateral move to undermine the authority of the devolved institutions contained in this Bill; affirms its commitment to upholding international law; mandates the First Minister and deputy First Minister to take a formal position opposing the UK Internal Market Bill; and calls on the Prime Minister to respect the will of the people of Northern Ireland and the principles of devolution.

Mr Speaker: Members, take your ease for a moment, please.

Members, before we resume our business, I see that Doug Beattie has entered the Chamber. Within the past couple of hours, Mr Beattie has been told that he is under threat from a loyalist paramilitary organisation. On behalf of all Assembly Members, I extend our solidarity and support to Douglas and his family at this time.

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Speaker.]

Adjournment

COVID-19: Craigavon Area Hospital Outbreak

Mr Speaker: Mr John O'Dowd has been given leave to raise the matter of the COVID-19 outbreak in Craigavon Area Hospital. Mr O'Dowd will have 15 minutes to speak on the topic.

Mr O'Dowd: I doubt that I will take the entire 15 minutes because there is considerable interest in the debate and I want to let other Members speak. I concur with your remarks about Mr Beattie and condemn the threats against him. I know that he has faced threats before and that it will not deter him from his task. I wish him and his family well at this time.

I also acknowledge that the Health Minister has been in the Chamber a lot today. I acknowledge the work that he has been doing over the last number of months on COVID-19. His task is not easy. I am not here to berate the Minister; I am not here to make his task any more difficult. I am here to support the Minister, his Department, the staff of Craigavon Area Hospital and the other hospitals that have been dealing with COVID-19. However, the task of an MLA and the Assembly is to hold Ministers to account, and that is how I present myself to the Assembly and the Minister today.

Minister, I am going to take a step back from Craigavon Area Hospital and look back a few months. Over the last number of weeks, when we have been debating this issue, families from other areas have been in contact with me, and I want to highlight an issue. In previous debates, I have told you that I was not aware of any other acute hospital that had a COVID-19 outbreak. That was my position until yesterday, when I was contacted by a family who said that they have been impacted by a COVID-19 outbreak at Antrim Area Hospital in April of this year. April was the height of the COVID-19 outbreak, which will probably become known as the first wave as we enter another serious era. The family are now engaging with the health authorities and have been in correspondence with your Department and office. I will go into greater detail with you outside the Chamber as I do not want their family name to be in the public realm.

However, they have informed me that there was an outbreak in Antrim Area Hospital. The media reported that there were at least two deaths associated with that outbreak in wards C6 and C7 of Antrim Area Hospital. I will raise that outbreak in conjunction with the Craigavon Area Hospital case, as I was not aware of any other incidents. However, the family have now informed me that after significant engagement with the Northern Trust, a level 2 serious adverse incident (SAI) investigation is being carried out into that outbreak. Strangely enough at the time, the media reports referred to the fact that 24 members of staff had tested positive but there was no reference to patients at that time. The reason that I highlight that is because the serious adverse incident, which the family have now got the trust to call, was announced to the family in or around 5 or 6 August, yet no

chair or panel has been appointed and the investigation has not started.

Moving forward to the last week of August, there was an outbreak in the emergency department of Craigavon Area Hospital in which two members of staff were affected and others had to isolate. On 25 August, it was announced that there had been an outbreak in Craigavon Area Hospital's haematology ward. A significant number of staff and 14 patients were affected. A week or so later, it was announced that there had been an outbreak in ward 3 south, in which a number of staff and patients had been affected. I questioned the Minister about that in the Chamber on 7 September and I asked him what his plans were. He announced a level 3 serious adverse incident in relation to that outbreak — the highest level that there can be.

However, as I said to the Minister yesterday, no chair or panel has been appointed and the investigation has not started. Since 7 September, when four patients had died, six patients have now died. Daisy Hill Hospital has had an outbreak and five patients have died there. I understand that there is evidence, though not proven, that there is a relationship between the outbreaks at Craigavon and Daisy Hill. I have provided further information to the Minister outside the Chamber in that regard.

I am beginning to question whether a serious adverse incident is the best way to deal with the situation. I am looking into the matter more and more, and when I listened to the chief executive of the Southern Trust this morning on the airwaves, I was concerned when he said that the trust had not yet agreed the terms of reference or the appointment of a chair. I am asking myself: is the trust agreeing the terms of reference? Is the trust to confirm the chair? The chair is supposed to be independent. I would like to think that it was the Minister who appoints the chair, not the trust, and that the Minister, in conjunction with the chair, will approve the terms of reference. The investigation has to be thorough and independent. That is why I question whether, perhaps, we need to move this beyond the trust.

It is not that I have any evidence to suggest that the trust has mishandled the issue or is to blame for the outbreaks; I have not. I am not pointing fingers of responsibility at anybody in the senior management or the executive of the trust, but given the scale of the outbreaks and the number of deaths involved, the investigation may have to be moved beyond the trust to be carried out by another body, agency or group of individuals.

My other concern, then, is time. It has been two weeks since the announcement; there have been multiple deaths since then and lessons have to be learnt. The Minister said that the trust has been engaging with Public Health England and that it is giving advice, but is that advice going out to the other hospitals? The Minister may want to respond to that. Can the source of the outbreak be identified? As I said to the Minister yesterday, it is either a person, equipment or a process. I accept that COVID-19 is in the community, so it can and will get into our hospital settings. If we do not know how and we do not know why and we have not set up an investigation, there is a danger of it happening again.

6.00 pm

While researching for the debate, I looked at the deaths from COVID-19 in hospital over this last period. On 25 August, when it was announced that there was infection in the haematology ward, deaths in hospital stood at 561. Today, they stand at 577. Therefore, the death toll during that period grew by 16. Of those deaths, 11 are associated with the outbreak in Craigavon hospital and Daisy Hill. That is, 75% of hospital COVID-19 deaths are as a result of patients catching COVID-19 in the hospital, which is shocking.

I come back to my point. We need the investigation up and running. I have concerns as to whether the serious adverse incident procedure is the right way to do it, but my bigger concern is that time is not on our side. I urge the Minister to appoint a Chair, and in agreement with him or her, set terms of reference and get the investigation up and going. In that way, our health service, health workers, patients and communities can have confidence that the matter is being tackled in an independent manner and that lessons will be learned from it very quickly, so that we minimise the risk of further outbreaks in other hospitals.

I will end on this point. Figures are available for deaths and infections in hospital, but I am having difficulty in establishing how many people have suffered secondary infection from outbreaks in hospitals. I am aware of a number of cases, including at least one death, where the partner of someone who has died has been infected. I suspect there are other, similar cases. In the Antrim case, the wife of the patient who died of COVID-19 died herself of COVID-19, several weeks later. COVID-19 not only impacts on the patient, but on the family.

I said that I would not take up all my time to allow other Members to speak, but I leave those points with the Minister.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Member for that. There is obviously lots of interest in the debate. Three Members representing the constituency are present, and they will have five minutes each to speak. All other Members called on to speak will have three minutes. There can be no extra time given for interventions, so take interventions at your peril.

Mrs Dodds: I speak in my capacity as MLA for Upper Bann.

I also associate myself with remarks addressed to my colleague Doug Beattie. I had not heard of the threat. It is reprehensible that a public representative should have such threats levelled against him. I trust that all will be well.

I would like to extend my sympathies to the families of the six patients of the haematology ward in Craigavon Area Hospital, who tested positive for COVID-19 and, sadly, lost their lives, and also to the families of the five patients in Daisy Hill, who also lost their lives. This is a devastating time for them and our thoughts and prayers are with them at this very difficult time.

As other Members have rightly said, on behalf of the people of Upper Bann, I express my gratitude and thanks to the doctors, nurses and support staff at Craigavon hospital who have been to the fore in protecting our community during the COVID-19 pandemic. They have been at the front line of the battle against COVID, and their

commitment has saved so many lives during a difficult and uncertain time. We all owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

However, given what they have done for us, we need also to ensure that there is no repeat of the events that we witnessed at Craigavon and Daisy Hill. We also owe it to the families of those impacted by these events to get to the bottom of what happened and to learn and take action so that such a tragedy does not strike again.

It is also essential that we instil confidence back into the community and hospital users, reassuring them that the hospital is a safe environment. I have been contacted by a number of patients, some of whom are incredibly ill and fearful because they may have to go into hospital. That is not a good situation for us to be in. During the pandemic, we witnessed a huge drop-off in those attending hospital, even when they needed to do so. We need to avoid a situation in which people feel unsafe using the hospital, as the long-term consequences would be absolutely devastating. My message to people in Upper Bann is simple: if you require medical attention, you should seek it immediately and use the hospital resources that are there for you.

The Minister's decision to announce a level 3 serious adverse incident is an important step in ensuring that we get answers about what happened at the hospital and what measures we need to put in place to ensure the safety of patients and staff. However, I am extremely concerned that this has not moved forward, and I look forward to the Minister outlining further details of the investigation to the House at the close of the debate. We also need to know about any issues that have already been identified and any early findings from preliminary investigations that have so far been carried out by the trust; I know that some of that has taken place. In these uncertain and difficult times, it is important that we find out the truth for patients and constituents in Upper Bann and, indeed, throughout the Southern Trust area.

The Minister has my support, but I believe, like all Members here this evening, that we need to get answers and that the families involved deserve answers — indeed, the front-line staff deserve answers — and that the importance of restoring trust and confidence to patients at the hospital is absolutely to the fore of our concerns this evening.

This is a very difficult time, and, over the past 24 hours, we have seen how this pandemic continues to impact our community and, indeed, all our services. Hospitals are not immune to those issues any more than any other environment, but we need to make sure that our patients, the most vulnerable among us, are protected and taken care of. I look forward to finding out where the investigation is at, and I urge that we proceed with haste in finding out the answers and providing solutions so that these dreadful things do not happen again.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank Mr O'Dowd for securing the debate this evening. It is to be welcomed that the Minister is here to respond. Like Mrs Dodds, the Minister has my support. I am sure that he has had many sleepless nights over trying to deal with this pandemic and, in particular, in dealing with grieving families and staff on the front line. I place on record my sincere condolences to the people who have lost loved ones, both in Craigavon and Daisy Hill. It is not only the loss of a loved one but the whole rite of funerals

and grieving, some of which has also been stolen. Mrs Dodds is right to point out that people need security about feeling safe when someone whom they know and love has to go to hospital.

It is my understanding that, so far, the emergency department has seen a significant drop in people accessing care. There is a huge communication and confidence-building issue that needs to be addressed by the trust. Other Members commented on the imperative of getting answers and giving reassurance to families, which, hopefully, the investigation will bring.

I want to concentrate on the staff as well as the people attending. It is my understanding that many staff are very distressed, not only about the outbreak of the pandemic but about the second spike that is coming and the implications for them and their families. I have family members who have to gown up and wear all the uncomfortable gear to protect themselves and others. As Members will know, doctors and nurses suffer outbreaks on their skin. There is a huge emotional and physical cost to the staff.

I know that infection control has worked really hard and I hope that, in any review, staff are consulted on what they think needs to be done. Craigavon Area Hospital is an award-winning hospital for infection control. I know that this is a very unusual pandemic and we are still learning about the disease itself, but something has happened for it to go from being an award-winning hospital to one in which there has been a number of deaths and people infected whilst in the hospital. There must be answers and reassurance must be given.

In the brief time available to me, Minister, I want to draw your attention to relatives and the clamp down on people visiting. That is also having an impact. For example, there is an issue that needs to be addressed of people not having that occasion of joy at being present at the birth of a child.

From what I hear on the ground, there is a wee bit of clamping down and bolting the stable door after the horse has bolted. There are also issues with end-of-life care, letting visitors in and how that is defined. I know of one family who recently were not able to be at the bedside of a loved one at the end of life because of how that was defined. There has to be greater clarity. I have also had constituents contact me who have had problems with contacting the ward who want to know about the status of their loved one.

I know that staff are run off their feet, but there are some management issues that need to be addressed. Simple things that can help to reassure people who are in distress, worried and who even want to know simple things like, "Can I collect my mother's night pyjamas", stuff like that and being able to be able to bring home and replenish toiletries and all of the rest of their items. How is all of that managed? From what I hear on the ground, the trust has a wee bit of work to do with some of the practical measures.

I also know that some staff feel that a lot is being asked of them by managers, without those managers actually experiencing at first-hand what it is like to be in the red zone. There is a need for some of the senior staff to step up to the plate and to go in and see what they are asking, and what we as politicians, others and the public are demanding of the nurses and doctors on the front line.

I will end on this point: we all have a civic responsibility, as others have said, around the public health messaging and about looking at ourselves and what we are doing to try to diminish the spread of this infection.

Mr Beattie: I thank you, Mr Speaker, and also other Members here, for the kind words of support in the face of the threats that I have received, which I pay little attention to. I would like to thank the Minister for yet again being in the Assembly to listen to the debate. Finally, I would like to thank John for tabling this debate because it is important and it is a microcosm of what could happen in Northern Ireland if we do not adhere to the health regulations that are being put before us by the Executive.

Without a doubt, what is going on in Craigavon Area Hospital is of real concern. These are life and death issues that we are talking about. We are not just talking about an issue with infection control; we are talking about people who are dying, families who are grieving and trust that is being damaged.

At the height of this COVID pandemic, it is worthwhile noting that Craigavon Area Hospital dealt with more patients than the Nightingale hospital. Labelled as having an ICU with impressive recovery rates, they are a trusted COVID service deliverer. They set up two emergency departments, respiratory and non-respiratory, in order to provide high levels of care and stop the spread of COVID. It was focused, it was diligent, it was deliberate, it was rigid and it worked.

What am I trying to say? I am trying to say that the staff in that hospital have made a huge effort to protect the people in that area and in Northern Ireland more widely.

6.15 pm

Sadly, we have had an outbreak with disastrous outcomes. We all feel for those who have lost their lives and for their families. As we have said, there is a level 3 serious adverse incident investigation being initiated. The Member says that it has not yet started, and that is a worry. However, to be really honest, I am slightly more worried about making sure that we contain the outbreak. Yes, the investigation is important; yes, we need to find out the reasons why; yes, there needs to be learning account. However, as we stand here right now, there needs to be a curtailment of the outbreak to save lives. If we can save lives, we can deal with the issues afterwards.

Where did the outbreak emanate from? The answer is that we just do not know. Did it emanate from somebody who refused to wear a mask, somebody who refused to wash their hands or somebody who went into a crowded space and passed the virus on to somebody who works in the hospital? We do not know. We are surmising. That is all that we can do until we get the results of the investigation.

I want to ensure that the commentary around this does not demoralise the staff in Craigavon Area Hospital. I have spoken to some of them, and some of them feel demoralised. More than 4,000 people work in Craigavon Area Hospital doing a Herculean job. That is clinical and non-clinical staff: doctors and nurses, cleaners and porters. They work day and night. I do not want to demoralise them, but I agree with the Member that we have to get to the bottom of the outbreak. It cannot happen again, and I certainly do want to see it happen anywhere else in Northern Ireland. However, I also want to make

sure that the people who work in Craigavon Area Hospital have confidence in the hospital and its leadership. I also want to make sure that people have confidence in using the facilities. What I do not want is sick people staying away.

In trying to find out what went on and why we had this awful tragic outbreak, I do not want to throw the baby out with the bath water. I want to make sure that we nurture those who work there and acknowledge what they have done for us previously and what they are doing for now. I want us to address the issues through an investigation. First and foremost, however, I want to see the outbreak contained and stopped in order to save lives. The learning account can come later.

Ms Bradshaw: Mr Speaker, I did not realise that I had only three minutes, so I will have to skip through my speech. I thank the Member for bringing the issue to the House and giving me opportunity to record my sincere sympathies and those of my party for the relatives of those who have sadly lost their lives. Hospitals should be safe places, and I am sure that those working in them will be devastated by the deaths.

Months ago, the surge plan came in from the Department of Health. I suppose that, at that time, it had been put together in great haste and that it had learnt from previous pandemics and outbreaks. In the Health Committee, we came across the new term of "institutional amplifiers". I suppose that a lot of work went on in trying to keep this hospital and other hospitals free from infections and that that work was put in place very readily. What has the trust responsible for Craigavon Area Hospital and for Daisy Hill Hospital learnt and what is it doing in quick time to move from the original plans to keep hygiene controls in the hospitals in place and what is it doing now? I am concerned about the serious adverse incident process. Over the years, I have spoken to bereaved parents and relatives who are so concerned about SAls. They say that it is about marking your own homework, they are always delayed and that only certain people get involved in them and that they really do not get to the nub of the problem. My concern is that this is kicking the can down the road in many ways and will not put in place, in quick time, changes to infection-control measures.

My second point is about the fact that, as John O'Dowd referenced, we had incidents in Antrim Area Hospital and these two hospitals, and I am sure that there have been others. As a member of the Health Committee and as a health spokesperson, I have always been keen to ensure that there is transparency about outbreaks and clusters so that the general public, the people who work in the hospitals and the relatives of the people staying in them have access to that information. It is so important that we all act responsibly, even more so when there are incidents such as this going on. As I say, we need to be assured that, going forward, things will be done differently at those hospitals. We know that there is a lag between being infected and then suffering from the disease, so I would like to hear from the Minister about what additional measures are being put in place at the two locations to stop the spread of the virus.

Before I draw my remarks to a close, I thank the Health Minister for being here today. He has had two very long days, and it is not an easy job.

Mr Speaker: I call William Irwin. Remember that all Members will have three minutes. Thank you.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the matter today. Given that Craigavon Area Hospital is part of the Southern Trust area and serves my constituency, Newry and Armagh, this is an issue of importance to my constituents. First, I sympathise with the families of the patients who have sadly passed away in a hospital setting as a result of the virus. My thoughts and prayers are with those bereaved families at this difficult time.

As we know, there has been a concentration of COVID-19 outbreaks in the clinical setting of Craigavon hospital. Patients and staff have tested positive for the disease, and, following the sad deaths of six patients, the Health Minister has instigated an investigation, via a level 3 serious adverse incident, of the circumstances surrounding the outbreaks. That investigation is vital to establish the reasons why the outbreak occurred. There have been three identified outbreaks at Craigavon. We all realise, of course, that, given the complexities of the virus, no one can give a cast-iron guarantee that, even with the highest regard for safety, it is possible to completely prevent spread. However, in a hospital setting, there is an understandable public expectation that such outbreaks will be prevented or, at the very least, minimised. Therefore, how the situation has escalated so quickly needs to be established. We acknowledge the good work that has been undertaken over many months by all hospital staff to prevent outbreaks. However, people will be concerned by the developments at Craigavon and now Daisy Hill. They will be concerned about the deaths that have occurred, and they will rightly enquire about how they happened. In the past few days, a level 3 serious adverse incident has been declared at Daisy Hill following the infection outbreaks. Sadly, there have been five patient deaths there.

These are certainly worrying times for everyone in the hospital. It is important to quickly establish the reasons why we have experienced this type of outbreak in two hospitals in the Southern Trust. If the causes are identified, they can be acted on to prevent further outbreaks. Is testing sufficient? Are wards regularly getting the deep cleaning that they require? Are rules being adhered to rigorously? Those are all questions that need to be answered.

The effect of an outbreak, with someone potentially dying as a result, is, of course, the greatest concern, and, sadly, that has happened across both sites in recent days. However, there are many more factors to consider: for instance, the impact on hospital services such as planned surgery and other treatments being cancelled, with staff having to isolate and the massive impact that that has on patient outcomes. I raised that point yesterday with the Minister, and I thank him for coming before the House again today. The number of staff now in isolation is a major and concerning knock-on effect of the outbreak across the two sites. It is a huge worry that necessary medical procedures that were due to take place —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Irwin: — have been postponed as a result. I call on the Minister to act as quickly as possible to ensure that the situation is rectified as soon as possible.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Irwin: I hope that everyone can return to work as soon as humanly possible.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus go raibh maith agat arís, a Aire, as bheith i láthair. I thank the Minister for attending the Chamber on what have certainly been a couple of very long days to address major health issues. On behalf of the Health Committee, I extend sincere sympathy to those who have contracted COVID-19 in Craigavon and Daisy Hill hospitals and, in particular, to the families of those who have died following hospital-acquired infection. I know that their loss is compounded dreadfully in these circumstances and that there is so much hurt and understandable anger among relatives.

I must also acknowledge the distress and disappointment felt by the health care staff and leadership, dozens of whom have also been infected in the line of duty. Having worked tirelessly throughout the pandemic, the workforce must be feeling demoralised and upset that harm should come to the very people that they are trying so hard to help. I realise that they are also bearing greater pressure due to the resulting staff absences.

The Committee has welcomed the announcement of the level 3 serious adverse incident inquiries in the Southern Trust. The process, however, can be lengthy and has been challenging for families in the past. It is important that families are involved centrally from the outset, updated regularly throughout and provided with all the support that they need at this time and in the future. While we must allow the SAI to run its course and not prejudice its findings, nevertheless, I hope that the opportunity will be taken for early and widespread sharing of any preliminary lessons learned, with a view to reducing the risk of outbreaks elsewhere. I was pleased to note the Minister's commitment to that rapid learning process in the Chamber yesterday.

The Health and Social Care workforce and leadership have been on a rapid learning curve with the virus since the start, and so much more is known now than six months ago. That mindset has never been more valuable. The Committee will want to know what has been learned or is still to be learned about the type and use of personal protective equipment (PPE) in these circumstances, for example, or about other infection control measures, the interaction between health professionals or the approaches to testing and monitoring: essentially, what is required to ensure that patients and staff have the protection and support that they need as we face into the coming challenging months.

The Committee has sought to play a positive role in scrutinising the pandemic response, feeding through the challenges on the ground and seeking to hold public bodies to account while making a constructive contribution to decisions. In keeping with that, the Committee will want to see the report of the inquiry as soon as possible and support and highlight the lessons learned and key public health messages arising. It is also important to state that, as we see increasing transmission of COVID-19, learning the lessons of outbreaks will be vital.

I have been contacted by families, and it is not an exaggeration to say that they have been devastated.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Gildernew: The best tribute to those who have died and promise to those who are suffering must be that we act together to prevent further incidents at all costs. I wish the Minister well and look forward to detailed engagement.

Mrs Cameron: First and foremost, we must remember that at the heart of the debate this evening are broken hearts and grieving families. My sympathies go to all those who have lost family or friend in Craigavon, Daisy Hill and, indeed, beyond.

I am also cognisant that we await the outcome of the action taken by the Minister in announcing a level 3 serious adverse incident inquiry. That is the right route for the Department to take. It is best to let that investigation determine what exactly happened and what the failings were, and then we can learn from that. There is clearly a problem here, but rumour and innuendo serve no purpose in establishing concrete fact. Facts are needed so that they can be acted on, the unanswered questions from families answered and the lessons learned.

I urge the Minister to proceed with haste and to ensure that the investigation is swift and thorough. There is also an important point to make. Let us also remember that there are considerable numbers of staff who are also broken-hearted, anxious and deeply moved by what has happened to patients in their care. I know that many nurses, doctors and, indeed, those who work in the haematology ward will be deeply distressed by the loss of their patients. Their dedication to their job is second to none, and their awareness of the need for impeccable infection control is also clear.

We need to be measured in what we say this evening. We all want answers. However, we need to reinforce the public health messages that can save lives whether that be in a hospital ward, an office, a restaurant or at home. The virus will be with us for some time, and we need to protect our hospitals and care homes in order to save lives. We need staff to be diligent, we need the public to be diligent and, as legislators, we need to ensure that they have the resources and the support to be diligent.

There are serious questions that need to be answered in this sad case; that is very clear.

The families need answers, the trust needs them, the wider health service needs them, and we need them. I thank the Minister for his action and await the outcome of the investigation. I trust that there will be the very minimum of delay in going forward with the SAI investigation.

6.30 pm

Ms Kimmins: I thank my colleague John O'Dowd for bringing this Adjournment debate this evening. I, too, wish to extend my condolences to all the families of the deceased, both in Craigavon and in Daisy Hill in my constituency. I thank the Minister for coming here, because I do appreciate that it has been a very tough couple of days. Without going over what everyone else has said here this evening, I, too, welcome the fact that there will be an SAI review, but, like others, I have concerns about the effectiveness of this, particularly as we need to get answers as soon as possible to ensure that this does not happen again. I believe that there is immediate learning that we can be looking at around key issues.

Just today, I have been contacted by family members of patients on the male medical ward in Daisy Hill who stated that they were not made aware at any stage of an outbreak on the ward. This has had major implications for their families. Their family member is currently in Craigavon, and the associated members are self-isolating while they await test results, which obviously has wider implications. Similarly, staff have been in contact with me to say that they first found out about the outbreak through the media, which is concerning. At a time when we want to ensure that staff feel valued, this can damage that too.

I think, Minister, that there needs to be more transparency to ensure that rumours do not circulate, that people are getting the correct information and that staff, patients and their families have better awareness and are more diligent in their day-to-day activities. We feel that there needs to be better communication, from the trust and from here in the Assembly, to ensure that people remember the stark message that this has not gone away. We know that this can get into our hospital settings — nothing is impossible — but it is important to keep that message live.

One of the biggest things that I have learned over the last number of days is around testing. There have been issues, and I have raised them with you, Minister. I do not want to go over those points again, but particularly for staff, patients and their families, accessing testing has proved really challenging, and it is obviously impacting on staffing levels within the hospital and on people in their wider lives.

Coming out of today, in the immediate aftermath of this, we as elected reps, and the senior management of the trust, need to work very, very hard to rebuild confidence, because confidence has been damaged here. For me, we were advised that Daisy Hill would be a COVID-free hospital, and there has been a serious upheaval as people were moved to Craigavon. We have lost our ED for a number of months now. This proves the need for the ED to come back, as we see that Craigavon is almost bursting at the seams with the workload that the staff are managing at present. We have a huge job of work to do, and we can do it, but it is important that we get a rapid response and that this is communicated clearly to the public.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Member for Upper Bann for bringing this important Adjournment debate today. I cannot stand here today and pretend that the outbreaks at Craigavon Area Hospital are not connected or linked to the outbreak at Daisy Hill Hospital. Twenty-five patients have tested positive; 11 patients have passed away, tragically; 44 staff have tested positive; and 112 staff are isolating. Eleven families are in the depths of grief, and my sympathies are with those families. They need answers. The words of Yvonne Stewart, who I spoke to, are ringing in my ears. Her father, John Fleming, was admitted to hospital for routine medical treatment. He has since been buried. She deserves answers. Yvonne Stewart could not thank the staff, doctors and nurses at Craigavon Area Hospital enough. She said that the level of care that her father got was exceptional.

There are 112 staff off isolating between the two hospitals. Can you imagine the duress that that puts on wards and on the remaining staff? Those staff need to be reassured that the lessons that need to be learned will be learned, and learned fast. Patients and their families need to be reassured, and the wider community needs to be reassured, that their hospitals are safe. I welcome the

announcement of a level 3 serious adverse incident review and the investigations that will take place in both hospitals. Those investigations must take place post-haste, and I am not filled with confidence having heard the chief executive of the trust on the radio this morning talking about still deliberating over the terms of reference.

I hesitate to pre-empt some of the findings of that investigation, but I believe that a fundamental finding will be that staff were not listened to. Staff were not listened to. Why did they have to come to me with concerns around testing and delays to testing? Why did they have to come to me with concerns about deep cleaning of the ward and deep cleaning of the canteen? Why did they have to come to me concerned about why infection control was not engaged fast enough? Why did they have to come to me concerned about staff being moved from a COVID ward to a clean ward? Staff were not listened to.

I want to finish by paying tribute to those staff, the doctors, nurses, porters, cleaners and cooks. Where would we be without them? Craigavon Area Hospital is an exceptional hospital, and Daisy Hill Hospital is an exceptional hospital. I agree with the Member for Newry and Armagh that we need to see the ED opened at Daisy Hill Hospital to ease the pressure on Craigavon Area Hospital.

Ms S Bradley: I, too, support Doug Beattie, and I thank the Minister for being here. I acknowledge the huge challenge that you face along with your team. It cannot be an easy day any day.

I thank the Member for bringing this debate to the Floor of the House, and I appreciate that, since it was presented to the Business Office, the situation has changed and now includes Daisy Hill, which is a recipient hospital for south Down. Both it and Craigavon Area Hospital have quite a big intake from that area.

From my perspective, Minister, I see that there are two channels at work here. There is that retrospective piece that needs to happen regarding the serious adverse incident. Unfortunately for those families who have lost loved ones, that will bring nobody back, but what it will do is provide them with the answers that they so rightly deserve at this time. I do share the concerns of the House that that process may be laboured and slow. It may be that the old tool in the box was quickly grabbed in these uncertain times. It may be that it is not the best tool for this job but it was the easiest to grab, and I would work with the Minister on any suggestions that he has to inject some speed into the process of bringing forward anything that needs to be learned quickly to move on to the second channel that I will refer to, the piece where we have to act fast and respond quickly to lessons that could be learned that could save future lives.

On that note, as my colleague from Newry and Armagh referred to, staff and patients need reassurance. I do not want to find out from the Floor of the House that cleaning has happened because we asked. I do not think that that is how staff should be finding out these reassuring words. There appears to be a real breakdown in communications from the trust to the staff and the patients. They need to know that everything that can be done is being done, and, if that communication channel opens up more rapidly and it is a two-way communication channel, I think that that will put an end to the room where rumour has grown.

Having spoken to people working on the ward and to families who have patients on the ward, I urge you, Minister, to please use this opportunity to reassure them. It is all that they seek at this time. They need to know that they are safe and that the most that can be done is being done to keep them safe. They need to hear it from you.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Ms S Bradley: They need to hear it from the trust, and they need to hear it from management in the hospital. I thank all those staff, and I thank you.

Mr Carroll: Thanks to Mr O'Dowd for bringing this important discussion to the Floor of the House. I think that it is important that even MLAs outside of the area give their thoughts on the issue. I begin by offering my condolences, sympathy, solidarity and support to the families who have lost loved ones due to the recent outbreak at Craigavon Area Hospital. My thoughts are obviously with all those who are battling for their lives and their health. This is obviously a highly sensitive issue and, because of that, I think that it is important to choose words carefully.

Of course, I do not claim to know the full details of what has happened in Craigavon Area Hospital or, indeed, in Daisy Hill Hospital. However, it is a deeply worrying situation when highly vulnerable patients who are free of COVID are admitted to a hospital where they then come into contact with the virus, to be met with the most tragic of fates in some circumstances. Like our care homes, these hospitals should have had the maximum protection from the virus at the very start, but, unfortunately, much like our care homes, some of these hospitals, including the staff and patients in them, have been failed at various stages throughout the crisis, and over the years as well.

We have to ascertain why what happened happened. Obviously, apart from the SAI review, there needs to be a full inquiry into these events, and that should be directly informed by the families, who should get the answers that they deserve. We should not, as others have said, disregard those people, such as health workers and their respective unions, because health workers have been failed throughout the crisis, from the denial of PPE to the more general rundown of services throughout the pandemic.

As Mr McNulty said, they may have raised concerns prior to this, I do not know, but I think that it is important, if they did, that that is listened to and addressed. I say this because, as I articulated earlier today, there are elements in the House who are going to great lengths to blame ordinary people for the spread of the virus. They talk about "reckless individuals", referring constantly to "house parties", but I think that the reality is that the same reticence to shut down workplaces in the first place fuelled moves to reopen them prematurely and in an unsafe way, which increased the spread of the virus, and possibly threatened more deaths. That was while creating a context in which many people began to draw the conclusion that if you could go to work, why not socialise with friends etc.

Just last week, I asked the First Minister to divulge the medical evidence that shows that although COVID can spread in a home where there are six people, it does not spread in a workplace where there are hundreds of people. I asked the Health Minister the same question today. I take it that he was rushed in some of his comments today, but,

on neither occasion, was I given the evidence to ascertain why it spreads in homes but not in workplaces.

I give my sympathies to the families. Hopefully a tragedy such as this will not happen again.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I thank Mr O'Dowd for proposing this Adjournment debate. I am thankful for the opportunity to further address the House on COVID-19, the outbreak that we have seen in Craigavon Area Hospital and on the related issues that we have seen in Daisy Hill Hospital, which I commented on yesterday in response to Mr McNulty's question for urgent oral answer.

In starting from where Mr Carroll left off, it is about ensuring that this does not happen again. It is about ensuring that we have the support in our health service and hospitals, and the support for the staff, to make sure that we do all that we can to address the spread of COVID-19.

I express my sincere sympathies to the loved ones of those who have passed away, and I reiterate that I am deeply sorry for the heartbreak and the loss that those families have suffered.

Thorough investigations are absolutely essential, and I am determined that no stone will be left unturned to ascertain the facts about the causes and about these cases and about any learning that we can take to prevent a further occurrence. While we do all that we can to protect ourselves and our society from the risk that this virus constantly poses, our citizens should, at all times, expect the highest standards of infection control to be in place across our healthcare facilities.

In the light of these recent clusters, the Southern Trust's immediate priorities are, first, to care for affected patients and staff and to prevent the further spread of the virus. Secondly, it is to ensure that the appropriate investigations are initiated, with involvement from the families, and supported and controlled by my Department.

6.45 pm

I have been clear that this is a very serious matter. As I have said previously, a thorough investigation is required so that patients and bereaved families receive the answers that they are entitled to.

The Southern Health and Social Care trust has confirmed that the level 3 SAI investigation will be extended to include the outbreak at the male medical ward at Daisy Hill Hospital. The investigation will be independently chaired, and, as I have said, its findings will be made available to the families impacted and will be made public. As I said in the House yesterday, I expect the independent chair to be appointed by the end of this week. I can give John the assurance that the independent chair will be appointed and selected in conjunction with the Health and Social Care Board and the Public Health Agency.

As to why the terms of reference have not been finalised yet, that is because the independent chair and also, importantly, the families will have input into the terms of reference. I have met with families who have been through a level 3 SAI, and their experience was not good. They were not supported right. So when I declared that this outbreak warranted a level 3 SAI, it was not, as the Member said, because it was the only tool in the box; it

was the tool that I had to ensure that we could get the answers that the families and also the staff need.

As I said yesterday, we expect the chair to be in place by the end of this week, and we will move as quickly as is practicable to get the answers. I think it is important to be very clear at this stage that, while we want an expeditious investigation, we simply cannot put a timeline on it until we have greater clarity about the underlying causes, which the investigation will provide. An SAI is about learning, and it is vital that we are thorough in our investigation and take every opportunity to learn from these tragic circumstances.

My Department and I are in regular contact with the Southern Trust, and I want to assure the public, patients and staff that all necessary measures are being taken, first, to control the outbreaks and, secondly, to investigate the circumstances that caused them. I also want to give them reassurance that all is being done to make sure that patients are safe, that the families are supported and that the staff are also important, because time after time in here, tonight, we have acknowledged the work that the staff have undertaken.

As I said yesterday, the trust is working with the Public Health Agency and Public Health England to make sure that the management of the response is of the highest standard and that the necessary lessons are learned right across our health and social care system. The trust is taking that necessary learning from Public Health England to identify the actions that can be taken now to support the patients and the families, because Public Health England has already gained experience of outbreaks. We want to learn from it and apply that learning here in Northern Ireland, but also to make sure that that learning is not just for the Southern Trust but for all the trusts in Northern Ireland, because, across these islands, we all have the same desire, and that is to ensure that patients, staff and visitors have access to safe healthcare in our hospitals.

These are unimaginably difficult times for the families, and I want to assure them that the Patient and Client Council is available to advocate on their behalf and to provide independent support as they engage in the process with the trust and the investigation. I said here yesterday that, if those families are reticent about support from the trust or do not think that it is going to be an open and transparent process, that is what the Patient and Client Council is there for.

I also want to take this opportunity to reassure the staff who are working through these unprecedented times to care for their patients and our loved ones that they are supported in their work and the daily challenges that they are presented with. This is not about apportioning blame. It is fundamental that we learn from this and take robust steps to ensure the safeguarding of our staff and patients in all of our hospital settings.

I listened intently to the debate today, and I take note of Members' concerns and frustrations because I have those same feelings. I want to provide a brief update that I received from the Southern Trust on the patients and staff who have been affected. Ms Bradley talked about hearing the reports in this House; this is information that I have received today, so it is only right that I provide it when I have it. We have had calls for transparency and clarity, so this is the information that I have received.

In relation to Craigavon, 14 patients tested positive; six of them have, sadly, passed away, five remain in-patients in North Respiratory for ongoing clinical care and three are at home. In Craigavon, 146 staff have been tested, 23 of whom have tested positive and 45 are in self-isolation. However, 26 of those 45 have now returned to work, such is their dedication and commitment.

Mr McNulty spoke about the staff, and it is not just the nurses and doctors; it is the cleaners and the porters. It is the entire team. So often, we look at our health and social care workers as workers in a job. They carry out a vocation and have a dedication that I have seen no equal to in the past seven months.

In relation to Daisy Hill Hospital, 13 patients have tested positive and five of those have, sadly, passed away. There is one at home and the remainder have been transferred to Craigavon, in line with the Southern Trust's protocol for management of COVID. Some 204 staff to date have been tested, 28 of whom have tested positive and 73 in total are self-isolating. If any Member knows of any family members who have concerns around getting access to tests, please come forward and let us know because they have access to pillar 1.

I will respond briefly to a couple of points that have been raised. I can confirm that enhanced cleaning is taking place on both sites several times each day, particularly in outbreak wards, where it happens four times per day, and also in donning and doffing areas. On touch points and staff terminals, measures are guided by best proactive advice from the Public Health Agency and learnings from Public Health England.

If the Speaker will indulge me with an extra couple of minutes, I have an extra page to read. I will finish on time, but it is vital that I convey the answers that I have here. I appreciate your indulgence. These measures, as I say, are guided by best proactive advice from the Public Health Agency and learning from Public Health England.

On the question of staff moving across hospital sites, I discourage the type of unfounded speculation that there has been. I have received provisional data on genotyping of the outbreaks of those who have tested positive, and, so far, there has been absolutely no link between staff who volunteered to help out across sites and the transmission of COVID-19 into Craigavon hospital.

Staff working flexibly across our sites is not uncommon and is safe. It is one of the strengths of our workforce, but I must stress this important point: the staff who came into Craigavon went from an amber PPE site to an amber PPE site. These are standard infection and control measures, which staff observe in order to prevent any transmission from one location to another. Nevertheless, these cases are a stark and tragic reminder that this virus is amongst us and is very much at large in our community.

I know that people want to get back to normality, and with our children going back to schools and colleges and many people returning to some kind of work pattern, it feels a little more like normal. These are still not normal times. We have to live our lives in the shadow of this terrible virus until the time comes when we have a safe and effective vaccine. Everyone is feeling the pressure. Each and every one of us must remain robust and not fall prey to the complacency that is creeping in upon us.

A number of Members referred to the rumours and speculation. I have always said throughout this pandemic that that sort of rumour and speculation is unhelpful. It is what most undermines our staff morale. It puts questions into the heads of families who do not have answers because, often, that speculation, rumour and innuendo, without ground and without basis, is what does the most damage.

In conclusion, there are undoubtedly questions that will have to be answered by the trust in relation to the outbreaks once the immediate threat has been brought under control. The necessary steps are under way and any lessons will be shared across all health and social care trusts as they emerge because COVID-19 remains a lethal and highly infectious virus.

Mr Speaker, thank you for your indulgence.

Mr Speaker: I thank all Members who contributed to the debate this afternoon. The substance and tone of all the contributions have adequately and appropriately reflected the gravity of the situation today, and I commend all the Members for their very worthy contributions.

Adjourned at 6.55 pm.

Written Ministerial Statements

The content of these written ministerial statements is as received at the time from the Ministers. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

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Department of Health

Covid 19 - Localised Restrictions

Published at 5:45 pm on Thursday 17 September 2020

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I am writing to provide Members with an update on the course of the Coronavirus epidemic and recent decisions that I as Minister for Health, along with the Northern Ireland Executive, have taken to limit its spread.

As Members will already be aware when R is above 1, the transmission of the epidemic will increase, resulting in more cases, hospital admissions and deaths. The greater the value of R above 1, the more rapid the increase.

Our 7 day incidence based on new positive tests is now 33.3 per 100,000 people. Our 14 day incidence is 64.9. Our incidence rates remain higher than both the United Kingdom average and that of the Republic of Ireland. We should also be mindful that Northern Ireland's case rate is significantly higher than the level where the UK currently imposes quarantine requirements on overseas countries.

We are also worryingly beginning to see an upturn in hospital admissions. Sadly we are now also seeing an increase in the number of reported deaths.

R is currently likely to be above 1, both for new positive cases and hospital admissions. The proportion of cases in individuals aged >60 yrs has risen from under 10% to just under 16%, however still thankfully significantly below the first wave of the epidemic where around 50% of cases were in this age group.

The current increase in cases should be viewed as the precursor of increasing cases in the over sixties with resulting pressure on the hospital system and increasing deaths.

Community transmission remains widespread, associated with multiple small clusters rather than a small number of larger outbreaks.

Unfortunately from the evidence coming from the contact tracing team it is still the case that much of the transmission is occurring between small social or family gatherings and casual mixing between households.

However, as I have said before, the spread is not even. There is marked variation in COVID cases across Local Government Districts.

Further insight is only possible from looking at a postcode level. In response to particularly high incidence of COVID-19 in certain parts of Northern Ireland the

Executive agreed on 10 September that local restrictions should be introduced in order to interrupt community transmission occurring through indoor social gatherings in households, and using postcode areas as the basis for determining the geographical extent of the restrictions.

The case for localised restrictions is well-established, given the marked variation in the incidence of Covid-19 cases in different localities.

Members of the public can now check online at any time to see if their postcodes are included.

Anyone living in these protected areas is required to abide by two restrictions:

- No mixing of households in private dwellings, with exemptions for: bubbling with one other household; caring responsibilities including childcare; essential maintenance, supported living arrangements; visits required for legal or medical purposes; marriage or civil partnerships where one partner is terminally ill;
- No more than six people to gather in a private garden from no more than two households;

In addition, everyone living in these areas is asked to be extremely careful in all aspects of their life. That particularly applies to medical vulnerable members of our community. Reflecting that requirement, visits to care homes and hospitals in the protected areas are being significantly curtailed.

Detailed advice is available on the NI Direct website.

Last Thursday, the Executive announced it was establishing a new Ministerial-led group on enforcement of Covid-19 regulations. The Executive Office agreed to lead on this work. Yesterday evening I attended the first meeting of the group, which addressed the dangerous anti-social behaviour in recent days in the Holyland area of Belfast. It is important that they now move to take swift action – the scenes witnessed this week demand it.

It is vital that action on the ground is coordinated and effective. The message must go out loud and clear that dangerous anti-social behaviour will not be tolerated.

A localised approach however inevitably presents logistical and presentational challenges. That would equally be the case if council districts, wards or parliamentary constituencies were used.

The new restrictions were introduced at pace last week due to the urgency of the public health situation. Other jurisdictions have faced similar challenges with localised restrictions. However it was the right thing to do.

I also said last week that the restrictions will be kept under constant review and areas will be added or removed from the list as required.

I can confirm that the newly introduced regulations introducing localised restrictions for the greater Belfast area extend beyond the Belfast City district to include certain co-terminus districts within the Lisburn and Castlereagh Council area. This reflects the population flows and public transport linkages and Belfast identity of these specific districts. The issue of the co-terminus districts was raised with me during discussions with Executive colleagues last week.

This was always going to be a complex and fast moving situation and I will make no apology for seeking to do the right thing.

There are lessons to be learned going forward, including on the need for engagement with the public and stakeholders.

The regulations themselves are not confusing and can make an important contribution to keeping people safe.

As I have stated previously, I will not step back from wider or stronger restrictions, should they be required.

Today I informed Executive colleagues that the postcode BT60 is now significantly above the previously agreed threshold of 80 positive cases per 100,000 for imposing localised restrictions, and all cases at this time appear due to household or community transmission. My Department will therefore be adding BT60 to the areas under local restriction. It is my intention that the restrictions for this postcode will be underpinned in regulation and be effective from 5pm Friday 18th September.

It is expected that the impact of these restrictions on transmission will take around two weeks to become apparent.

These restrictions will be retained only as long as they are deemed necessary and proportionate.

However I would remind Members that local restrictions may need to be introduced urgently in further areas in response to spikes in incidence. I will endeavour to try to keep the House informed of those decisions, even through regular short written statements.

Department of Finance

2020-21 Covid-19 Allocations

Published on Thursday 24 September 2020.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Introduction

This statement sets out further allocations aimed at addressing the evolving COVID-19 situation and the Executive's response to recovery

Funding Available

Since the Statement to the Assembly on June Monitoring, further funding of £762.2 million has been made available to the Executive as a result of the COVID-19 response in England. This includes funding made available through the Barnett formula as well as £600 million which formed the UK Government's guarantee announced on 24 July 2020. This guarantee provides a minimum of £2.2 billion to the Executive for 2020-21 for its COVID-19 response and is provided now to avoid a drip-feed of further Barnett and the associated planning difficulties such a drip-feed would produce. Full details of Barnett funding is set out at **Table A**.

The Department for Communities has surrendered £4 million of COVID-19 funding in relation to its Supporting People programme. In addition, as a result of recent departmental assessments some £30.9 million Capital DEL has been made available for reallocation.

The Executive had previously held £2.2 million for its contribution to a Ferry Operator scheme run by the Department for Transport in England. Latest indications are that the cost will be £0.35 million, thereby releasing £1.85 million for reallocation

Further Allocations

13 August

Due to the evolving situation and the need to provide support as expediently as possible the Executive allocated £123 million of funding on 13 August. This set of allocations included funding to enable schools and Further Education facilities to safely reopen, provide apprenticeship places and support social enterprises. A full list of August allocations is set out at **Table B**.

11 September

Further limited allocations were made on 11 September, reflecting the urgency of providing support for Higher Education places and additional PPE for the education sector as schools re-opened. Details of these allocations are set out in **Table C**.

24 September

Further allocations have now been agreed by the Executive after considering its COVID recovery plan.

Given the concerns around waste management and the need to meet pressures resulting from increased landfill and waste management costs DAERA have been allocated £11.4 million to support these key services.

Local councils have been at the forefront of vital recovery services despite being placed into financial stress by income reduction. Councils will also play a key role in economic recovery and in recognition of that £40 million

has been allocated to the Department for Communities to support key local council service provision.

Given the severe impact on the arts sector and the need to provide appropriate support for the reopening of venues, and introduction of Covid measures, in the face of dramatic losses of revenue £29 million has been allocated to the Department for Communities for cultural recovery. This is in addition to £4 million which was previously allocated for the Cultural Resilience Fund and means that an additional £33 million has been allocated to the sector which plays a key part in economic recovery.

The Executive recognises the need for further support for businesses and in recognition of the ongoing hardships faced the Department for the Economy has been allocated £8.5 million for assistance to business, £8.4 million for skills and youth training, £9.9 million for tourism support, £5.8 million to University R&D, £1.9 million for air route support and £1.4 million for Energy. These should all help spur the economic recovery.

The Executive has allocated £8.0 million to schools with a further £1.0 million for pre-schools, enabling them to maintain safe practices and £0.2 million in respect of Special Education Need mainstream and pupil support.

Given the winter pressures identified by the Department for Infrastructure and the need to ensure that key transport corridors are accessible during the winter months the Executive has allocated £5 million for this important economic support network.

FTC funding of £80 million has also been agreed for the Ulster University Belfast campus project.

Full details of allocations are set out in **Tables D&E**.

Central Funding

Following the allocations set out above £54.8 million of the funding previously set aside for Transport and PPE remains. Departments have not identified any further PPE requirements therefore it is proposed to combine the Transport and PPE funding, along with £0.4 million of general funding into one pot of £55.2 million. This will be held pending proposals from the relevant departments on support for sectors which have so far fallen through the gaps.

The additional £600 million that formed part of the UK guarantee is held centrally pending the Department of Health's assessment of costs for 2020-21.

Outcome

The outcome of these sets of allocations is that the Executive retain £55.2 million for further sectoral support and £600 million pending the Health assessment. There is also a small Capital overcommitment of £0.5 million which will be managed as part of the monitoring process.

Further decisions on funding will be made following the Department of Health assessment of need and proposals from departments on further sectoral support.

Full details are included in the tables provided with this Statement.

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COVID-19 Treasury Funding

Table A Barnett Consequentials / UK Guarantee

Executive Allocations

Table B August Allocations

Table C 11 September Allocations

Table D 24 September Resource Allocations

Table E 24 September Capital Allocations

Table A – Barnett Consequentials / UK Guarantee

£ million

England Only Measures	Resource	Capital	FTC
Budget20 LA hardship fund	16.4		
Business support grants (total cost)	406.9		
Business rates reliefs (total cost)	353.2		
Charity support - National Lottery Community Fund	10.2		
Charity support - direct grants (inc hospices)	8.5		
Fisheries Support	0.2		
Rugby League Support			0.4
Coronavirus Emergency Response fund			
Enhanced NHS discharge/suspension of means test	42.6		
Local Authority COVID support package	52.4		
Purchasing independent sector capacity	45.2		
Shielding - food packages	6.9		
Shielding - DHSC elements	9.6		
DfT - Emergency Management Agreements	95.0		
PPE procurement	3.3		
DWP additional funding for operational resilience	4.7		
Call centre for the National Shielding Centre	1.8		
NHS Workforce	48.6		
GP and Community Pharmacy Easter Bank Holiday Opening	2.9		
Emergency Management Agreement for railway services (19-20)	19.3		
Advance Ticket Refund	1.0		

England Only Measures	Resource	Capital	FTC
Voucher scheme to replace free school meals	7.1		
Shielding - food packages	1.9		
Councils	52.4		
Shielding - food packages	19.7		
Shielding - DHSC elements	0.2		
DfT - Emergency Management Agreements	0.8		
PPE procurement	35.9		
MHCLG Homeless (Capital DEL)		3.1	
Test and Trace Funding	9.8		
NHS Workers	8.3		
GPs support in care homes	1.5		
Contact tracers	7.4		
Flu vaccines	6.5		
PPE (second tranche)	157.3		
Budget 2020-21 COVID-19 Capital		1.3	
Historic Royal Palaces	0.8		
Economically vulnerable food support	2.1		
Summer food fund	3.9		
Schools catch-up	16.4		
Community Pharmacy Support Fund	3.9		
Contact tracers	-7.4		
Test and Trace (LA element)	36.1		
Health and Safety Executive	0.4		
Telephony services	1.4		
Fire services	1.1		
Homelessness (resource)	4.2		
Local authority support package (2nd July)	16.4		
Prison service support	1.3		
Cultural Recovery Fund	32.6		
Large Zoo Support	2.8		
GP and Community Pharmacy Easter Bank Holiday Opening	0.0		
Summer Economic Update	46.2		
UKG Guarantee Announcement	600.0		
Totals	2199.5	4.4	0.4

Table B – 13 August 2020 Allocations

£ million		
DFC	Safely re-open the Voluntary & Social Enterprise Sectors	2.5
	Social Enterprises	7.0
DfE	FE COVID-19 Related Additional Expenditure To Provide Safe Learning Environment	5.5
	Apprenticeships	17.2
	Free School Meals – Further Education	0.4
DE	Restart – PPE	6.4
	Schools Reopening	35.0
	Free School Meals	0.6
DfI	Translink	20.0
	Taxi and Bus Industry – statutory Licences	1.4
	NI Water	27.0
Total		123.0

Table C – 11 September 2020 Allocations

£ million		
DfE	Higher Education Places	3.2
DE	Restart – PPE	19.2
Total		22.4

Table D – 24 September 2020 Resource Allocations

£ million		
DAERA	Waste Management	11.4
DfC	Local Councils	40.0
	Culture Recovery	29.0
Total DfC		69.0
DfE	Assistance to Business	8.5
	Skills and Youth Training	8.4
	Tourism	9.9
	University R&D	5.8
	Energy	1.4
	PPE	3.5
	Air Route Support	1.9
Total DfE		39.2

DE	Schools	8.0
	Non-Statutory Pre-School Settings	1.0
	SEN	0.2
Total DE		9.2
Dfl	Winter Service	5.0
Total		133.8

Table E – 24 September 2020 Capital Allocations

£ million

DoH	Track, Trace and Protect App	1.6
Dfl	A6 Flagship	14.8
	NI Water - Acceleration of Works	15.0
Total Dfl		29.8
Total Conventional Capital		31.4
TEO	Ulster University (FTC)	80.0
Total		111.1

Department of Health

Covid-19 — Update

Published at 5.00 pm on Friday 25 September 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I am writing to update Members on the latest situation regarding the Coronavirus epidemic and the ongoing work by my Department and the Executive to protect the public.

Over the last week, there has been a marked increase in cases along with a progressive rise in COVID hospital patients, although the latter remains at a relatively low level at present.

The current estimate of R is around 1.5. There have been 1,236 laboratory confirmed positive cases in the last week and the 7 day incidence based on new positive tests, as can be found on the Department of Health dashboard at any time, is now 65.7 per 100,000 of our population. In addition, the average number of COVID occupied hospital beds has continued to increase.

The Executive this week extended localised restrictions which were in force in different areas to the whole of Northern Ireland. Mixing between households is not permitted, with exemptions in place for certain situations. Similarly, meetings in private gardens must involve no more than six people from no more than two households.

I believe Members may also receive an update on Monday from the First and deputy First Minister on updated regulations for the hospitality industry.

The Executive continues to prioritise public health, while also recognising the importance of keeping society and the economy as open as possible. As Health Minister, I recognise the consequences for population health and well-being of economic stagnation.

There is a tightrope to walk and, as I have told Members many times before, no easy or pain free solutions are available. I would urge Members to continue to promote widespread public compliance with the Coronavirus regulations.

The best way to avoid further restrictions on our lives is to follow the ones we now have in place now and strictly follow public health advice on social distancing, handwashing and face coverings.

As we look ahead, we have to plan for every eventuality.

There is early evidence to suggest that the household restrictions applied on a postcode basis, and now Northern Ireland wide, may have had some impact on reducing transmission. My Department and the Executive will continue to monitor the data on prevalence and be guided by expert medical and scientific advice.

I am advised that further interventions may be required to prevent an exponential rise in the virus.

In the coming days and weeks the Executive will continue to assess different potential options for returning incidence to low levels.

Members will be aware of media coverage of health and social care staff becoming infected with Covid-19 through social contacts.

I want to place on record once again my thanks and appreciation to staff for their dedication throughout this pandemic and the sacrifices they have made.

I also fully appreciate the feelings of exhaustion and anxiety within the workforce at this time. I would appeal to everyone across society to remain vigilant about the Covid-19 threat.

The Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser have recently written to HSC staff, underlining the importance of maintaining the recommended precautions in social interactions and settings across our health and care facilities.

Whilst many efforts will be rightly focussed on the pandemic, I remain acutely aware of the many priorities and challenges we are experiencing in non-Covid healthcare.

One area that I remain especially keen to see progress on is the rebuilding and stabilisation of our cancer services. Yesterday I was pleased that the Executive endorsed my Department's draft Policy Statement which sets out short and medium term plans to rebuild and stabilise cancer oncology and haematology services to address the serious detrimental impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Health and Social Care's delivery of these services across Northern Ireland.

Even before the onset of Covid-19 a population health needs assessment prepared by the Public Health Agency in 2019 commented that recent pressures affecting oncology services in Northern Ireland had highlighted challenges in sustaining the appropriate level of high quality specialist care in all Health and Social Care Trusts.

I firmly believe that increased capacity is needed to address the underperformance in meeting cancer waiting time targets and to address the increasing demand for these services. The impact of Covid-19 has added a worrying new dimension to the HSC's underperformance in meeting waiting time targets. We have seen a significant fall in red flag referrals during the pandemic surge and it is anticipated that the service is likely to see a surge in referrals over the coming months, with the potential for an increase in late stage presentations of patients experiencing symptoms.

The immediate need is to rebuild services following the Covid-19 first wave and maintain service delivery for red-flag and urgent referrals for the year ahead.

The Rebuilding Plan for Cancer Services contains 17 actions to maximise available capacity across cancer services. The Oncology Stabilisation Plan includes 5 key elements, including funding to support development of new consultant posts in Northern Ireland Cancer Care (NICC) to address single handed / vulnerable practice and pressures within NICC. Funding to support development of new consultant posts in Northern Ireland Cancer Care (NICC) to address single handed / vulnerable practice and pressures within NICC.

The HSCB has also developed a Stabilisation Plan for Haematology Services given its close association with Oncology services to address the capacity pressures also faced by this service. All Trusts have brought forward individual plans which provide enhanced capacity to meet the increase in demand for services whilst simultaneously

providing a more resilient service through the development of more sustainable teams.

Each of the Trusts have also developed surge plans to address operational resilience for winter pressures and for any subsequent waves of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020/2021. These are in addition to Phase 3 Rebuilding Plans for 01 October to 31 December 2020.

These plans are to be submitted in the coming days for my consideration and shortly after I hope to share them with Members as well as making them publicly available.

The Executive Office

Outcome of the Recent Competition to Appoint A New Head of The Civil Service (Hocs)

Published on Saturday 26 September 2020.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: The position of Head of the NI Civil Service (NICS) is a critical role and one of significant responsibility, including leading almost 23,000 civil servants to serve the institutions of government and all our citizens through the provision of excellent public services.

The Head of Civil Service (HOCS) is also the most senior official in the organisation, and is the principal policy adviser to the First Minister and deputy First Minister across all the issues of government. HOCS also heads up the Executive Office.

The challenges cannot be underestimated given our current unprecedented context of continuing to manage the response to and recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic, preparations for EU exit and delivering commitments set out in NDNA.

The previous post holder, David Sterling, announced his intention to retire in December 2019 after more than three years in the post. Planning for the HOCS recruitment exercise was underway in January, with the intention that a replacement would be appointed by the time David retired at the end of August.

While some inevitable delays to this process were experienced due to the covid-19 pandemic, the agreed process of joint FM and dFM final stage interviews took place last week.

Regrettably, an appointment was not made.

We are therefore, now urgently working to put in place appropriate interim arrangements and in parallel considering how best to fill this crucial role on a substantive basis.

The Rt Hon Arlene Foster MLA **Michelle O'Neill MLA**
First Minister 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 7 August 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how are the commitments to timely responses to Assembly Questions in paragraph 3.3 of the Guidance for Ministers in the Exercise of their Official Responsibilities being monitored; and with what results.

(AQW 4571/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Our department will be consulting all departments on the form and frequency of publication of performance statistics for responses to Assembly Questions with effect from the Assembly's autumn term when it is anticipated that the normal processes for questions will have resumed.

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the Racial Equality Strategy will be implemented.

(AQW 4723/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Racial Equality Strategy is for the period 2015 – 2025 and implementation will therefore be ongoing during this period.

Good progress has been made in implementing the key actions in the Strategy to date, specifically:

- The structures to support delivery, including the Racial Equality Sub-Group and Racial Equality Champions in each Department, are now in place. They are developing a joint work programme and approach.
- A review of the Race Relations (NI) Order and relevant aspects of other legislation is underway.
- Research into monitoring, which also includes the potential for amendments to our Fair Employment legislation, has just been completed and we are considering the draft report to inform future proposals. There is growing evidence of a disproportionately high number of BAME deaths from COVID-19 in England and Wales which reinforces the need to gather evidence here to fully identify the extent of racial inequalities. Our work on monitoring aims to support the establishment of an improved evidence base.
- A review of the delivery model for the Minority Ethnic Development Fund (MEDF), a key element of our policy for racial equality and good race relations, is due to complete in the coming weeks. The findings will inform the future operation of the Fund.
- Work with the Department of Education (DE) to identify ways to tackle racist bullying in schools is underway. This is supported by the sub group who are also engaging with the PSNI to agree actions to increase identification and monitoring of race hate crime.

We remain committed to full implementation of the Strategy and its proposed actions. Indeed work is also underway to finalise a draft Refugee Integration Strategy for all refugees and asylum seekers which we hope to consult on later this year.

The Racial Equality Indicators Baseline Report was published in November 2018 and presents data measuring the progress of the Racial Equality Strategy. We are pleased that the report shows headway made in a number of areas but appreciate that there is more to do and we will continue to work to fully implement the actions in the strategy.

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of whether the Executive has done a disservice to Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities in Northern Ireland by not having a Racial Equality Strategy in place.

(AQW 4824/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive has a Racial Equality Strategy in place for the period 2015 – 2025 which can be found at the link below:

<https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/racial-equality-strategy-2015-2025.pdf>

We are pleased to report that good progress has been made in implementing the key actions in the Strategy to date, specifically:

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Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) what species of trees are due to be planted through the afforestation programme, Forests for Our Future; and (ii) whether he can provide assurance that invasive non-native species will not be planted.

(AQW 5435/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The Forests for Our Future programme will support tree planting that meets the UK Forestry Standard which is governments' approach to sustainable forestry. The Standard describes that trees and shrubs for afforestation should be chosen from a diverse range of species which are well adapted to the site and with a sufficiently wide genetic base to promote future adaptation. This will help the woodland to be more resilient to climate change and keep a wide range of forest management options open for the owner.

The Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 defines invasive, non-native species and prohibits the sale of these plants such as Himalayan balsam, sea buckthorn and Japanese knotweed. The planting of these species and other unregulated non-native invasive species, such as rhododendron and cherry laurel will not be supported for planting under the Programme.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has any plans to review car parking provision at Portglenone Forest.

(AQW 5787/17-22)

Mr Poots: Our forest parks are a fantastic natural resource which attract approximately 4.7 million visits annually. They make a significant contribution to tourism and recreational facilities across Northern Ireland, in addition to important health and well-being benefits they provide for local people.

Effective partnership working between my Department and local Councils has enabled the development of many new and improved facilities at forests in recent years. I am keen to see our forests continuing to play as full a role as possible in supporting regional tourism and provision of local outdoor recreational opportunities.

Forest Service is currently working with Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, under a joint Memorandum of Understanding, to support Council tourism and recreation priorities. Within this strategic framework, officials are working closely with the Council regarding recreational provision at Portglenone forest and associated car parking needs will be considered as part of this work.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline his Department's role in tackling Japanese Knotweed and Giant Hogweed.

(AQW 5876/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA is committed to taking action in dealing with the spread and impact of invasive alien species. The Invasive Alien Species Strategy for Northern Ireland, published in 2013, details how the actions on invasive alien species occur through different interventions including targeted eradication, awareness programs, local action groups, research and development. However, as with any of these species, it is the landowner's responsibility to manage and eradicate on their land. The Department has an advisory and enforcement role.

Further information can be accessed on the Department's Invasive Non - Native Species website at:

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/biodiversity/invasive-non-native-species-inns>

In addition, the Invasive Species Ireland website, managed by NIEA, provides full guidance on confirming ID, management techniques and legislation - <http://invasivespeciesireland.com/species-accounts/established/terrestrial>

The Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 contains powers for controlling the introduction of invasive alien species (IAS) in the wider environment. Under Article 15 of the Wildlife Order, it is an offence to 'plant or otherwise cause to grow in the wild' Japanese knotweed or any other invasive plant listed in Part II of Schedule 9 of this legislation. The current legislative position does not require landowners to eradicate Japanese knotweed.

Giant hogweed is and has been recently designated as a Widely Spread Species as per the requirement of Article 19 of EU Regulation 1143/2014. It is now an offence to permit the spread of this species outside the boundaries of your own land. There is also an expectation, on a national obligation, for all landowners to manage and eradicate this species from their land.

The Department continues to provide training events for a variety of organisations including other departmental estate managers, council parks staff and nature conservation staff in NGOs. In addition, it encourages community groups and farmers to manage Invasive Alien Species in their areas and to apply to the Department's various funding streams, such as the Environment Fund, the Environmental Challenge Competition and Environmental Farming Schemes for assistance.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what actions his Department is taking to ensure the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 objectives are being met; and on what date she intends to publish a report confirming the approach it is taking towards achieving the Strategy goals.

(AQW 5907/17-22)

Mr Poots: Work on the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 has not progressed across the NICS as first envisaged due to a number of reasons, including Assembly suspension, EU Exit and Covid-19.

Nevertheless, the DAERA Racial Equality Champion provided the necessary input to the Issues Register, although a meeting planned for March to agree the Action Plan did not proceed.

The Champion has also continued to progress the work within the Department in relation to racial equality issues and dedicated resources have been secured to support diversity work. We will continue to work closely with the TEO Racial Equality Unit to address issues and gaps in services faced by service users from different racial backgrounds.

Under the New Decade, New Approach agreement we look forward to the development of a new and updated Racial Equality Strategy. The approach to the Strategy goals should be published shortly after this.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in light of the recent information released on Nitrogen deposition in our Special Areas of Conservation, protected under the Habitats Directive, and in our Special Protection Areas, protected under the Birds Directive (i) what actions his Department are taking to prevent further degradation as required by law; and (ii) for the timescale of any such actions.

(AQW 5986/17-22)

Mr Poots: DAERA are developing an ammonia strategy which will address nitrogen exceedances at protected sites. This strategy will include proposals for the implementation of ammonia reduction measures, habitat restoration measures and a revised operational protocol for the assessment of the impacts of atmospheric nitrogen, as well as appropriate timescales. We hope to consult on this strategy soon.

Department for Communities

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what steps her Department has taken to assist Universal Credit claimants in advance of their first payment; and what is the average wait for the first payment of Universal Credit.

(AQW 3373/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): Every day, new claims for Universal Credit become due for payment at the end of their first five-week Assessment Period. The volumes of these have varied significantly in recent months from an average of approximately 900 each week prior to Covid-19 to a maximum weekly volume of over 11,000 in the week beginning 27 April. Throughout this time my Department has paid over 95% of these new claims at the end of that first five-week period.

Anyone suffering financial hardship during this five-week period can apply for an Advance Payment, with further support also available from the Universal Credit Contingency Fund or Discretionary Support.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities whether she was conveyed to the funeral of Bobby Storey on 30 June 2020 in an official Executive car.

(AQW 5610/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I was collected from home on 30 June 2020 and taken to Bobby Storey's funeral in West Belfast by the Ministerial Car. I was later collected and taken to Stormont for Assembly business, including the Final Stage of the Housing (Amendment) Bill.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the debt incurred by each council area as a result of COVID-19; and (ii) the financial support given to each council to directly address their COVID-19 pressures.
(AQW 5681/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department does not collate figures on council debt. Any debt figures pertaining to individual councils would feature in their annual report and accounts. The most recent available audited figures are in the 2018/19 accounts since, due to the current pandemic situation, the accounts for the year ended 31 March 2020 will not be finalised until 31 December 2020.

The total financial support given to councils amounted to £20.3 million for the period mid-March to June 2020 to directly address their COVID-19 pressures in respect of lost council generated income and up-front / exceptional COVID-19 costs. The amount of support allocated to each council is shown in the table below:

Support Allocated to Councils from Mid-March to June 2020

Councils are currently in the process of preparing a bid for support for the second quarter of the 2020/21 financial year.

Council	Allocation £
Antrim & Newtownabbey	1,949,158
Ards & North Down	1,415,734
Armagh, Banbridge Craigavon	2,052,238
Belfast	4,042,083
Causeway Coast & Glens	1,965,989
Derry & Strabane	1,291,091
Fermanagh & Omagh	1,793,465
Lisburn & Castlereagh	2,016,401
Mid & East Antrim	934,149
Mid Ulster	1,298,985
Newry Mourne & Down	1,540,707
Total	20,300,000

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of food parcels that were delivered by her Department on a weekly basis from March to July in each (i) council; and (ii) electoral district area.
(AQW 5682/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A Key aspect of the Emergency Response to the Covid 19 crisis was the distribution of food boxes to people who were shielding and non-shielding and in critical need of food. The distribution of over 184,000 food boxes to date has been achieved through the collaboration of Councils, Trusts and a wide range of grass roots community partners.

The number of deliveries per electoral district is not available, however the table below sets out the total number of deliveries per Council area to local food distribution centres from 6 April (when the programme began) until 8 July.

DfC COVID-19 Food Parcel Programme: Deliveries to Councils 06/04/20-08/07/20

Council	Boxes Delivered
Belfast City	47,879
Derry City and Strabane District	23,904
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough	17,949
Newry, Mourne and Down District	18,001
Ards and North Down Borough	16,372
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough	12,928
Fermanagh and Omagh District	15,378

Council	Boxes Delivered
Lisburn and Castlereagh City	11,109
Mid Ulster District	12,520
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough	6,502
Mid and East Antrim Borough	6,010
Total	188,552

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to provide details of all grant funding schemes available for community organisations.

(AQW 5767/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Information on the Department's grant and other contracted programmes can be found on the Department's website at: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/>

My Department has a funding relationship with the NICVA as a key element of its Regional Infrastructure Support Programme for the Voluntary and Community Sector.

Amongst other support, NICVA provides the GrantTracker funding database - <https://www.grant-tracker.org/>

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities whether she is engaged in discussions with housing associations about the opportunities to use financial transactions capital to increase the construction of social housing.

(AQW 5823/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department has considered the use of Financial Transaction Capital (FTC) for the construction of social housing. However Housing Associations due to their current classification to the public sector are currently unable to avail of FTC.

The passing of the Housing Amendment Act should change this soon. The Department, and the sector, will continuously explore finance options to optimise funding for the Social Housing Development Programme. FTC has of course been used to support other tenures such as the Co-ownership Scheme.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities what actions her Department is taking to ensure the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 objectives are being met; and on what date she intends to publish a report confirming the approach it is taking towards achieving the strategy goals.

(AQW 5861/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I previously set out how my Departmental Racial Equality Champion, as part of the NICS Racial Equality Champions Group, was due to meet with the Racial Equality subgroup in March 2020 to discuss the co-design of a draft work plan (AQW 5291/17-22 refers).

It is my expectation that, in addition to ensuring synergy across all Departments to achieve the goals of the strategy, the work plan will set out how we report our progress towards achieving the objectives and goals of the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2020.

As I have outlined previously, in the absence of an agreed work plan my Departmental Racial Equality Champion continues to ensure that messages about the importance of racial equality and good race relations are consistent and visible to all staff including Non-Departmental Public Bodies and other service providers.

My Department also arranged a Race Champion Awareness Session where colleagues were invited to develop a greater understanding of racial equality issues and incorporate the spirit and practicalities of the Racial Equality Strategy into their everyday work. The key speaker, Neil McKitterick from Barnardo's NI Refugee Support Service, provided an overview of the refugee experience here in NI.

As a 'Friend of Mela', work is ongoing with Belfast Mela festival organisers to see how DfC can be involved in the week long virtual celebration of world music, dance and art from the 24th - 30th August.

I remain committed to ensuring that due regard is given to racial equality when designing or delivering public services and in line with current equality legislation and best practice guidelines.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities whether she intends to use Section 75 monitoring to enable inclusion by publishing the proactive approaches taken to promote equity rather than publishing Equality Monitoring information that confirm discrimination has not happened.

(AQW 5862/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Monitoring for the purposes of Section 75 provides for the continuing process of evaluating the impact of departmental policies and programmes to determine whether they have any adverse consequences, why these might be occurring and whether action needs to be taken to address any unfairness or disadvantage.

In accordance with Equality Commission guidance, the Department has undertaken an audit of inequalities to identify inequalities across the 9 Section 75 categories relevant to our functions. This has enabled the Department to identify areas where it can better promote equality of opportunity and good relations for our service users and those affected by our policies.

The Department conducts an annual review of progress on the implementation of our equality scheme commitments, including the publication of the Department's Section 75 Annual Progress Report which presents the key projects and initiatives progressed during the year and reports on the impact and outcome of this work on people, relating to the relevant Section 75 category.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities to detail the process used by her Department to identify and enable identification of partners to take part in the co-production and co-design of policies and legislation; and how they ensure their contacts are kept up to date and current.

(AQW 5863/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- i Early and continuous engagement with stakeholders is embedded within policy making across my Department. My officials engage with a number of consultative and working groups, consisting of key stakeholders and partners that work with the Department on a regular basis in the co-production and co-design of policies and legislation to ensure the needs of those impacted by our policies are considered at every stage.
- ii. Business areas across the Department securely maintain lists of key stakeholders and partners specific to their policy area, as well as referring to general stakeholder lists such as S75 consultees. Stakeholder lists and membership of groups are continually reviewed and updated, and officials regularly involve existing partners in discussions to identify any additional partners that should be involved.
- iii. A practical example of this is the ongoing work by my officials to prepare for the development of a suite of Social Inclusion Strategies which includes the new Anti-Poverty Strategy, Disability Strategy, Gender Strategy and Sexual Orientation Strategy in line with the commitments made in New Decade, New Approach and the Executive's Programme for Government.
- iv. I am keen to ensure that representative organisations and groups of interest will be able to make a meaningful contribution to the development and implementation of these Strategies. I will establish processes for stakeholders and their representative groups to contribute to the design and development of the Strategies at all stages, taking account of their views, from the initial production through to monitoring and reporting, based on the principles and practice of citizen and community engagement.
- v As part of this process, I have agreed to the creation of an Expert Advisory Panel for each Strategy. Potential members will be approached to participate based on their expertise and in-depth knowledge of, issues relevant to the development of each Strategy.
- vi. A Co-Design Group for each Strategy will also be appointed to advise on the development and content of the draft Strategies and their supporting action plans. The Groups will be made up of key stakeholders who can represent the views of the relevant sectors. Nominations to the Co-Design Groups will be sought from a cross-section of Voluntary and Community Sector organisations.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the (i) 2017 instruction from the Housing Executive to external solicitors to draft new community leases to ensure compliance with the Business Tenancies Order 1996; and (ii) potential consequences of the new contracts and the impact on volunteers and local communities who avail of projects, courses, homework clubs and womens' groups.

(AQW 5869/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am aware that the Housing Executive instructed external solicitors to draft a new lease that was up to date, easier to navigate, and reflected current legislation such as The Business Tenancies Order (Northern Ireland) 1996.

The Housing Executive has assured me that the protections afforded by the Business Tenancies Order applies to both the old form of lease as well as the new form of lease, and furthermore there has been no change in the context of community lettings and the protections afforded by the Business Tenancies Order.

The Housing Executive has advised me that the new lease does include some additional responsibility for repairs and associated costs for the lessee. However, the new lease also stipulates that the Housing Executive will replace any item which is beyond economic repair.

The Housing Executive will continue to be sympathetic to any repair request from non-profit making community lets, and also undertake and maintain all fire safety works for all community lets. In addition, all community lets are included in External Cyclical Maintenance schemes along with the Housing Executive's domestic properties. However there is a reasonable expectation that any tenant will return the property to the state in which it was at the beginning of the lease.

The new lease does include a reference to a rent review which may be implemented at some future date for profit making tenancies only. However the Housing Executive does not currently apply Rent Reviews for non-profit making community lets.

The Housing Executive has advised that it is currently in discussions with community representatives in respect of any potential adverse impact of the new lease for community lets. For example, concerns have been raised with regard to repairing obligations; however, the Housing Executive is confident of resolving these matters in the very near future.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities whether she will consider reopening and extending the deadline for the COVID-19 charities grant as many charities were unaware of the grant application because they were closed during the pandemic.

(AQW 5926/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have listened to the views from the sector, I am pleased to say that the Covid-19 Charities Fund will re-open again for a three week window from 3 August 2020. I would encourage all charities to apply and should any charity need help in making their application, this will be available. Further details about the Fund can be found at:

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/news/charities-urged-apply-emergency-funding>

Department of Education

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to detail how many primary school applicants in the Lisburn area were not allocated places in their first three choices of school.

(AQW 5527/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): There were 1,254 applications for admission to Primary 1 in September 2020 which listed a primary school located in the Lagan Valley constituency as the first preference school. Five children have not been placed in either their 1st, 2nd or 3rd preference school. All five children have been placed in their 4th preference school.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to outline whether his Department will give consideration to the issuing of a translink pass to include both train and bus travel for children who are eligible for free school travel but use two modes of transport in their daily journey.

(AQW 5580/17-22)

Mr Weir: The current contract between the Education Authority and Translink for the provision of home to school transport does not allow for a single pass to be used on both bus and train services.

It is for the EA to determine the most appropriate mode of home to school transport for eligible pupils based on the individual circumstances of each pupil as well as having regard to the interests of efficiency and economy in making that determination.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education on how many occasions, in the past 5 years, has the Education Authority (i) refused to provide indemnity protection to a board of governors; and (ii) advised a chairperson or board of governors that they were in breach of governance procedures and they would not be covered by any indemnity protection unless they followed recommended employment practices and procedures.

(AQW 5640/17-22)

Mr Weir: On no occasion in the last 5 years has the Education Authority (i) refused to provide indemnity protection to a board of governors; and (ii) advised a chairperson or board of governors that they were in breach of governance procedures and they would not be covered by any indemnity protection unless they followed recommended employment practices and procedures.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how he has implemented the Assembly motion passed on 11 October 2016 which called on him to 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 5647/17-22)

Mr Weir: I recognise the importance of quality Physical Education (PE) in the curriculum and my Department recommends a minimum of two hours PE per week for all pupils. Quality PE makes a significant contribution to the education, skill development, mental health, resilience and wellbeing of children and young people.

Schools are best placed to address the needs of their pupils. At present I have no plans to introduce legislation to prescribe the amount of time that schools should allocate to PE.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education for an update on the return of pupils to school in September in terms of class sizes.

(AQW 5838/17-22)

Mr Weir: You will appreciate that issues relating to the practical re-opening of schools are highly complex – the need for physical distancing impacts significantly on class sizes, school transport and school meals, and many other issues. My strategic objective has always been to achieve maximum face-to-face teaching time for all pupils at the earliest opportunity.

I provided guidance to schools on 19 June 2020 which outlined processes and requirements for schools returning at the end of August. The guidance provided in June was based on planning assumptions for August and was always subject to review and revision.

I am well aware of the importance of all schools and settings resuming more normal patterns of operation and attendance, in line with standard legislative requirements. I hope this can be achieved as soon as possible in order to mitigate impact of the disruption on educational attainment and pupil wellbeing.

I am, therefore, currently reviewing guidance and would expect to bring forward revised proposals to the Executive shortly.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education when the summer Holiday Hunger scheme funding will be delivered.
(AQW 5848/17-22)

Mr Weir: On 19 June 2020 the Executive approved funding of £12m to establish the Summer Food Payment scheme. The scheme is specifically to ensure the welfare of children is not impacted by going hungry during the summer holidays as a result of Covid 19 social distancing requirements impacting on normal summer schemes which provide support, including food, to vulnerable children during the summer.

This scheme will make two ex gratia grant payments to the families of over 102,000 children, including FE students funded by DfE, during the months of July and August. The grant is equivalent to the cost of a Free School Meal (£2.70) for 5 days per week. The first payment of £62.10 per child was made week commencing 6 July and the second payment will be for £56.70 per child and cover the period 3 August – 31 August.

This scheme is for those children who were entitled to free school meals on 30 June 2020. Further details on the scheme are available at: <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/faqs-summer-food-payment-scheme-9-july-2020>

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the benefits of the delivery of free school meals during holiday periods.
(AQW 5849/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is widely recognised that for some children school holidays are a time of stress and impoverishment. For children from low income families, school holidays can bring greater financial pressures, food insecurity, isolation and poor health. This is often referred to as holiday hunger. The issue of holiday hunger is not new and is not for a single department to resolve.

However this year, due to Covid19, to address growing concerns in the short term the Summer Food Payment scheme was established. The purpose of the scheme is to ensure the welfare of children is not impacted by going hungry during the summer holidays as a result of Covid-19. Social distancing requirements have impacted on normal summer schemes which provide support, including food, to vulnerable children. The Department of Education is ready to work with other departments to address the issue in the longer term.

The Department will carry out a Post Project Evaluation (PPE) to evaluate the effectiveness of the Summer Food Payment scheme in due course.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what procedures are in place to capture, record and monitor incidences of bullying in (i) primary; and (ii) secondary schools; and for a breakdown of the number of incidents recorded in each of the last five years.

(AQW 5894/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department does not collect this information.

Schools have responsibility to respond to individual bullying incidents in accordance with their discipline, positive behaviour and anti-bullying policies.

The Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (NI) 2016 requires grant-aided schools to maintain a record of all bullying incidents. Following concerns raised by the teaching unions, the Department agreed to a temporary pause in the planned implementation of this legislation to facilitate further meaningful dialogue.

I am considering an implementation date in the context of the Education Restart Programme and will make an announcement in due course.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Education what plans are in place to allow students who need to use the Strangford ferry to get to school, to be able to travel safely once schools reopen.

(AQW 5901/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department continues to work with the Education Authority, the Department for Infrastructure and Translink to ensure safe travelling arrangements for schoolchildren using the Strangford ferry are finalised before the commencement of the school year.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education whether the Expert Panel examining links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background will be permitted to examine the implications of academic selection and socio-economic background on educational underachievement.

(AQW 5946/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Terms of Reference for the review, which I have made available to Assembly members and the public, does not preclude any areas of policy from scrutiny by the expert panel. It does suggest that the Expert Panel should focus on areas of policy where there is consensus.

The scope of the Expert Panel is very broad and includes policy areas ranging from early years to the end of post-primary education, as well as family / community engagement, emotional health and well-being and so on.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of youth groups in the Belfast East constituency registered with the Education Authority; (ii) the level of funding awarded to each of the groups; and (iii) whether he has any plans to increase the level of funding.

(AQW 5968/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have arranged for the information requested to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, what consideration his Department has given to the matter of rural need, particularly access to broadband and technology, in respect of guidance published by his Department on the reopening of schools, particularly on the new school day.

(AQW 5973/17-22)

Mr Weir: In May, I announced a scheme to lend digital devices to pupils. This scheme includes procurement of additional devices and a remote broadband connectivity solution. Further to that, in July, I was pleased to announce that free Wi-Fi and mobile connectivity will be provided to children and young people, including those in rural settings, who may not have had access to digital technology during lockdown.

In support of this, my Department has carried out a Rural Needs Impact Assessment in relation to access to broadband and digital devices for our children and young people.

My Department has been working with the Education Authority, in partnership with BT, to provide a range of solutions to address connectivity problems for pupils, with particular consideration to rurality. This includes:

- supporting the provision of an initial quantity of up to 2,500 Mi-Fi devices, which is a mobile connectivity solution to support those children who are not within a BT Wi-Fi hotspot; and
- providing 8,300 Wi-Fi vouchers for disadvantaged children with up to eight month's internet access.

In regard to the reopening of schools, I provided guidance to schools on 19 June 2020 which outlined processes and requirements for schools returning at the end of August. I am well aware of the importance of all schools and settings resuming more normal patterns of operation and attendance, in line with standard legislative requirements. I hope this can be achieved as soon as possible in order to mitigate impact of the disruption on educational attainment and pupil wellbeing. I am, therefore, currently reviewing guidance and would expect to bring forward revised proposals to the Executive shortly.

When schools are open, pupils and teachers will continue to benefit from the Education Authority's ICT managed service, which includes full support for bandwidth issues and digital devices, regardless of the location of a school. The Northern Ireland Public Sector Shared Network Project will also deliver enhanced bandwidth to schools in all locations going forward.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Education what measures will be put in place to ensure children returning to school are not carrying the COVID-19 virus.

(AQW 5981/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department's approach to planning for the re-opening of schools has been focussed on restricting opportunities for the virus to enter a school and limiting the risk of transmission.

It is, however, essential that in the event of an outbreak we are in a position to deploy an appropriate track, trace and test programme within the school community to reduce the risk of further onward transmission and to ensure any future school closures are for a minimal period of time.

The Department is developing clear guidance and agreeing processes on managing localised Covid-19 outbreaks in schools, should they occur. These processes will align with existing Public Health Agency (PHA) procedures.

It is vitally important that anyone with symptoms of Covid-19 does not attend the educational setting. If someone becomes unwell whilst at school, procedures have been put in place to ensure the person is sent home and advised to follow Public

Health Agency guidance for households with possible coronavirus infection. Those pupils and staff would be expected to follow the requirements of the Test, Trace and Protect programme.

Department of Finance

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance whether there is a Barnett consequential for the Green Homes Grant Scheme; and whether this money will be ring fenced for the same purpose.

(AQW 5772/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Initial indications from Treasury are that this funding will be found from existing budgets for 2020-21. This means that there would be no additional funding for the Executive. Funding in future years would form part of the overall Spending Review settlement. My officials are working with their Treasury counterparts to confirm that there is no change to this position.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance whether the Chancellor of the Exchequer's statement of 8 July 2020 made any consequential financial provision for the introduction of a Green Homes Grant in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 5880/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In his statement on 8 July 2020, the Chancellor announced over £3 billion of funding for green buildings, including a £2 billion Green Homes Grant scheme to upgrade people's homes.

The Executive will receive a Barnett consequential on any additional funding provided for the scheme. The amount has not yet been confirmed by the Treasury.

As with all Barnett consequentials it is for the Executive to decide on the allocation any funding received in line with local needs and priorities.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Finance what percentage of (i) all staff; and (ii) staff at Grade 5 and above, working in his Department have completed anti-racism training; and how often this training is updated.

(AQW 5905/17-22)

Mr Murphy: NICS HR diversity and inclusion training courses are reviewed and updated periodically. Reviews scheduled for 2020/21 are underway.

In 2017 Unconscious Bias training was introduced to the NICS. Initial classroom based training was provided to SCS staff with 40 DoF SCS staff completing the training. In August 2017 Unconscious Bias e-learning training was made available to all other staff and rolled out on a mandatory basis for line managers up to Grade 6 level. To date 2208 DoF staff in grades below SCS level have completed this package.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether his Department intends to update the Building Regulations to require (i) electric vehicle charge points; and (ii) full-fibre connectivity for (a) new; and (b) existing buildings.

(AQW 5918/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Policy on electric vehicles is the responsibility of the Department for Infrastructure (DfI), whilst the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) in Britain has policy responsibility for broadband connectivity as a reserved matter. The role of Building Regulations as a vehicle to support delivery of electric vehicle charging points and full fibre broadband connectivity is under consideration.

However Building Regulations provide requirements only where building work is being carried out, so any changes would not require retrospective measures for existing buildings where no work is being carried out.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance (i) how many homeowners do not own the freehold of the ground of their property; (ii) whether he is aware of the report on leaseholds from the Law Commission of England and Wales; (iii) whether he intends to introduce legal reforms to leaseholding as recommended for England and Wales by the Law Commission; and (iv) to outline the rationale for this decision.

(AQW 5923/17-22)

Mr Murphy: It is not possible to state how many homeowners do not hold freehold title to their property as it is not possible to extract this information from the Land Registry IT system. The system will be replaced in due course and it is intended that advanced reporting facilities will be available in the replacement system. The situation regarding leasehold in this jurisdiction differs from that in England and Wales and has not to date attracted the same types of criticism. However, we will continue to monitor emerging issues in this area.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance whether any of the £600 million announced by the UK Government as extra funding for Northern Ireland will be used for those that are self-employed and who missed out on grants.

(AQW 5929/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Whilst the £600 million is an advance on Barnett consequentials and has not been related to specific allocations it is understood that a significant proportion of this funding relates to allocations that will be provided to NHS England. Therefore while it is for the Executive to agree the allocation of this funding, decisions may need to be deferred until the Health Minister has had time to estimate potential costs for his department for the remainder of the year.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance to detail the process used by his Department to identify and enable identification of partners to take part in the co-production and co-design of policies and legislation; and how they ensure their contacts are kept up to date and current.

(AQW 5943/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department of Finance follows NICS guidance on the Distribution of Departmental Publications and Consultation and adapts this to the issue on which the consultation or engagement is taking place. The Department identifies the stakeholders with a particular interest in the specific policy area or piece of legislation at the outset the development process and puts in place an engagement approach which is appropriate for the issue under consideration. When possible for policy development issues first engagement can be led by the Department's Innovation Lab where stakeholders are invited to debate and agree issues and potential approaches. This approach was adopted for recent engagements on non-domestic rating reform, dormant accounts and community asset transfer. When appropriate subsequent engagement events would be held in different locations. For example, a targeted engagement with the business community was undertaken to assist with the design of the rates relief package put in place by the Executive this year. Consultation on budget issues have recently taken place over very short timescales. Consultations are publicised to ensure that all interested parties can contribute. The Departments Assembly Committee would be fully involved in all consultations.

For Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS)-wide internal Human Resources (HR) policies, NICSHR consults with the trade unions recognised by the NICS for collective bargaining purposes. Engagement with these unions is on an ongoing basis. Contact points are well established with any changes notified.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to explain how a letter was sent to churches by the General Register Office advising them that they may lose the right to conduct marriages; and what disciplinary action has been taken in relation to the letter.

(AQW 5961/17-22)

Mr Murphy: On 1st September 2020, the British Government laid Regulations, introduce religious same sex marriage. The General Register Office (GRO) incorrectly advised that all registered churches must confirm what types of marriages they wish to carry out. This was an error as only new churches registering need to advise GRO of their position. The current registered churches must advise GRO if they wish to carry out same sex marriages. All churches currently registered have automatically been opted out of same sex marriage until GRO is advised differently. A letter of unreserved apology has been sent to all churches. No disciplinary action is being taken.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance how many deaths have occurred in the Belfast East constituency in each of the last three financial years, where illegal drugs, misuse of prescription drugs or alcohol have been a factor.

(AQW 5966/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

(i)(ii) Drug death statistics are routinely published using standard definitions of 'drug-related' deaths (i.e. where the underlying cause of death is drug poisoning, drug abuse or drug dependence); and 'drug misuse' deaths (i.e. a subset of the above where any of the substances controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) are involved). These are currently available up to calendar year 2018.

Not all of the drugs controlled under the Act are illegal, and also, NISRA does not hold information on drugs misuse relating solely to prescription medicines.

Using the standard definitions:

- there were 13 drug-related deaths registered in the administrative area of Belfast East during the financial year 2017/18. Provisional figures show that there were 14 in 2018/19 and 12 in 2019/20; and
- there were 12 deaths due to drug-misuse registered in the administrative area of Belfast East during the financial year 2017/18 which will include deaths due to both (i) illegal drugs and (ii) misuse of prescription drugs (if there were any). The statistics for deaths due to drug-misuse are not yet available for financial years 2018/2019 and 2019/20. Prior to publication the statistics require additional coding and checks that are performed in conjunction with the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The 2019 drug deaths statistics will be published around December 2020.

(iii) The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) publishes statistics on the number of deaths due to alcohol-specific causes (i.e. deaths wholly attributed to alcohol). These are currently available up to calendar year 2018. There were 19 alcohol-specific deaths registered in the administrative area of Belfast East during the financial year 2017/18. Provisional figures show there were 19 in 2018/19 and 16 in 2019/20.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance for an update on any discussions he has had with HM Treasury regarding greater flexibility for the Executive in terms of borrowing powers, including for resource spending.

(AQW 5992/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive is able to access up to £200 million of borrowing each year under the Reinvestment and Reform Initiative. This borrowing can only be used for capital purposes.

I, along with my counterparts in Scotland and Wales, have raised the issue of budget flexibilities, including the use of borrowing for resource spending, with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on a number of occasions. Unfortunately we have not been able to secure agreement to this at the present time.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance whether he will engage with his counterpart in Dublin to explore potential avenues for the creation of an all-Ireland Brexit mitigation fund that would target businesses and sectors most affected by Brexit after 31 December 2020.

(AQW 6001/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The European Council recently agreed to set aside a €5 billion contingency fund that will be used to ease impacts on member states from Brexit. Although it is expected that the south of Ireland will benefit from the majority of that fund, the north will not be eligible. Within the Executive's arrangements for considering our future relationship with the EU I lead on future policy and finance issues and I have already written to Treasury to make it clear that we will be seeking additional funding to mitigate additional costs flowing from Brexit. I will continue to press this issue as the outcome of their negotiations with the EU develop and the nature of the future relationship is clarified.

Department of Health

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Health for an update on the recommencement of fertility services.

(AQW 5670/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I launched the Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services on 9 June 2020 and Phase 2 Rebuilding Plans, which cover the period July to September, on 10 July.

The focus will be on re-starting urgent services first; however, I made it clear that I consider re-instatement of fertility services to be a priority. The Belfast Trust has therefore been working to put plans in place to enable the service to recommence, on a phased basis, at the Regional Fertility Centre from 10 August 2020.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health how his Department is ensuring that children who need speech and language therapy, and who would normally receive this in school, are supported as part of the restart programme for schools.

(AQW 5685/17-22)

Mr Swann: All HSC Trusts have continued to work closely with families to help deliver therapeutic support for children with complex needs during lockdown on a risk assessed basis and in line with public health guidance. Parents have been given points of contact to direct any specific Allied Health Professions (AHP) queries and issues that may arise.

Each AHP service area has also developed and provided parents/carers with resource packs including home treatment programmes where appropriate to help meet the children's assessed needs. Digital solutions for sharing information with parents/carers via online apps, page tracker, linkages with special schools websites etc. have been scoped and utilised where possible to ensure therapy advice and online guidance is available for families.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health (i) for an update on resuming IVF services; and (ii) how many women (a) currently have treatment paused; and (b) are currently waiting for treatment.

(AQW 5721/17-22)

Mr Swann:

(i) I launched the Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services on 9 June 2020 and Phase 2 Rebuilding Plans, which cover the period July to September, on 10 July. The focus will be on re-starting urgent services first; however, I made it clear that I consider re-instatement of fertility services to be a priority. The Trust has been working to put plans in place to enable the service to recommence on a phased basis at the Regional Fertility Centre from 10 August 2020.

(ii)(a) 66 women currently have their treatment paused.

(ii)(b) 503 women are currently waiting for treatment.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health to provide an update on his engagement with his counterpart in Dublin on preparations for an all-island approach to addressing any possible resurgence of COVID-19 in the winter months.

(AQW 5752/17-22)

Mr Swann: Both myself and the Chief Medical Officer have regular engagement with our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland on a wide range of COVID-19 related issues.

While the timing and severity is not certain and will depend upon a number of factors, we are anticipating that there will be future COVID-19 surges. I recognise the importance of putting in place comprehensive surge plans for critical care, hospital beds and care homes. This includes exploring the development of a Nightingale facility to help lift pressures from the system, if necessary.

As part of this planning for future surges, my officials have been considering lessons learnt from across the UK and from other jurisdictions, including the Republic of Ireland. This has involved looking closely at the intermediate care facility opened recently in Limerick to inform the development of our own facility for future COVID-19 surges.

As we continue to make plans to ensure the Health and Social Care Service in Northern Ireland is prepared to face future COVID-19 waves, we will continue to draw on all available learning from across these islands and beyond.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the provision of cannabis-based medicines to treat illnesses such as epilepsy.

(AQW 5877/17-22)

Mr Swann: There remains no legal barrier to specialist clinicians prescribing cannabis-based medicines in cases where it is deemed clinically appropriate. Decisions as to whether to prescribe cannabis-based medicines to a patient are made on a case by case basis and are a matter for the specialist clinician with responsibility for providing clinical care to that particular patient.

A national Refractory Epilepsy Specialist Clinical Advisory Service (RESCAS) was launched earlier this year. It is made up of a network of UK paediatric neurology specialists and provides a forum for the discussion of difficult epilepsy cases that have presented diagnostic and/or management difficulties and have proven refractory to treatment.

RESCAS is an advisory service which complements regional clinical services, and clinical responsibility for the care of any patient discussed at RESCAS remains with the referring paediatric neurology team. Decisions as to whether to refer individual patients to this service are a matter for clinicians.

Updated information from the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Pharmaceutical Officer on cannabis-based medicinal products was issued to HSC organisations on 21 July 2020 and can be accessed at the following link:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/HSS-MD-51-2020.pdf>

You may also wish to note that my Department has published a set of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on cannabis-based medicines on its website. These are designed to provide helpful background on the implications of the change in the law that enabled clinicians to prescribe cannabis-based medicines, and provide additional support to those specialist clinicians who are considering whether to prescribe a cannabis-based medicine for individual patients. These FAQs are updated regularly and can be found on the Department's website at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/cannabis-faqs>.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for an update on his plans to reinstate services at the Regional Fertility Clinic in Belfast.

(AQW 5974/17-22)

Mr Swann: I launched the Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services on 9 June 2020 and Phase 2 Rebuilding Plans, which cover the period July to September, on 10 July.

The focus will be on re-starting urgent services first; however, I made it clear that I consider re-instatement of fertility services to be a priority. The Belfast Trust has therefore been working to put plans in place to enable the service to recommence, on a phased basis, at the Regional Fertility Centre from 10 August 2020.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on the recent meeting between her officials and representatives of Motorcycle Action Group UK regarding concerns they have around wire cable central reservation barriers; (ii) what mitigation efforts are being undertaken to try and avoid the future use of such barriers; and (iii) whether there are any plans to replace existing examples.

(AQW 5727/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):

- (i) A meeting was held on 2 July 2020, between officials from my Department, Kellie Armstrong MLA, a deputy for Rachel Woods MLA and Motorcycle Action Group UK (MAG). A request was made by MAG to ban the use of wire rope and steel post safety barriers in central reserves and only specify concrete barrier systems in Northern Ireland. Design standards for high speed roads are common across the UK and it would not be appropriate for Northern Ireland to introduce such a ban and deviate from standard, without significant justification. Specific guidance is being developed

for the design and installation of safety barrier systems in Northern Ireland, to compliment UK wide standards. This guidance will contain the UK requirements for the implementation of motorcycle protection systems at high risk locations on the road network.

- (ii) My Department adheres to the current standards used across Europe when installing safety barriers, including wire rope systems. As stated above, it would not be appropriate to avoid the future use of any safety barriers that have been designed and tested to current standards. European product standards must be followed, otherwise a 'barrier to trade' situation would be created.
- (iii) Research and testing carried out to date has concluded that wire rope systems perform well when impacted by errant vehicles and are no more hazardous to vulnerable road users than other types of deformable steel posted safety barriers, more commonly used across the road network. My Department will continue to monitor road traffic collision information and where a specific risk to motorcyclists is identified, appropriate mitigation measures to reduce the risk shall be considered.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that other testing has recommenced, to outline a timescale for the resumption of car driving tests.

(AQW 5728/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) reinstated some driver testing services last month for those licence categories, where testing can be done safely in line with Public Health Agency advice and guidance on social distancing requirements. This includes motorbike driver testing from 6 July and tests for drivers of buses, tractors and module 4 CPC tests for lorry, bus and coach drivers from 20 July.

On 28 July, I announced that the DVA plans to resume practical driving tests for cars and lorries from 1 September, initially prioritising those requests from key workers followed by those customers whose tests were cancelled due to lockdown. The DVA will continue to work with staff and trade union side in the coming weeks to ensure the risk assessments for these driving tests take full account of all relevant public health advice and guidance to ensure the safety of all during the testing process. The DVA is preparing an information pack for driving instructors and candidates in advance of tests resuming to help them prepare for the new testing process.

There is likely to be a significant demand for driving tests when all services are reinstated and while the DVA will endeavour to facilitate appointments at the earliest opportunity, initial waiting times for driving tests will be longer than usual. In order to help mitigate the impact on customers, I recently announced plans to amend the Driving Licence Regulations that will allow an eight month extension to the validity of theory test pass certificates, which expire between 1 March and 31 October 2020 and a 6 month extension to the validity of off-road motorcycle test pass certificates, which expire between 1 March 2020 and 31 August 2020.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 5160/17-22, to provide an estimated timescale for the implementation of the regulations amending the legislation around MOT exemptions for Vehicles of Historic Interest.

(AQW 5729/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Given the ongoing public health situation and the necessity of priority being given to any legislation matters in relation to Covid-19, it is difficult to provide a timescale for the implementation of the regulations amending the legislation around MOT exemption for Vehicles of Historic Interest (VHIs). I can however assure you that officials are working to ensure that this is progressed to enable the new regulations to be implemented as soon as possible. Taking the above factors into consideration, I anticipate that this should be completed before the end of the year.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 5118/17-22, (i) how she will determine if the project is fit for purpose; (ii) what areas may not be fit for purpose currently; and (iii) how these can be remedied.

(AQW 5740/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In advance of the next stage of the York Street Interchange scheme, and in line with good practice in relation to the development of major transport projects, I have commissioned a short, sharp external review designed to ensure an approach to the scheme that is future-proofed and forward looking. This will be informed by stakeholders and specialists to ensure that any scheme is fit for purpose.

I am conscious that much of the development work was carried out several years ago and am keen to ensure that the scheme we move to procure is one capable not only of connecting people to opportunities but also of promoting sustainable travel, improving road safety and enhancing the north end of the city centre in a way that can benefit not only those who rely on the road but also those who live and work close to it. Designing and developing our infrastructure means meeting the needs of all of our community and our wider environment now and for future generations.

Terms of Reference for the review are available at: -

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/articles/york-street-interchange-overview>.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 5118/17-22, (i) where the project currently sits in regards to her departmental priorities; and (ii) whether she can provide a timeline for the project.

(AQW 5741/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the strategic importance of the York Street Interchange. Its inclusion in the New Decade New Approach Agreement is a further indication of the significance of the project to our economic and societal wellbeing and I am determined to see it delivered.

Following completion of the short, sharp external review I have commissioned to ensure an approach to the scheme that is future-proofed and forward looking, I will be engaging with Executive colleagues to secure sufficient capital funding from future Spending Reviews to drive the delivery of a range of essential infrastructure projects as outlined in New Decade New Approach, including York Street Interchange.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will (i) extend the dates; or (ii) reimburse passengers the face value of pre-purchased books of Strangford ferry tickets unable to be used due to the COVID-19 lockdown.

(AQW 5749/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Although pre-purchased books of Strangford Lough Ferry Tickets were superseded by multi-journey SmartCards in autumn 2014, pre-purchased tickets were accepted for a further year after which they were no longer valid.

- (i) It is my intention to extend by 1 year, the expiry date of journeys on SmartCards, which are not used by customers due to the COVID-19 pandemic and I have asked my Officials to investigate how this can be achieved.
- (ii) Refunds will not be issued for pre-purchased books of tickets. The Terms and Conditions for use of a multi-journey SmartCard advise purchasers that no refunds will be given for unused journeys.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Infrastructure what research has been commissioned into the safety record of central reservation wire rope and steel post type crash barriers on dual carriageways and motorways.

(AQW 5755/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department for Infrastructure adheres to the current European standards, contained in EN1317, used across the UK, Ireland and many other parts of Europe, when installing any type of safety barrier - including wire rope systems. These standards take account of current research, best practice, safety, value for money and environmental considerations.

The Department for Transport provides funding for Highways England to develop National design standards and where necessary, commission relevant research projects. The majority of research and testing in this area of work is coordinated through the UK Technical Committees - Standards for Road Equipment, which includes safety barriers. The UK Committees then input to the development of European standards and specifications. Research and testing carried out to date has concluded that wire rope systems perform well when impacted by errant vehicles and are no more hazardous to vulnerable road users than other types of deformable steel posted safety barriers, more commonly used across the road network.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has to promote Motorcycle Protection System barrier installations on dual carriageways and motorways.

(AQW 5756/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Motorcycle protection systems can be installed at locations where there are potentially challenging road layouts that could result in a motorcyclist leaving the road and striking a safety barrier. Examples of these locations are where there are a series of bends or sharp corners, not normally associated with dual carriageway and motorway alignments.

Specific guidance for design and installation of Road Restraint Systems is being developed for Northern Ireland, to complement the UK wide standards. This new guidance will highlight the GB NI requirements for the implementation of Motorcycle Protection Systems at high risk locations on the road network.

My Department will continue to monitor road traffic collision information and where a specific risk to motorcyclists is identified, appropriate mitigation measures to reduce the risk shall be considered.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the progress of the Fivemiletown bypass.

(AQW 5759/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently progressing the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) to draft report stage in order to allow it to be presented for public consultation. Timescales for the Transport Plan have been affected by the COVID-19 emergency which has impacted upon staff resources and work priorities.

The RSTNTP will set out future investment and improvement for our strategic transport networks, by road, rail and bus, and reflect my commitment to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across Northern Ireland. It will also help to inform my priorities for future development of the main road networks.

It would be premature to announce recommendations at this stage; however I recognise there is a public interest for further improvements to the A4 westwards of Ballygawley, including a bypass at Fivemiletown. This will be carefully considered as

part of the wider RSTNTP proposals. Once I have identified my preferred options and priorities, I will issue a draft plan for public consultation.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to maintenance of rural roads, for a breakdown of the financial allocation in (i) Omagh; (ii) Dungannon and South Tyrone; (iii) Strabane; (iv) Fermanagh; and (v) Cookstown.
(AQW 5760/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have allocated £75m capital to structural maintenance of the road network for 2020/2021. Recognising the importance of investment in the roads network to improve connectivity, help communities and tackle regional imbalance, I have allocated £10m from this structural maintenance budget to specifically target improving rural roads.

The £10m allocation for rural roads has been apportioned across the four geographic Roads Divisions on the basis of need, using a range of weighted indicators. Divisions use these indicators when apportioning across council areas to ensure, as far as possible, an equitable distribution of funds to best address needs.

Table 1 contains DfI Roads Western Division allocations from the rural roads budget by District Council area.

TABLE 1: Rural Roads Allocations – DfI Roads Western Division

	Derry City and Strabane District Council	Fermanagh & Omagh District Council	Mid Ulster District Council	Western Division Total
Rural Roads allocation	£809k	£1,655k	£1,386k	£3,850k

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) what investigations have taken place to find the source of the excessive noise at Kells substation; (ii) what practical measures are being adopted to ensure noise will be reduced and that the plant is safe; and (iii) who assesses the measures as safe and acceptable.
(AQW 5784/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is my understanding that Antrim and Newtownabbey Council have received a number of noise complaints regarding Kells substation which are currently under investigation. As such and as the Council are the planning authority of first instance in this matter they will be best placed to respond to your queries and advise what stage the investigation is at.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the recent view of the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland that developers or system operators should provide details of any dangerous substance that will be stored or can be produced if there is a loss of control of the process or operation of Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS), to outline (i) what changes will be made to the planning process to ensure all information is provided by developers and the system operator; and (ii) how will this updated process ensure the proper role of the Control of Major Accident Hazards Regulations in planning applications for BESS facilities.
(AQW 5785/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Control of Major Accident Hazards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 are enforced by the Health and Safety Executive NI (HSENI) and Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). My Department does not use these regulations to assess planning applications.

In addition to the normal requirements for planning permission, if an applicant proposes to store hazardous substances, the Planning (Hazardous Substance) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015 provides the legislative basis for assessing and determining hazardous substance consent. Those regulations require an applicant making such an application to provide, among other things, details of each hazardous substance for which consent is sought, including the maximum quantity of each relevant substance proposed to be present. In addition to substances present, and pursuant to part 3 of those regulations, this includes substances that it is reasonable to foresee being generated if there is a loss of control.

Applicants applying to a planning authority for any permission or consent are required to provide sufficient information to enable the planning authority to consider and assess relevant material considerations in making their determination. Where such information is not initially available or becomes apparent following consultation or receipt of representations, it can be requested from the applicant.

Accordingly, I consider that the existing processes effectively provide for the submission and assessment of the necessary information required in connection with hazardous substance consent applications where hazardous substances are stored or may be generated.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the schedule for cleaning and maintaining the rainwater gratings and gullies in the Clonduff Estate; and (ii) what work is planned to ensure the gratings and gullies are fully functioning.
(AQW 5799/17-22)

Ms Mallon: All urban road gullies are cleaned once per year. The gullies in Clonduff Estate were last cleaned in July 2019 and were all found to be working normally at that time. The next scheduled clean has been impacted slightly by restrictions associated with Covid 19 but is due to be completed by the end of August 2020.

To help ensure all gullies are operating correctly, any defects reported to the Department are investigated and appropriate action taken. In February 2020 problems were reported with two gullies in Clonduff Drive. The subsequent investigation resulted in one gully being cleared while the outlet from the second gully was found to be blocked. Remedial work has been programmed to repair this blockage and the repair is expected to be completed before the end of August 2020.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the streets in the South Down constituency that are earmarked for future road-calming measures.

(AQW 5803/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Each Roads Division has now been allocated a budget and my officials are currently developing and finalising plans for delivery of a programme of schemes across the North which I can confirm will include traffic management and traffic calming measures within the Newry, Mourne & Down Council (NMDC) area.

Until this work is complete I trust you will appreciate that I am not in a position to be able to provide more specific details of the schemes that are to be taken forward within the NM&DC area. However, in due course a list of the proposed schemes will be included in the Council report that will be published over the coming months.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much has been allocated to road safety measure schemes in the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council area.

(AQW 5804/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Budgets for road safety measures are allocated on a Divisional basis rather than by council area and proposals are assessed and prioritised on that basis. As each Roads Division is currently still finalising their work programmes, I am unable to provide details of planned expenditure within individual council areas at this time. However, details of planned schemes will be included in the Annual Report to Council, which will be published over the coming months.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has applied for, or secured, additional funding from the June monitoring round to progress the scheme to improve the Bellspark Road/Orchard junction accident blackspot between Clady and The Glebe, Co.Tyrone.

(AQW 5812/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has plans to progress a scheme to improve the Bellspark Road / Orchard Road junction, which will involve changes to the existing road layout to make it safer for users. The new layout will introduce a staggered crossroads and bring about significant visibility improvements.

I have already allocated sufficient funding for the elements of this scheme I am advised can be completed during this financial year.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many street light faults remain outstanding in the West Tyrone constituency.

(AQW 5814/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is unable to provide this information by constituency. However, I can confirm that in Roads Western Division, which includes the West Tyrone constituency, as at 24 July 2020 there were 124 street lighting outages currently recorded as outstanding on the street lighting maintenance system.

Following an initial delay in April, due to the COVID19 crisis, the Department is now providing a full street lighting maintenance service, with outages generally being attended to within the required 5 working days.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how much extra funding was allocated to her Department at the last monitoring round; and (ii) what figure has been spent on street lighting repairs in West Tyrone constituency.

(AQW 5815/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department received no additional funding in the June 2020 monitoring round.

I allocated £3.2m to DfI Roads from the opening 2020/21 Resource Budget for repairs of street lighting by external contractors which will negate the need to be reliant on monitoring rounds. My Department's internal workforce will also continue to progress repairs.

My Department does not capture and record spending at Constituency level. The DfI Roads Western Division, the Division into which the West Tyrone Assembly Constituency boundaries fall, has been allocated £1.1m for Street Lighting repairs. This compares favourably to opening forecast spending in 2019-2020 of £0.5m, and is also more than the 2019-2020 outturn of some £0.9m.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on when practical driving tests will resume.

(AQW 5818/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) reinstated some driver testing services in July for those licence categories, where testing can be done safely in line with Public Health Agency advice and guidance on social distancing requirements. This includes motorbike driver testing from 6 July and tests for drivers of buses, tractors and module 4 CPC tests for lorry, bus and coach drivers from 20 July.

On 28 July, I announced that the DVA plans to resume practical driving tests for cars and lorries from 1 September, initially prioritising those requests from key workers followed by those customers whose tests were cancelled due to lockdown. The DVA will continue to work with staff and Trade Union side in the coming weeks to ensure the risk assessments for these driving tests take full account of all relevant public health advice and guidance to ensure the safety of all during the testing process. These changes will be communicated to driving instructors and learner drivers as soon as possible.

There is likely to be a significant demand for driving tests when all services are reinstated and while the DVA will endeavour to facilitate appointments at the earliest opportunity, initial waiting times for driving tests will be longer than usual. In order to help mitigate the impact on customers, I recently announced plans to amend the Driving Licence Regulations that will allow an eight month extension to the validity of theory test pass certificates, which expire between 1 March and 31 October 2020 and a 6 month extension to the validity of off-road motorcycle test pass certificates, which expire between 1 March 2020 and 31 August 2020.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the feasibility study as referenced in New Decade, New Approach concerning the upgrade of the Belfast to Dublin rail link to a high speed connection.[R]
(AQW 5819/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to improving connectivity between Belfast and Dublin as this is key in delivering opportunities for better connecting the island of Ireland and enhancing our respective economies. Our rail network, whilst relatively small, does present a unique opportunity in this regard.

In line with this and the commitments within the New Decade New Approach, I am committed to delivering high speed rail. I recently met with Minister Ryan to discuss the improvement of transport links and hope to be in a position to provide a further update in due course.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure what discussions she has had with the Minister of Finance on increased funding for roads maintenance to allow three cuts of grass annually across the roads network.
(AQW 5843/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Under normal circumstances my Department aims for two grass cuts per year in rural areas and five cuts in urban areas. In 2020/21 my Department aims to cut all roadside verges and sightline areas twice between April and October, with sightlines at bends and junctions being cut more frequently as required to ensure public safety is not compromised. However, within the funding envelope available, it is not possible to reinstate the number of urban area cuts to five per year.

Whilst there is no immediate prospect of additional funding I will continue to work with the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues to secure the necessary funding to deliver the full range of road maintenance activities.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure what Equality Impact Assessment was carried out on the recent announcement of £10 million to resurface rural roads, in year 2020-21 instead of high volume vehicle roadways in areas such as North Down.
(AQW 5845/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act requires public authorities to have due regard for the need to promote equality of opportunity between:

- a persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation
- b men and women generally
- c persons with a disability and persons without
- d persons with dependants and persons without

An Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) should be carried out if a policy shows a possible 'adverse impact' on any group.

The Road Recovery fund (RRF) is funded from within the opening £75 million Capital budget in 2020/21 for structural maintenance and is targeted to roads adversely impacted by recent under-funding and roads which had deteriorated over the previous winter periods. All roads are included, however, as some 78% of the roads in Northern Ireland are rural it is inevitable that a significant proportion of any Structural Maintenance or RRF budget will be targeted towards the rural road network.

The Structural Maintenance budget is allocated on the basis of need and applies equally to all road users. It does not have implications for equality of opportunity, thereby making it unnecessary to carry out an Equality Impact assessment.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether wire rope crash barriers are specified for use on the A5 and A6 road projects.
(AQW 5852/17-22)

Ms Mallon: On both the A5 and A6 projects the appointed contractor is responsible for the design and construction of the works. Contractors are permitted to install any certified safety barrier system that meets the specification, performance criteria and current European Standards.

To date wire rope safety barriers have been installed on the Randalstown to Castledawson section of the A6 project and it is the intention of the contractor to use wire rope safety barrier on the Dungiven to Drumahoe section. For the A5 project, it is too early for a decision to be made on the type of safety barriers to be installed.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department will avoid further delay to the York Street Interchange project whilst also ensuring the project is future proof.

(AQW 5853/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The review I have commissioned to ensure an approach to the York Street Interchange scheme that is future-proofed and forward looking, will be short and sharp.

I am determined to see this strategically important scheme delivered. I will be engaging with Executive colleagues to secure sufficient capital funding from future Spending Reviews, to drive the delivery of a range of essential infrastructure projects, as outlined in New Decade New Approach, including York Street Interchange.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans are in place to allow students who need to use the Strangford ferry to get to school, to be able to travel safely once schools reopen.

(AQW 5900/17-22)

Ms Mallon: .

My Officials, in conjunction with their counterparts in Translink and the Education Authority, are currently developing options and working towards finalising arrangements, in advance of the commencement of the school year, for schoolchildren who normally travel on the Strangford ferry.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether consideration has been given to partnership arrangements to enable the utilisation of pre-existing car parks to enhance Park and Ride provision in the North Down area.[R]

(AQW 5917/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Officials will continue to liaise with the Ards & North Down Borough Council regarding the council's parking strategy and indeed wider parking provision and this will help identify any sharing opportunities that could enhance Park and Ride.

As previously advised and in support of my commitment to active travel and our Green Recovery, Translink is currently rolling out enhanced cycle storage facilities at stations and halts across the network, and it is intended to include Bangor in this programme.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Infrastructure what funding opportunities exist to develop greenway and blueway infrastructure in South Down; and what steps she is taking to develop such green infrastructure schemes in South Down.

(AQW 5931/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The £20m Blue/Green fund that I have announced will act as a catalyst for positive infrastructure and cultural change in the way citizens live and travel, building on current initiatives that I have already introduced. I want to make sure that there is an inclusive approach to determining the deployment of this fund with a wide range of stakeholders having had the opportunity to identify innovative solutions that will transform communities across the region for the better. I am meeting with a wide range of stakeholders to swiftly explore and seek support for co-design ideas and will open the fund as soon as is practicable thereafter.

In 2016, my Department provided Newry, Mourne and Down District Council with grant funding for a feasibility study for the proposed greenway from Downpatrick to Ardgass. In 2019, the Council was also provided with a grant to develop detailed designs for greenway routes from Comber to Downpatrick and onwards to Newcastle.

Greenways are essentially Council led projects. My Walking and Cycling Champion has written to all Councils, in the context of the £20 million blue / green infrastructure funding, seeking information on the current status of their greenway proposals as I am keen to support their development. I would encourage Councils to do what they can – particularly in respect of land acquisition and local consultation – to bring their projects to the point where they could be constructed.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much of the recently announced £8 million for LED streetlights will be spent in South Down; and to detail the location of these upgrades in South Down.

(AQW 5933/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is unable to supply this information by constituency. However, in Southern Division, which includes South Down, I am pleased to be able to confirm to the Member that £2 million has been allocated for this work, which will allow for the replacement of approximately 7,500 sodium street lights with low energy LED units. These units offer energy savings of up to 60% compared to the equivalent sodium lights, as well as a reduction in maintenance costs and the number of outages on the network.

As this funding has only recently been allocated, programmes for the work in the South Down area, and indeed all other areas across the north, are being finalised so I am unable to provide specific details of locations at this time.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Infrastructure what strategic road improvement schemes are planned for South Down in 2020/21 financial year.

(AQW 5934/17-22)

Ms Mallon: During the 2020/21 financial year, it is planned to continue development work on both the Newry Southern Relief Road and the A24 Ballynahinch Bypass within the South Down area.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Infrastructure which domestic road traffic regulations reflect section 244 of the Highway Code in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 5949/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to increasing the level of sustainable travel in Northern Ireland and I am aware that cars parked inconsiderately on footways present real challenges for footway users.

The rules for using the road are contained within the Highway Code for Northern Ireland. Rules 234 to 252 provide advice on 'Waiting and Parking, and Rule 244 specifically asks drivers not to park on a footway.

With the exception of commercial vehicles, there is no overall piece of legislation that prohibits vehicles from parking on all footways. Where there are parking restrictions on the adjacent carriageway, my Department can carry out enforcement action against cars parked on footways. The PSNI also has powers to take enforcement action against cars found to be obstructing footways.

My Department's social media channels Share the Road to Zero website and Facebook and Twitter accounts promote the rules of the Highway Code, including regular reminders of the relevant rules on footway parking. I am, however, keen to explore if further measures may be necessary.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider strengthening road traffic regulations in Northern Ireland to introduce a general ban on footway and pavement parking.

(AQW 5950/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is committed to increasing the level of sustainable travel in Northern Ireland and I am aware that cars parked inconsiderately on footways present real challenges for footway users. Consequently my Department carries out enforcement action against cars parked on footways where there are parking restrictions on the adjacent carriageway. The PSNI also can and does take enforcement action against cars found to be obstructing footways. To promote and encourage compliance, regular reminders of the relevant Highway Code rule on footway parking are also posted on our road safety and sustainable travel social media channels. I am, however, keen to explore if further measures may be necessary.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the (i) dates; and (ii) content of any recent engagements her Department has had with Scottish Government counterparts concerning the (a) South West Scotland Transport Study; and (b) upgrade of A75 and A77 in Scotland.

(AQW 5990/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Departmental officials have engaged with Transport Scotland on a number of occasions regarding the importance of the A75 and A77 as road freight routes to Scotland, England and onwards to Europe.

These engagements have included:

- Meetings of the Strategic Roads in Britain Group hosted by the Department for Transport on 10th April 2019 and 20th March 2020 when there was discussion of BREXIT considerations and inter-regional Strategic Road improvements
- The Scottish Transport Conference on 13th June 2019 in the context of the Scottish Transport Strategy and the forthcoming South West Scotland Transport Study
- Discussion of the South West Scotland Transport Study on 6th July 2020 in the context of input to the consultation on the forthcoming Strategic Transport Project Review 2 which will consider the A75 and A77 upgrades in detail. Sustrans One Path Initiative

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether any plans exist to fund the roll out of the Sustrans One Path Initiative to more areas across Northern Ireland.[R]

(AQW 5991/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The One Path Initiative was carried out on the Comber Greenway in 2018 and was funded by my Department together with Belfast City Council, Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council and Ards and North Down Borough Council. The initiative was developed and implemented by Sustrans. My Department is prepared to work with any other Councils or Government Departments who feel there is merit in promoting this initiative through their parks and on their traffic-free paths.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what efforts she has made to explore advancing two phases of the A5 simultaneously.

(AQW 5999/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Subject to a favourable outcome from the Public Inquiry held during February and March of this year and the successful completion of all statutory procedures and environmental assessments, construction work on the first phase of the scheme, Phase 1A from New Buildings to north of Strabane, could commence during 2021.

The indicative programme for the whole scheme, as published in an addendum to the Environmental Statement of last year, indicated a phased approach to delivery, leading to scheme completion in 2028. It is considered that this overall completion date remains achievable. This would require the construction of more than one phase simultaneously over this time period. However, the commencement of construction and progression of each phase is clearly dependent on the successful completion of the above mentioned statutory processes and assessments, and the funding made available to my Department over this period.

Department of Justice

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice to detail the legal aid bill in the last five years for (i) defendants; and (ii) complainants of alleged hate crime offences in Northern Ireland, broken down by eventual prosecutorial outcome.

(AQW 5786/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Information on the grant of legal aid does not specify that individual certificates are in respect of a hate crime. While individual grants of legal aid may include matters which involve allegations of hate crime, these cannot be established from the legal aid certificates issued.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice how many open-air meetings have been prohibited under Part II of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987, in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 5788/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department of Justice can prohibit open-air meetings under Part II of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 in consequence of information furnished by the Chief Constable. The PSNI has confirmed that it has not provided information to the Department for this purpose in the last ten years. You may wish to ask the Secretary of State if such information was provided to the NIO as I am only in a position to respond for the Department of Justice.

Article 23A (2) (a) of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 confers powers on any constable in uniform 'to require any person to remove any item which the constable reasonably believes that person is wearing wholly or mainly for the purpose of concealing his identity'.

The Public Prosecution Service has advised that while there have been no prosecutions under Article 23A of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 specifically related to paramilitary garb or public processions in Northern Ireland, there have been 11 summary prosecutions in respect of Article 23A (7) of the Order for wearing masks/face coverings during protests.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) what constitutes a disguise, under the Section 23A of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987; and (ii) how many times this power has been exercised in respect of paramilitary garb worn in public processions in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 5789/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department of Justice can prohibit open-air meetings under Part II of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 in consequence of information furnished by the Chief Constable. The PSNI has confirmed that it has not provided information to the Department for this purpose in the last ten years. You may wish to ask the Secretary of State if such information was provided to the NIO as I am only in a position to respond for the Department of Justice.

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Department for the Economy

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has considered a strategy for protecting jobs in the hospitality sector during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 5737/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I am aware of the significant impact which COVID-19 has had on our tourism industry. The mitigations implemented at a national and local level (eg grant schemes, business rates relief, loan schemes etc) will have played an important part in helping to sustain many tourism and hospitality businesses through the recent difficult months.

In addition, the decisive action taken by the NI Executive to accelerate the timeframe for re-opening the industry will play a key role in enabling businesses to generate the revenue needed to retain jobs across Northern Ireland.

Re-opening is a significant step forward. However, the road ahead will be very challenging and I am very conscious of the importance of planning ahead for recovery. That is why I decided to establish the Tourism Recovery Steering Group. I chair this Steering Group which is leading on planning and preparing for the recovery of the industry as we begin to emerge from COVID-19. The membership of the Steering Group comprises representation from relevant Government Departments, Tourism NI, Tourism Ireland, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, VisitBritain and tourism and hospitality industry representative bodies.

I have asked the Steering Group and Working Group to develop a Tourism Recovery Action Plan to address key issues as we move forward to rebuild the industry and protect jobs. This work is ongoing.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has received any advice or economic projections about a possible slow down in foreign direct investment due to the global COVID-19 economic disruption.

(AQW 5794/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The potential impact of COVID-19 on global FDI flows is something that my Department is conscious of and this was recognised in our latest Macroeconomic and Sectoral Assessment, published on 30th June.

In terms of experience on the ground Invest NI has been engaging with both existing and prospective international investors to monitor investor sentiment and any potential impact on foreign direct investment. While redundancies within business across NI are on the increase, Invest NI has not yet detected a material downturn in prospective interest in its immediate pipeline of potential investors. In addition, some of our existing major investors have noted the resilience and performance of their NI operations throughout the pandemic.

Invest NI has pivoted to virtual inward investment discovery sessions and is maximising digital solutions to promote NI as an FDI location of choice. However, continued travel restrictions that prevent physical investment visits may ultimately impact on its ability to 'close' less advanced deals.

More widely, the Department is aware of OECD projections that suggest global FDI flows will likely fall by at least 30% in 2020 compared to 2019, before returning to pre-crisis levels by the end of 2021. The OECD reports that this is as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting supply disruptions, demand contractions, and pessimistic outlook of economic actors. After that, the impact on FDI flows will depend on the success of the public health and economic policy measures taken by governments.

My officials are also aware of a United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) World Investment Report 2020, which states that global FDI flows are forecast to fall by up to 40 per cent in 2020 from their 2019 value. UNCTAD indicate a variety of effects that the pandemic will have on FDI. These range from immediate impacts, such as lockdown, resulting in delays in the implementation of investment projects, to longer term impacts, such as businesses pushing for a higher degree of national or regional self-sufficiency due to tighter restrictions on international trade and investment which have already emerged as a result of the outbreak.

You will appreciate of course that events around the COVID-19 pandemic both in Northern Ireland and in other parts of the world could occur to alter any forecast picture.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 5196 17-22, to detail (i) whether Invest NI asks, monitors and records the reasons why inward investors chose particular locations for investment; (ii) whether Invest NI asks, monitors and records the reasons why inward investors do not chose other locations; and (iii) if Invest NI does not do this, why it does not.

(AQW 5821/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI enters into a range of discussions with existing and potential inward investors to understand the drivers influencing their decision to invest or expand. Those discussions are conducted on a 'Commercial in Confidence' basis. This is standard business practice and provides those parties with considerable comfort as invariably highly sensitive strategic and financial information is shared with Invest NI that cannot, and is not, shared with third parties.

However, based on feedback from prospective and existing investors from across its global network over a number of years, a number of common decision-making factors have been identified. Some of the reasons cited are as follows:

- Many companies (especially those off-shoring for the first time) prefer to cluster where the majority of international firms are already located. The rationale is that those who have gone before them have done the due diligence and proved that the location works. They need to be part of an ecosystem with other international companies. The area was not seen as having a developed cluster in, for example, technology or financial services.
- International companies will assess locations on pure demographics and the area was considered not to have the density of population needed to sustain very large scale shared service operations.

- International companies cited the lack of city centre Grade A office and flexible managed serviced space as another reason not to invest in the area.

This information provides Invest NI with an insight into investment decision trends and informs on how best to refine and adapt Northern Ireland's proposition as an international investment location.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the community background of the academic and research staff currently working for Queen's University, Belfast.

(AQW 5839/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department does not collect or hold information relating to the community or religious background of staff employed by Northern Ireland's higher education institutions.

You may wish to contact the university directly for the information requested.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy what COVID-19 financial support measures her Department has put in place to secure the future of HMS Caroline and to ensure that it remains open as a visitor attraction and a physical manifestation of British Maritime and Military history in Belfast.

(AQW 5858/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In May, 2020, in order to assist with reported cash-flow issues during the Covid-19 crisis, my Department reached agreement with the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) to make a substantial payment towards claims made to date for operating costs in respect of HMS Caroline. NMRN is also utilising the Government's Job Retention Scheme with all but two of the full time staff of HMSC currently on furlough.

Due to the Covid-19 crisis NMRN closed HMSC to the public on 17th March 2020. After consultation with NMRN, I extended this period of temporary closure to 31st December 2020. This period will be used to undertake a thorough review of the attraction, reappraise the original business cases and identify efficient and cost effective options for moving forward. We will work closely with NMRN and other key stakeholders, during the period of temporary closure and will keep them engaged and informed throughout the process. The Department has advised NMRN that it will meet agreed costs associated with this period of temporary closure.

My officials had been working closely with NMRN to attempt to make the attraction more profitable and increase visitor numbers. Visitor numbers are key to the sustainability of this attraction, which is reliant on ticket sales and spend at the café or shop. Visitor numbers have been disappointing to date, resulting in operational deficits. However, I remain committed to exploring all options to enable this important heritage visitor attraction to remain in Belfast.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for the Economy what measures she is taking to ensure that potential University students with BTEC qualifications are not discriminated against, given universities have offered guaranteed places to A level students, and that these higher educational students are given every opportunity to reach their full potential in today's COVID-19 environment.

(AQW 5870/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As autonomous institutions, universities are responsible for their own admissions practices and I have no remit to intervene. However, I am deeply concerned that the actions taken have caused greater uncertainty and anxiety for those students who must still await their qualification results, especially those undertaking non-traditional qualifications, before a place is secured. Queen's initiated the change in admissions practice and I have outlined my concerns to Queen's, and advised that I do not support this decision.

Additionally, I have sought strong assurances that any student whose place will not be secured until their results are known be provided with advice and support during this extremely worrying time. My Department can supply contact details for both Queen's and Ulster if any potential students wish to discuss admissions directly with either institution.

It is a key priority for me and my Department to ensure that those most able, but least likely, to participate in higher education are given every opportunity to do so, regardless of their background. Each higher education provider produces an annual Widening Access and Participation Plan for my Department's approval. These plans are a legal requirement under the Education Student Fees (Approved Plans) Regulations 2005. Those same regulations, (Article 9), impose significant duties on my Department to approve, monitor and enforce the implementation of the plans.

My Department will work closely with all higher education providers to ensure these plans are followed to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds into and through higher education.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy when first aid training courses can resume in workplaces.

(AQW 5874/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, which imposed the original restrictions on business/premises and gatherings, were repealed and replaced on 24th July 2020.

The new Regulations, the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 have relaxed the restrictions on the size of gatherings in certain circumstances. The full guidance document related to the Regulations can be found here <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/your-guide-to-covid-regs.pdf>

The relevant section in relation to your query is on page 3, which states:

'Indoor and Outdoor Gatherings (excluding Private Dwellings)

You, as a group of individuals, may gather indoors or outdoors (excluding in private dwellings) up to a maximum of thirty people.

Gatherings operated or organised by a responsible person

The thirty person limit does not apply to a gathering where that gathering has a recognised person responsible for organising and operating the gathering and it is organised or operated for cultural, entertainment, recreational, outdoor sports, social, community, educational, work, legal, religious or political purposes.

The person responsible when organising or operating the gathering must;

(a) Have carried out a risk assessment which meets the requirements of the

Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000, whether or not that person is subject to those Regulations; and

(b) Take all reasonable measures to limit the risk of transmission of the coronavirus, including implementing the preventive and protective measures identified in the risk assessment and comply with any relevant guidance issued by a Northern Ireland Government Department'.

The relaxation in relation to gatherings for educational purposes would cover training of staff, provided the organising body complies with the requirements relating to risk assessments and reasonable measures. As stated above it is the responsibility of the organising body to ensure that it can provide its services/ operations in a safe manner which complies with any relevant guidance issued by Northern Ireland Government Departments.

Information from the First Aid Awarding Body Forum is available at the following link which includes COVID-19 Advice for trainers - <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/93498.html>

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of homes in the Foyle constituency that will benefit from Project Stratum.

(AQW 5879/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Project Stratum target intervention area consists of just under 79,000 premises across Northern Ireland. There are 103 domestic and non-domestic premises in the Foyle Constituency within this target intervention area. It is important to note, however, that the number and location of premises that will benefit from this intervention will not be known until the procurement is complete and a contract has been awarded this autumn. The aspiration of my Department continues to be to maximise broadband coverage throughout Northern Ireland from total available funding of £165m, along with vital industry contribution, so that as many premises as possible benefit from this public intervention.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether both procedural and substantive legitimate expectation of the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) scheme participants will feature in the long-term resolution of the RHI issue.

(AQW 5889/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Your question to the First Minister and deputy First Minister has been transferred to me, as Minister of the Department with responsibility for the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Scheme, for a response.

I am currently considering options on the future of the Scheme. There are a series of complex issues under consideration including value for money matters, compliance with State aid rules and the impact on Scheme participants.

I will discuss the options with Executive Colleagues before any final decision is taken.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy for the (i) number; and (ii) detail of legal challenges to Coronavirus Grant Support Schemes, including those covered by Pre-Action Protocol for Judicial Review.

(AQW 5919/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I can confirm that my Department has received correspondence relating to COVID-19 grant support. However, taking account of data protection provisions, it would not be appropriate to discuss the nature of the correspondence.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for a timeframe for the expected delivery of broadband facilities to rural communities under Project Stratum; and (ii) whether her Department, pursuant to the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, has considered ways in which this timeframe could be shortened, in the context of the heightened need for access to remote learning facilities before the beginning of the new school term.

(AQW 5972/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) Project Stratum continues on schedule. The closing date for receipt of tenders passed on 5th May, and the evaluation of bids is underway. Contract award is expected in late September 2020. My Department's engagement with industry indicates that approximately 6 months will be required for network design and delivery preparation prior to deployment. It is anticipated, therefore, that deployment of infrastructure will commence a number of months after contract award, with completion by 31 March 2024.
- (ii) Project Stratum has been developed under very robust corporate governance arrangements, to ensure efficient delivery. These will provide the necessary safeguards for the public investment. It is not possible to fast track the procurement or the required governance procedures.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy how many meetings she has had with retailers and retail groups on Brexit since the restoration of the Executive in January 2020.

(AQW 5993/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Since coming into office, I have twice met with my Department's EU Exit Stakeholder Forum which includes representatives from Retail NI and the NI Retail Consortium as well as representatives from other sectors. In addition I have held seven separate meetings with retailers or retail groups to discuss a range of issues including EU Exit. This included two meetings with Retail NI (both wholesale members and retail businesses), one meeting with the NI Retail Consortium, and four meetings with local businesses including retailers as part of Local Chamber of Commerce delegations.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 14 August 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether steps have been taken, or will be taken, through New Decade, New Approach or otherwise, to amend the current definition of victim to exclude victim-makers.
(AQW 706/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): No steps have been taken by the First Minister and deputy First Minister, acting jointly, to amend the 2006 Order definition of a victim and survivor.

Ms Anderson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the Executive Office will ensure that funding programmes operated by the Community Relations Council will be allocated on a fair and proportional basis.
(AQW 4712/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: CRC has a robust process in place to ensure funding is fairly and proportionately allocated. Applications for CRC funding are initially assessed by a panel of CRC staff and scored against set criteria including: how the project will address a strategic need or gap in existing provision; how it links to the wider T:BUC strategy; the project's methodology and outcomes; value for money; the organisation's experience and track record; and their governance and financial arrangements. The panel assessments are then presented to the CRC Board for final approval, with awards subsequently made in merit order.

On an on-going basis CRC work to identify emerging issues and, should they identify particular areas of need, then a welcoming statement is used to encourage applications focussing on a particular geographic area or theme.

Mr McNulty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given their role in the promotion of equality and good relations, whether they will (i) commit to commissioning an audit of statues and structures on public lands and spaces; and (ii) produce a list of such structures which they deem to be appropriate or inappropriate, given they may cause offence as to who they are dedicated to.
(AQW 4831/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We have no plans to do so.

Mr T Buchanan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given their Department prohibited people from attending funerals of their loved ones due to COVID-19 restrictions, for their assessment of hurt caused to many grieving families by the attendance of the deputy First Minister at the funeral of Bobby Storey on 30 June 2020.
(AQW 5371/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We recognise the profound and enduring hurt felt by all those who have experienced a bereavement as a result of the pandemic, and who have been unable to grieve as they would have wished.

We acknowledge that, as the restrictions are eased, there is an understandable desire to return to the established customs and practices for funerals. Doing so safely and sensitively presents a considerable challenge.

We must all strive to do so with caution and sensitivity, whilst being mindful of the feelings of others, particularly those who experienced bereavement when restrictions were at their most severe. We acknowledge, and deeply regret, the hurt that they must feel.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the process used by his Department to identify and enable identification of partners to take part in the co-production and co-design of policies and legislation; and how it ensures its contacts are kept up to date and current.

(AQW 5906/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): When developing policies to deliver on my vision of a “sustainability at the heart of a living, working, active landscape, valued by everyone” my Department seeks to adopt a best practice to policy making. In doing this officials make use of NICS guidance on policy development, such as the “A Practical Guide to Policy Making in Northern Ireland”, published by the NI Executive.

This guide recognises the fundamental importance of engagement and consultation during policy development, particularly with those who are to be affected by the policy or intervention. Co-production and co-design of policies are two of the approaches which are outlined in “A Practical Guide to Policy Making in Northern Ireland” and my Department adopts these techniques as appropriate, depending on the nature of the policy or strategy being developed. For example in developing the Green Growth Environment Strategy it is planned to adopt a co-design approach.

No matter what approach is adopted to engagement it is important that the relevant stakeholders are involved in the process. Relevant policy and operational areas of the Department maintain and update information on relevant stakeholders, which might, amongst other things, be based on previous engagement on policy development, information from operational / regulatory activity, responses to previous engagement and consultations and as a result of public advertisements.

In addition to this the Department maintains and updates a list of relevant groups who should be engaged in any consultation as a result of the equality provisions of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act.

Officials are mindful that there may be relevant stakeholders who, for whatever reason, may not be aware or involved in, development of a particular policy or piece of legislation. With this in mind a variety of communications channels are used, such as press releases, the DAERA website and social media channels, to draw attention of the Department’s work to the widest audience possible.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs why his Department sought successive Derogations from the Nitrates Directive when the majority of Northern Ireland’s habitats protected by law, had already exceeded their Critical Load Threshold for Nitrogen deposition.

(AQW 5985/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Nitrates Directive (91/676/EEC) includes provision for Derogations and sets out the criteria and process which must be met for a derogation to be granted by the EU Commission.

Farms operating under a derogation must meet specified criteria and implement additional nutrient management, manure spreading restrictions and record-keeping measures. These conditions and requirements are set by the EU Commission’s DG Environment following a detailed assessment process. The purpose is to ensure that farms operating at a higher livestock manure nitrogen loading allowed by the derogation do not adversely impact on water quality. Derogated farms must also meet all other requirements of The Nutrients Action Programme (NAP) Regulations 2019-2022.

The Northern Ireland derogation for 2019 – 2022 also includes specific requirements on the timing of slurry application and the use of Low Emission Slurry Spreading Equipment (LESSE). These requirements are to reduce gaseous nitrogen emissions in the form of ammonia and will therefore help to reduce nitrogen deposition.

The derogation enables grassland cattle farms that meet the specified criteria to maximise grass based production and nitrogen use efficiency and therefore reduce use of concentrate feeds. Encouraging greater use of grassland grazing systems is also an important measure in minimising ammonia emissions, as indoor confinement systems are estimated to produce over 50% more ammonia than grazing systems with the same number of dairy cows.

An ammonia strategy for Northern Ireland is currently in development which will address the issue of nitrogen deposition at protected habitats.

Mr O’Toole asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given his recent withdrawal of cooperation with the UK’s application to the European Commission to create Border Control Posts at Northern Ireland’s ports, whether he has (i) met with the DEFRA Secretary to discuss the UK Government’s decision to proceed with the application without DAERA’s input; and (ii) received information regarding the content of the UK’s application of 7 July 2020.

(AQW 6009/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) is the lead Department within the Executive on the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Operational Readiness Programme associated with implementation of the Northern Ireland/Ireland protocol. Since the programme initiated DAERA has been working closely with the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in order to develop and implement arrangements.

This has included Defra’s assistance with the preparation of the draft applications to be made by the UK government to the EU Commission to designate NI Points of Entry for Sanitary and Phytosanitary checks in line with the NI Protocol. The

applications were drafted and submitted by Defra, on behalf of the UK Government but they were developed on the basis of input from DAERA. DAERA has taken forward stakeholder engagement, established the necessary designations and led in the structural design of the Points of Entry. It is working on refined proposals which will be forwarded in due course, subject to my approval.

I continue to meet with the Defra Secretary of State on a regular basis at the monthly Inter-Ministerial Group for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs to discuss wider issues associated with the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol. This includes the implementation of the delivery programme for the new SPS control regime post EU Transition.

I have also specifically written to the Defra Secretary of State on a number of occasions over the past month, highlighting some very significant issues which have emerged through this programme scoping process. I have stressed that we urgently need to have these issues resolved through future negotiations otherwise significant impacts will be placed on our businesses and consumers. These include additional cost burdens on Northern Ireland businesses and consumers and significant levels of physical checks that will affect currently free flowing traffic. This work is ongoing.

I have consistently restated that, in line with previous commitments, the UK Government (UKG) must ensure the continuation of unfettered movement of animal and plant products, plants and live animals from GB to Northern Ireland, but also to define a legally binding framework which ensures continued, unfettered access for our businesses to their key markets in Great Britain.

In common with the UK Government, I want the Northern Ireland Protocol implemented in a way that minimises any frictions on the flow of agri-food trade and works for our businesses and citizens.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the use of Border Control Posts in Northern Ireland, including what checks will be required.

(AQW 6010/17-22)

Mr Poots: In line with the Northern Ireland/Ireland Protocol, to ensure that the island of Ireland remains as a single epidemiological Unit post transition, Northern Ireland needs to align with the EU rules on sanitary and phytosanitary checks (SPS) for agri-foods. There is a legal responsibility flowing from the Protocol to ensure these SPS checks will be carried out on the relevant goods entering Northern Ireland at designated Points of Entry (POE), which includes our ports and airports.

Since the 26 May, my officials have been working at pace and against very challenging timeframes, in conjunction with stakeholders at ports and the wider UK Government, to develop and deliver a control regime to include new process design, the required IT, trained staff and supporting facilities to deliver first day operational readiness for SPS checks at Northern Ireland's NI Points of Entries by the end of December 2020.

I am working on the assumption that if both the EU and United Kingdom Governments are committed to minimising friction on trade, it is reasonable to assume there will be a very small number of checks. I have noted in paragraph thirty-five in the UK Government's Policy Paper, "The UK's Approach to the Northern Ireland Protocol" which states, "The process by which controls are conducted, and their frequency – including the level of physical checks required – will need to be discussed with the EU in the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee, within the context of the provision in the Protocol that both parties must use their "best endeavours" to avoid controls at Northern Ireland ports as far as possible, and adopt recommendations in the Committee accordingly. We will actively seek to simplify and minimise electronic documentary requirements for this trade."

In light of the fact that the above negotiation process has not yet been concluded through the Joint Committee, there is lack of certainty around the level of checks required. In all outcomes I have been clear it will be vital that physical checks are kept to the minimum required and that no additional burdens are placed on NI business and consumers.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to provide an update on the remediation of the illegal Mobouy dump undertaken by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

(AQW 6015/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has established a remediation team to progress remediation of the Mobouy site. Presently they are working towards the finalisation of the procurement documents that will allow a process to appoint an integrated consultancy team (ICT) to commence. Appointment of this ICT is the next Milestone in the project and will facilitate finalisation of the remediation strategy and completion of the Business Case (OBC2) for approval to appoint a contractor to carry out the remediation works.

As part of the work to ensure the polluter pays principle, the Crown Court trial of the alleged operators of the site was due to commence on the 8 September 2020. However, the Department was notified by the Public Prosecution Service on the 31 July 2020 that the case will not be listed for hearing on that date due to the current COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions on jury trials. At this time it is not clear when the trial will be relisted.

The Remediation Team will now work to assess how best to balance the need for the remediation process to begin, via the tender for the ICT, and how best to protect the criminal prosecution from any allegations of abuse of process or prejudicing the case against the defendants.

Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, a comprehensive Environmental Monitoring Programme (EMP) has continued to be implemented at the site including site and river bank inspections together with daily laboratory testing of water quality at the NI Water public water abstraction. No pollution incidents in the River Faughan have been reported by members of the public or identified through the monitoring carried out under the EMP during this time.

Due to Covid-19 no face to face community stakeholder engagement has taken place since February 2020; a planned stakeholder site visit to Kerdiffstown landfill remediation had to be postponed in May 2020. A presentation to provide updates to the community stakeholders is being prepared.

The Site Vision Task and Finish Group, currently made up of NIEA and Derry City and Strabane District Council officials continues to meet on a regular basis. When the criminal trial has concluded, representatives from the stakeholder groups will be invited to participate in the Task and Finish Group.

Department of Education

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Education whether specific funding will be available to allow all children who qualify for free school meals to return to school on 1 September and to avail of their free school meal entitlement.

(AQW 5703/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): When schools open to all pupils from w/c 31 August School meals, including free school meals will be available in schools.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what steps have been taken by his Department to promote the procurement of local, high-quality produce in school catering.

(AQW 5897/17-22)

Mr Weir: The procurement of food for school catering is a matter for the Education Authority (EA) and individual Voluntary Grammar/Grant Maintained Integrated (VG/GMI) schools.

The EA has advised that all Catering Service Food Frameworks are put in place in line with Northern Ireland Public Procurement Policy and a number of its frameworks are tendered in lots which are either geographical or product specific. This allows local small and medium sized enterprises to consider tendering for one or more of the lots depending on their supply capacity and capability.

A number of the Catering Service Food Frameworks require the frequent supply of fresh products, for example, meat, poultry and milk. This requirement for freshness coupled with the frequency of delivery can increase opportunities for local producers.

In order to encourage and promote opportunities for local suppliers the EA undertakes extensive pre-market engagement with interested suppliers prior to deciding the tender procurement strategy. To alert and encourage the local market, this pre-market engagement is advertised via several outlets including EA social media accounts, the EA website, the eTendersNI website and, if the tender is above the EU regulations threshold, the Official Journal of the European Union. The EA Procurement Service (EAPS) also attends numerous regional 'meet the buyer events' the purpose of these are to introduce EA and its requirements to the local supply base and importantly advise them on how they can tender for EA catering supply opportunities.

All of the produce included in EAPS tenders is in line with the agreed Nutritional Standards issued by the Department of Education. The quality of the items tendered and awarded is therefore based on those Standards coupled with achieving a Value for Money outcome for the EA Catering Service.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 5221/17-22, how much money his Department has spent on addressing racial bullying in schools in the last ten years, broken down by area.

(AQW 5959/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department does not have a specific budget to address racial bullying in schools.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education to detail the percentage and number of pupils claiming free school meal entitlement not achieving 5+ GCSE (A*-C), and equivalents including English and Maths, broken down by community background for the last 5 available academic years.

(AQW 5979/17-22)

Mr Weir: The tables provided below detail the number and percentage of school leavers who did not achieve at least 5 GCSEs at A*-C (including equivalents) including English and maths between 2014/15 and 2018/19, broken down by community background.

School leavers entitled to free school meals NOT achieving at least 5 GCSEs(2) A*-C inc. GCSE English and GCSE maths by religion of pupil⁽¹⁾

NOT achieving 5+ GCSEs ⁽²⁾ A*-C inc. English and maths	2018/19		2017/18		2016/17	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
PROTESTANT	1,006	56.5	976	57.2	1,070	57.3

NOT achieving 5+ GCSEs ⁽²⁾ A*-C inc. English and maths	2018/19		2017/18		2016/17	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Total	1,782		1,707		1,866	
CATHOLIC	1,574	46.8	1,586	48.4	1,678	49.8
Total	3,361		3,275		3,367	
OTHER ⁽³⁾	337	53.2	261	51.1	273	52.6
Total	633		511		519	
ALL RELIGIONS	2,917	50.5	2,823	51.4	3,021	52.5
Total	5,776		5,493		5,752	

NOT achieving 5+ GCSEs ⁽²⁾ A*-C inc. English and maths	2015/16		2014/15	
	No.	%	No.	%
PROTESTANT	1,114	62.1	1,023	66.8
Total	1,794		1,532	
CATHOLIC	1,894	51.6	1,853	55.3
Total	3,667		3,351	
OTHER ⁽³⁾	288	56.3	241	56.4
Total	512		427	
ALL RELIGIONS	3,296	55.2	3,117	58.7
Total	5,973		5,310	

Notes

- 1 Excludes special and independent schools
- 2 Includes equivalent qualifications
- 3 Other includes Other Christian, No religion and Non-Christian.

Please note that the increase in the number of FSME pupils coincides with an extension of the eligibility for free school meals under the Working Tax Credit free school meal criterion which was extended to post-primary pupils from September 2014.

Department of Finance

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance (i) to outline the independence of the Northern Ireland Civil Service; (ii) to outline its role in serving the public interest compared to the interest of the Executive; and (iii) how the independence of the Civil Service is impacted by the selection process of the Head of the Civil Service culminating with an interview with elected representatives.

(AQW 5891/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Civil servants are bound by the NICS Code of Ethics, which requires them to comply with the Civil Service core values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality. Civil servants are politically impartial and accountable to the Minister in charge of the department in which they work, and to the public. Individuals holding public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest.

All appointments to the NICS must comply with the Civil Service Commissioners Recruitment Code. Under the Civil Service Commissioners (Northern Ireland) Order 1999, Commissioners have a statutory duty to ensure that appointments to the NICS are made on merit, on the basis of fair and open competition.

The NICS recruitment process for the Head of the Civil Service provides for the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to have a role in the interview process.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance what percentage of (i) all staff; and (ii) staff at Grade 5 and above, working in his Department have completed anti-racism training; and how often this training is updated.

(AQW 5944/17-22)

Mr Murphy: NICSHR diversity and inclusion training courses are reviewed and updated periodically. Reviews scheduled for 2020/21 are underway.

In 2017 Unconscious Bias training was introduced to the NICS. Initial classroom based training was provided to SCS staff with 40 DoF SCS staff completing the training. In August 2017 Unconscious Bias e-learning training was made available to all other staff and rolled out on a mandatory basis for line managers up to Grade 6 level. To date 2208 DoF staff in grades below SCS level have completed this package.

Department of Health

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the resumption of open clinics with GP services.
(AQW 5771/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): As independent contractors who contract with the Health and Social Care Board to provide primary medical services, GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients. The current COVID-19 pandemic does not in any way change this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how best to prioritise patients to provide this core service whilst maintaining patient safety.

GP practices are currently operating a telephone triage system which allows patients to continue to seek medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP then uses their clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be safely managed over the telephone or whether a face to face appointment is required. This ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential. Some practices have also utilised other technologies such as video conferencing.

The telephone triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face to face assessment to one of the Primary Care COVID-19 centres which have been established in Northern Ireland. This ensures that these patients do not attend the GP Practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimal disruption.

GP practices are still providing face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them and all practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment to allow them to do so safely.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices on 30 July 2020 to ask that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices have been advised to communicate to patients (on posters, practice website, or practice newsletter) about the practice services that are available and how to access them and to ensure that this information is made clear to patients.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQO 549/17-22, (i) to detail the advice that states risk to staff from improper fit testing of COVID-19 masks is low; (ii) who provided the advice; and (iii) how many staff were recalled for fit testing.

(AQW 5866/17-22)

Mr Swann: Advice was sought by Infection Prevention and Control Medical Leads and Microbiologists across the HSCTs in relation to the risk to staff affected by this issue. It is important to note the advice given from Infection Prevention Control Medical Leads indicated the risk was likely to be low, this was predicated on the following considerations:

- The mask would have provided a measure of protection suitable, albeit not at the level required by HSE INDG 479 Fit Test Protocol.
- Staff undertake a fit-check prior to wearing a mask each time it is applied to ensure a good fit.
- Wider control measures are put in place to protect staff from exposure to infectious agents, such as the other PPE, engineering controls like ventilation and use of isolation rooms, and minimising close personal contact during clinical interactions where this is possible.
- Given that these staff passed quantitative testing, albeit to a different standard, it is likely that the risk to staff would be low and most likely represents less of an increase in risk than if qualitative testing were used instead.
- Not all staff had to wear the mask and in addition some staff had already been correctly fit tested for an alternative mask

The number of staff that were affected by this issue were 2886. Health and Social Care Trusts have implemented a retesting programme which will continue throughout August.

It is important to note the phrase "likely to be low" does not infer that this incident was not a serious breach of protocol and as such presented a safety risk, hence the reason for the commissioning of a Level Two Serious Adverse Incident (SAI) review.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQO 549/17-22, to outline the details of the Public Health Agency Serious Adverse Incident review including the expected timeframe for completion.

(AQW 5867/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency has commissioned an expert panel to carry out a Level 2 Serious Adverse Incident Review (SAI). This review will be completed within 6-10 weeks.

The members of this panel include:

- SAI Chair: Alan Murray, CEO of The British Safety Industry Federation (BSIF) and BSIF administer the Fit2Fit Competency Assessment scheme.
- SAI Member: Professor Mike Scott, Director of Medicines Optimisation Innovation Centre.
- SAI Member: Mark Roscrow- M.B.E, former Director of Procurement, Logistics and Health Courier Services for NHS Wales.

The panel will examine:-

- The standards and process used to procure and govern fit-testing across all Trusts.
- The incident, how it occurred and how it was managed.
- The systems used to monitor the quality of fit-testing.
- Learning and will make recommendations for ensuring systems are safe and effective.

The panel will also engage with staff and Trade unions colleagues during the course of the SAI.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the current number of vacancies for (i) nurses; (ii) hospital doctors; and (iii) General Practitioners in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 5878/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) & (ii) Information on the number of nursing and medical vacancies actively being recruited to in each Health & Social Care (HSC) Trust at 31 March 2020 is detailed in the table below.

HSC Trust	Vacancies actively being recruited to at 31 March 2020	
	Registered Nursing	Medical
Belfast	885	71
Northern	248	34
South Eastern	356	5
Southern	300	51
Western	253	40

Source: Recruitment & Selection Shared Services (BSO) & HSC Trusts

- (iii) Information on the number of vacant GP posts is not available. GPs are independent contractors who contract with the Health and Social Care Board to provide primary medical services to their patients. As independent contractors, GPs are responsible for identifying and recruiting the number of GPs and other staff required to deliver those services.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 5299/17-22, to list the domiciliary care providers and the amounts paid to each provider.

(AQW 5881/17-22)

Mr Swann: The amounts paid to each Domiciliary Care Provider as detailed in AQW 5299/17-22 are provided in the table below. Figures for Southern Trust are now based on the actual invoiced payments, and are higher than projected in the response to AQW 5299/17-22; actual Covid-19 Top-up payments are therefore lower than the earlier projection.

Financial Support paid to each Domiciliary Care Provider April – June 2020 (£000's)

Northern HSC Trust		Southern HSC Trust	
Crossroads Care NI	33	Quality Care	19
Extra Care	156	Ann's Homecare	216
Homecare Independent Living	83	Care Plus	6
Optimum Care	75	Clogher Valley Care Ltd	32
Admiral Care	56	Connected Health	1
Anns Home Care	23	Enable Care Services	40

Northern HSC Trust		Southern HSC Trust	
Bluebird Coleraine	41	Firs Homecare	4
Bluebird Lisburn & Down	2	Homecare NI	22
Glen Caring	17	Jackie's Dom Care	16
Hutchinson at Home	9	L&B Care Services (M E Fitzpatrick)	4
Jackies Dom Care	8	Moneydarragh Flexicare	42
One2One Care and Support	67	Peacehaven Care Services	24
Platinum Care	43	Provincial Care Services	7
Support Care	22	Rathmourne	57
Trackars	9	Rutledge Recruitment	43
		Trackars Homecare	6
Total	644	Total	539

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to outline the actions he is taking to prevent malnutrition among over-65s arising from the particular issues of lockdown and the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 5884/17-22)

Mr Swann: Lockdown has proved challenging for all Health and Social Care Trust services. However HSC staff and Allied Health Professional (AHP) therapy services have worked closely with adults over 65 to deliver and prioritise therapeutic support for those at risk of malnutrition during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The PHA has led work in partnership with the HSCB and Trusts to raise awareness and develop regional guidance assisting with the identification of malnutrition and signposting for further help. This work was targeted to those in Care Home settings with eating, drinking and swallowing issues. Two specific sets of guidance were issued "Regional nutritional guidance for care home residents suspected or confirmed COVID-19" (21.05.2020) and "Eating, Drinking and Swallowing during COVID-19, Advice for staff supporting residents in care homes" (released 21.05.2020). These were distributed to all care homes within Northern Ireland and released on social media.

A PHA blog, PHA healthy recipes website (www.choosetolivebetter.com) and "Keeping Well At Home Guidance Booklet", a booklet to give older people ideas and suggestions (including nutrition) to keep safe and well at home during the pandemic, are available online.

Detailed planning for the recovery of services is underway across all HSC Trusts, and is seeking to build on some of the innovative ways of working that have emerged to help people at risk of malnutrition including the increased use of social media and digital platforms.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health, in light of the publication of the Strategy Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care, to outline the timetable for completion of the Physiotherapy Workforce Review.

(AQW 5887/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have noted the recommendations of the Physiotherapy Workforce Review Report and have agreed that it should be published on my Department's website during August.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the accuracy of COVID-19 tests; and whether his Department will publish the number of false negative tests conducted.

(AQW 5922/17-22)

Mr Swann: The COVID-19 Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) swab tests are not in practice taken as 100% accurate. Specifically, there may be sensitivity issues causing a negative test result in some samples from COVID-19 positive cases. This is influenced by the quality of the specimen available for testing, site from which the sample is obtained (lower or upper respiratory) and duration of time since acquisition of infection. There is also a risk of a false positive result with any molecular test or assay, however contamination of specimen or extract are the most recognised issues impacting accuracy. It is not possible to ascertain in every circumstance if an individual has received a false negative test result, therefore, this data is not currently available.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many people in the Ards and North Down area have tested positive for COVID-19.

(AQW 5927/17-22)

Mr Swann: DoH publishes a COVID-19 Dashboard (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates>) which includes information on individuals with laboratory completed tests for the SARS-COV-2 virus, which causes COVID-19. The information described by the COVID-19 Dashboard includes details of numbers of people testing positive and is broken down by Local Government District.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 5336/17-22, what is the extent of the historical test results; and how long is it expected to take to update.

(AQW 5937/17-22)

Mr Swann: Historical test results totalled 39,709. The Northern Ireland Electronic Care Record (NIECR) system has been updated and all test results for individuals tested through the National Testing Programme are now available in the individual's electronic care record in the NIECR system.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health (i) whether an adult safeguarding law is being developed for Northern Ireland; and (ii) if not, whether the introduction of one is being considered.

(AQW 5958/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am currently considering recommendations for legislative reform in this area. The Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland recommended the introduction of an Adult Safeguarding Bill in his 'Home Truths' report. My Department also commissioned an independent review of the HSC's response to Dunmurry Manor Care Home including an in-depth report on safeguarding. Practices concerning safeguarding must be strengthened and I will wish to carefully consider the review's findings before making a decision on the way forward.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what steps he has taken to address waiting times for those seeking help with alcohol and drug misuse; broken down by Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 5960/17-22)

Mr Swann: The alcohol and drug services, commissioned by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) and the Public Health Agency (PHA), in all five Health & Social Care Trust (HSCT) areas have largely remained operational throughout the COVID-19 pandemic with client contact/support and interventions primarily continuing on a telephone/video-link basis.

Several services provided by the HSCTs were initially affected by staff redeployment during the surge planning period, while other services operated in different ways to avoid face-to-face contact where possible. Some Residential Care services had to close for a period but these have now begun to reopen, although some services are currently operating at a reduced capacity.

Recovery and reset plans currently being implemented by the HSCTs, and overseen by the HSCB, will ensure that all alcohol and drug services will shortly be fully operational again and help to address any waiting lists.

I have also allocated an additional £400,000 to the PHA in 2020/21 to meet increased service demands within the alcohol and drug services they commission.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of Health and Social Care staff who are still redeployed from their original service due to responding to COVID-19; broken down by Health and Social Care Trust and service.

(AQW 5976/17-22)

Mr Swann: In response to COVID 19, a significant number of staff were redeployed within their own Directorates in their employing Trusts in order to maintain essential services. Trusts do not hold a central database to capture this information.

The table below contains figures for staff in each Trust who have moved across Directorates and are still redeployed. Trusts have not been able to supply this information broken down by specific services.

Trust	Staff still Redeployed (WTEs)
BHSCT	217
SHSCT	181
SEHSCT	2
NHSCT	51.78
WHSCT	116
Total	567.78

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail each occasion his Department had formally corresponded on the issue of COVID-19 travel restrictions, with (i) the Border Force; (ii) the Home Office; (iii) Public Health England; (iv) the third party follow up call company.

(AQW 5978/17-22)

Mr Swann: Department of Health officials sit on UK-wide Programme Board that provides strategic direction, to ensure the aims and objectives of the International Travel programme are achieved. The Board currently meets (via video conferencing) 3 times per week and is made up of over 50 members which include officials from Border Force, Home Office and Public Health England.

Officials also have informal contact when required with specific organisations to consider specific international travel queries.

There has been no direct contact with the 3rd party contractor to date.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health (i) how many families that have been assessed are on a waiting list to access (a) children's disability social work services; and (b) the Autism Intervention Service; and (ii) the average time a family has to wait between assessment and first appointment for each of these services, broken down by each Health and Social Care Trust. **(AQW 6002/17-22)**

Mr Swann: The number of children that have been assessed and are on a waiting list to access children's disability social work services or autism intervention services, for each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust, are presented in Table 1.

The average wait between assessment and first appointment for the children's disability social work services and autism intervention services, for each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust, is presented in Tables 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Please note the information below relates children and not families.

Table 1: The number of children that have been assessed, and are waiting to access the children's disability social work services or autism intervention services by HSC Trust.

HSC Trust	Number of children who are waiting to access	
	Children's disability social work services	Autism Intervention Services
Belfast	107	379
Northern	0	614
South Eastern	61	47
Southern	0	36
Western	35	258
Northern Ireland	203	1,334

Source: HSC Trusts

Note: The number of children assessed and waiting to access autism intervention services in the Belfast and Western HSC Trust relates to 30 June 2020. For the Northern, South Eastern, and Southern HSC Trust this relates to 31 July 2020.

Table 2: The average wait between assessment and first appointment for children's disability social work services and autism intervention services in the Belfast HSC Trust.

HSC Trust	Average wait between assessment and first appointment for	
	Children's disability social work services	Autism Intervention Services
Belfast	26 weeks*	**

Source: Belfast HSC Trust

Note: The average wait on the children's disability social work services has been calculated between 1 August 2019 and 31 July 2020.

*Average wait time represents the time from referral to initial assessment, and not from initial assessment to first appointment.

**Belfast HSC Trust do not collect this information in a format that would allow for an average wait time to be easily calculated.

Table 3: The average wait between assessment and first appointment for children's disability social work services and autism intervention services in the Northern HSC Trust.

HSC Trust	Average wait between assessment and first appointment for	
	Children's disability social work services	Autism Intervention Services
Northern	Within 20 working days	18 weeks

Source: Northern HSC Trust

Note: The average wait to access the children's disability social work services and the autism intervention services has been calculated between 1 August 2019 and 31 July 2020.

Table 4: The average wait between assessment and first appointment for children's disability social work services and autism intervention services in the South Eastern HSC Trust.

	Average wait between assessment and first appointment for	
HSC Trust	Children's disability social work services	Autism Intervention Services
South Eastern	8 – 20 weeks*	9 weeks

Source: South Eastern HSC Trust

Note: The average wait on children's disability social work services and autism intervention services has been calculated between 1 August 2019 and 31 July 2020.

*Average wait time varies depending on Trust area and type of referral.

Table 5: The average wait between assessment and first appointment for children's disability social work services and autism intervention services in the Southern HSC Trust.

	Average wait between assessment and first appointment for	
HSC Trust	Children's disability social work services	Autism Intervention Services
Southern	*	**

Source: Southern HSC Trust

* The assessment is commenced by the CWD social worker on their first appointment, therefore there this is no wait time.

** The maximum time frame for children and young people to be seen in SHSCT is 13 weeks. Post diagnostic intervention first assessment is within the 13 week timeframe.

Table 6: The average wait between assessment and first appointment for children's disability social work services and autism intervention services in the Western HSC Trust.

	Average wait between assessment and first appointment for	
HSC Trust	Children's disability social work services	Autism Intervention Services
Western	3 weeks*	54 weeks**

Source: Western HSC Trust

* Average wait between 31 July 2018 up to 13 February 2020.

** This figure refers to the longest wait, and not the average wait time for the Autism Intervention Service as at 30 June 2020.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health (i) how many families are currently on a waiting list for an assessment to access (a) children's disability social work services; and (b) the Autism Intervention Service; and (ii) the average time a family has to wait for an assessment for each of these services, broken down by each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 6003/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of children that have been referred to and are waiting on an assessment for the, children's disability social work services and Autism Intervention Services, for each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust, are presented in Table 1.

The average wait on an assessment for children's disability social work services and Autism Intervention Service for each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust is presented in Tables 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6.

Please note the information below relates children and not families.

Table 1: Number of children who are waiting for an assessment for children's disability social work services and autism intervention services by HSC Trust.

HSC Trust	Number of children who are waiting for an assessment for	
	Children's disability social work services	Autism Intervention Services
Belfast	107	1293
Northern	0	1505
South Eastern	0	11
Southern	8	51
Western	107	970
Northern Ireland	222	3,830

Source: HSC Trusts

Note: The number of children referred and waiting for an assessment for the Autism Intervention Services in the Belfast and Western HSC Trust relates to 30 June 2020. For the Northern, South Eastern, and Southern HSC Trust this relates to 31 July 2020.

Table 2: The average wait on an assessment for children's disability social work services and Autism Intervention Services in the Belfast HSC Trust.

HSC Trust	Average wait on an assessment for	
	Children's disability social work services	Autism Intervention Services
Belfast	26 weeks	*

Source: Belfast HSC Trust

Note: The average wait on children's disability social work services has been calculated between 1 August 2019 and 31 July 2020.

* Belfast HSC Trust do not collect this information in a format that would allow for an average wait time to be easily calculated.

Table 3: The average wait on an assessment for children's disability social work services and autism intervention services in the Northern HSC Trust.

HSC Trust	Average wait on an assessment for	
	Children's disability social work services	Autism Intervention Services
Northern	Within 20 working days	23 weeks

Source: Northern HSC Trust

Note: The average wait for Autism assessment has been calculated between 1 August 2019 and 31 July 2020.

Table 4: The average wait on an assessment for children's disability social work services and Autism Intervention Services in the South Eastern HSC Trust.

HSC Trust	Average wait on an assessment for	
	Children's disability social work services	Autism Intervention Services
South Eastern	*	7 weeks

Source: South Eastern HSC Trust

Note: The average wait for the Autism assessment has been calculated between 1 August 2019 and 31 July 2020.

* Families are initially assessed at point of referral to ensure criteria to access services is met.

Table 5: The average wait on an assessment for children's disability social work services and Autism Intervention Services in the Southern HSC Trust.

HSC Trust	Average wait on an assessment for	
	Children's disability social work services	Autism Intervention Services
Southern	0 – 12.5 weeks*	13 weeks**

Source: Southern HSC Trust

Note: The average wait on children's disability social work services assessment has been calculated between 1 August 2019 and 31 July 2020.

* Average wait time can vary from 0 weeks to 12.5 weeks depending on Trust Area.

** This figure refers to the longest wait for an Autism Diagnostic Assessment as at 31 July 2020.

Table 6: The average wait on an assessment for children's disability social work services and Autism Intervention Services in the Western HSC Trust.

HSC Trust	Average wait on an assessment for	
	Children's disability social work services	Autism Intervention Services
Western	79 weeks *	90 weeks**

Source: Western HSC Trust

** Average wait in the period 3 December 2019 and 17 February 2020.

* This figure refers to the longest wait for Autism Diagnostic Assessment as at 30 June 2020.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health how many unallocated cases were there of families requesting access to (i) children's disability social work services; and (ii) the Autism Intervention Service, broken down by each Health and Social Care Trust, in the last twelve months.

(AQW 6004/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of unallocated cases to children's disability social work services and Autism Intervention Services, for each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust over the previous 12 months are presented in Table 1 and 2, respectively.

Table 1: The number of unallocated cases to children's disability social work services over the previous 12 months, by HSC Trust.

HSC Trust	Jul 20	Jun 20	May 20	Apr 20	Mar 20	Feb 20	Jan 20	Dec 19	Nov 19	Oct 19	Sept 19	Aug 19
BelfastA	144A											
Northern	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
South Eastern	40	33	45	38	62	63	57	60	52	56	45	47
Southern	8	7	16	26	20	7	7	14	6	24	18	29
Western	107	104	98	93	92	91	91	84	85	89	84	84

Source: HSC Trusts

A The Belfast Trust has reported the average number of unallocated cases over a 9 month period from 1 April 2019 to 31 December 2019. Data collections were suspended in January, February and March 2020.

Table 2: The number of unallocated cases to Autism Intervention Services over the previous 12 months, by HSC Trust.

HSC Trust	Jul 20	Jun 20	May 20	Apr 20	Mar 20	Feb 20	Jan 20	Dec 19	Nov 19	Oct 19	Sept 19	Aug 19
BelfastA	-*	1293	1283	1276	1236	1157	1095	1018	1001	968	912	1025
Northern	618	693	749	779	850	852	757	721	664	579	512	481
South Eastern	47	57	57	55	53	53	32	27	20	26	23	52
Southern	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

HSC Trust	Jul 20	Jun 20	May 20	Apr 20	Mar 20	Feb 20	Jan 20	Dec 19	Nov 19	Oct 19	Sept 19	Aug 19
WesternB	-*	258	268	316	318	278	275	254	254	246	240	226

Source: HSC Trusts

A Belfast HSC Trust has provided the number of children waiting for assessment following an Autism referral.

B Western HSC Trust has provided the number of children on the Autism Intervention Waiting list, after assessment.

* Figure unavailable as the information is currently under month end validation.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health how many summer scheme places are available this year for children with (i) a learning disability; and (ii) autism, broken down by each Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 6006/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of summer scheme places available in 2020 for children with a learning disability and autism, for each Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust, are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: The number of summer scheme places available for children with a learning disability and autism by HSC Trust in 2020.

HSC Trust	Number of summer scheme places available for children with	
	Learning disability	Autism
Belfast	116	0
Northern	0	0
South Eastern	110	0
Southern	430*	10
Western	40	0

Source: HSC Trusts

* This figure relates to the number of summer support sessions available for total of 119 children, and includes those children with learning disabilities, sensory disabilities, and Autism.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, in light of increased reports of patients unable to access key GP services in Derry, what action his Department is taking to address this.
(AQW 6016/17-22)

Mr Swann: As independent contractors who contract with the Health and Social Care Board to provide primary medical services, GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients. The current COVID-19 pandemic does not in any way change this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how best to prioritise patients to provide this core service whilst maintaining patient safety.

GP practices are currently operating a telephone triage system which allows patients to continue to seek medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP then uses their clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be safely managed over the telephone or whether a face to face appointment is required. This ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential. Some practices have also utilised other technologies such as video conferencing.

The telephone triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face to face assessment to one of the Primary Care COVID-19 centres which have been established in Northern Ireland. This ensures that these patients do not attend the GP Practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimal disruption.

GP practices are still providing face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them and all practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment to allow them to do so safely.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices on 30 July 2020 to ask that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices have been advised to communicate to patients (on posters, practice website, or practice newsletter) about the practice services that are available and how to access them and to ensure that this information is made clear to patients.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following the Department's recent meeting with motorcyclist representatives over the issue of wire rope crash barriers, what actions her Department is taking to address these road safety concerns.

(AQW 5842/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): My Department adheres to the current standards used in Europe when installing safety barriers, including wire rope systems. Research and testing carried out to date has concluded that wire rope systems perform well when impacted by errant vehicles and are no more hazardous to vulnerable road users than other types of deformable steel posted safety barriers, more commonly used across the road network.

There is clear evidence that motorcycle impacts with safety barriers on dual carriageways are extremely infrequent. At high risk locations, motorcycle protection systems may be considered where there are potentially challenging road layouts such as a series of tight bends or sharp corners that could result in a motorcyclist leaving the road and striking a safety barrier. Specific guidance is being developed for the design and installation of safety barrier systems in Northern Ireland, to complement UK wide standards. My Department will continue to monitor road traffic collision information and where a specific risk to motorcyclists is identified, appropriate mitigation measures to reduce the risk shall be considered.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans are in place to upgrade the junction at Ballymiscaw Road and Whinney Hill Road, Holywood.

(AQW 5844/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm my Department has developed plans to upgrade the junctions at Ballymiscaw Road / Whinney Hill and Dunlady Road / Holywood Road / Craigantlet Road / Whinney Hill in Holywood. It is recognised that this scheme would bring important benefits in terms of road safety and traffic progression.

However due to the scale and cost of the project and in light of current budgetary constraints, there are no plans to progress the scheme at this time.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans are in place for her Department to work in partnership with Ards and North Down Borough Council to clean the build-up of road dirt on the road verges and footpaths on the major roadways throughout North Down.

(AQW 5846/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, places the responsibility for cleaning of all public roads (except for Special Roads, such as motorways) on district councils. When carrying out routine maintenance work on busy roads within the North Down area, such as the A2 Belfast to Bangor Road, my officials contact Ards and North Down Borough Council so it has the opportunity to avail of the temporary traffic management arrangements put in place by my Department to assist with their carrying out of the sweeping/cleaning function.

On most recent occasions, the Council has taken up the offer, however, on other occasions the offer has been declined. The Council also has the option of engaging the services of a private contractor to provide temporary traffic management to enable this work to be completed.

I am aware that officials have apprised the member of my Department's position on this matter.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the use of wire rope as a form of crash barrier for the protection of vehicles and motorcyclists.

(AQW 5851/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department adheres to the current standards used across the UK, Ireland and many other parts of Europe when installing safety barriers, including wire rope systems. These standards take account of current research, best practice, safety and environmental considerations.

Research and testing carried out to date has concluded that wire rope systems perform well when impacted by errant vehicles and are no more hazardous to vulnerable road users than other types of deformable steel posted safety barriers, more commonly used across the road network.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the dualling of the Dargan Viaduct will be prioritised as part of the future proofing of the York Street Interchange project.

(AQW 5857/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As part of the development of the York Street Interchange project, a feasibility study on the dualling of the Dargan Viaduct has been completed. It is proposed that works to strengthen the foundations and piers of the Dargan Viaduct will be delivered as part of the York Street Interchange as future proofing for further work.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has any plans to assist in increasing electric car charging infrastructure, including the number of rapid charging points.

(AQW 5882/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently 320 22kWh (Fast) charge points at 160 locations and a further 17 50kWh DC rapid charge point in the North. The e-car public charge point network is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and the market is also open to other commercial operators who would wish to provide charging infrastructure. There are a number of recent developments that are likely to impact expansion and improvement of the network. For example, the Utility Regulator's recent decision to remove the Maximum Resale Price on the electricity cost of charge points will allow commercial operators to charge above cost price of electricity supply. This should give clarity for operators wishing to provide commercial services and strengthen network provision in the North.

I am committed to seeing this infrastructure increased as part of my Department's climate change action and I have agreed with the DAERA Minister to work collaboratively to promote the use of electric vehicles and specifically to improve the charge point network. 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 infrastructure including rapid charging. I am also considering how the planning system can support the expansion of electric vehicle charge point infrastructure.

Mr Storey asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the Ballyconnelly Road, Cullybackey, will be included on the winter gritting schedule.

(AQW 5895/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department receives many requests each year for additions to the winter gritting schedules. For this reason all decisions made are based on an objective assessment process set out in the Department's Winter Service policy. This process ensures that a consistent approach to winter maintenance is adopted across the entire road network, allowing my Department to grit approximately 28% of the public road network, which carries 80% of our traffic.

A section of the Ballyconnelly Road is already on the gritting schedule as it is part of the main through route between Cullybackey and Portglenone. Due to low traffic volumes the remaining portion of Ballyconnelly Road between Dreen Road and Cardonagh Road does not currently satisfy the policy requirements for inclusion. However as this is based on a traffic survey from 2014, I have asked for the assessment to be updated.

In accordance with the Department's Winter Service Policy, traffic volumes should be assessed between October and April (inclusive), to reflect flows during the treatment period. A survey will be programmed for October 2020 and I have asked that you are advised of the outcome, when this work is complete.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the likely impact on capital project (i) costs; and (ii) timescales as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.[R]

(AQW 5920/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department's capital projects are on track to spend their current 2020/21 allocations. No significant additional costs have been incorporated into contracts in relation to COVID 19 as contractors and suppliers adapt working practices to continue delivery of existing projects.

Some projects have been delayed however others as a result have been accelerated to ensure spending the full capital budget available in-year.

The longer term impact of new working practices are not fully understood yet however I do not anticipate any significant additional costs or time delays arising this financial year that would result in lost opportunities.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure why funding for Capital Structural Maintenance for the Ards and North Down Council area is the lowest in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 5925/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Ards and North Down Borough Council area is allocated funding for Capital Structural Maintenance on the same basis as other District Councils, using established criteria such as road length and structural condition, to reflect need.

Within DfI Roads Southern Division, the Ards / North Down area has 15.2% of road length and received 16.2% (2017/18) and 16.1% (2018/19) of the funding available for road repairs respectively.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how much will be spent developing the Narrow Water Bridge Scheme in this financial year; (ii) for what purpose; and (iii) when she will announce a date for construction to commence.

(AQW 5932/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As outlined recently, I remain committed to advancing the Narrow Water Bridge Project. I raised it during discussions at the recent North South Ministerial Council meeting in Dublin Castle.

In coming weeks, I will be discussing this work with Minister Ryan to consider how best we can maximise the tourism potential of this cross border region whilst protecting the natural environment in an area of historic and ecological significance. Plans in

relation to the project will be dependent on decisions made jointly and subject to the availability of funding. It is, therefore, too early to give an indication on expenditure and timeframes for any project at this stage.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are any plans or proposals to move the lorry driving test centre from Craigavon to another location.

(AQW 5947/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I agreed to a request from the Minister of Health earlier this year to make the Craigavon MOT Test Centre available as part of covid testing to fight the spread of COVID-19.

Deloitte, who manage the National Initiative at the Craigavon MOT Test Centre, have set up a one-way traffic management system around the test centre to direct people into COVID-19 testing pods. As a result, the Driver & Vehicle Agency, which plans to resume car and lorry practical driver testing from 1 September, will be unable to offer the lorry driver test at the Craigavon MOT Test Centre until further notice. Anyone wishing to book a lorry driving test will be offered an alternative test centre for their test. MOT tests will still be able to be carried out at the Craigavon MOT Test Centre as the National Initiative does not impact on the MOT test hall.

I recognise that this may cause some inconvenience, but I hope that customers will appreciate the importance of retaining a COVID-19 test centre in the area.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the (i) footpath; and (ii) carriageway resurfacing projects planned for East Belfast within this financial year; and the scheduled start dates.

(AQW 5967/17-22)

Ms Mallon: You will be aware from my response to AQW 4576 17-22 that my Department is currently progressing a number of footway and road resurfacing schemes in the East Belfast constituency during this financial year. My officials work closely with our contractors on the delivery of the programme of works and for a number of construction related reasons, operate a three month rolling construction programme. The schemes listed below are being progressed throughout this 3 month period and further schemes will be programmed thereafter:

Schemes currently programmed for 2020/21 are as follows:

i.) Footway reconstruction schemes

- Marmont Park area – scheduled start date August 2020;
- Sandhill Parade (Sandhill Gardens to Sandhill Park) - scheduled start date still to be confirmed; and
- Orby Gardens - scheduled start date still to be confirmed.

New footway schemes

- 180m of new footway and resurfacing 40m of existing footway as part of Barnett's Road improvement scheme – currently on site.

ii.) Carriageway resurfacing schemes

- Hawthornden Way (Parkway to Upper Newtownards Road) - scheduled start date August 2020;
- Cregagh Road (Tildarg Street to Onslow Parade) - scheduled start date September 2020;
- Woodstock Link (Albertbridge Road to Halcombe Street) - scheduled start date still to be confirmed;
- Marmont Park area – scheduled start date August 2020;
- Sandhill Parade (Sandhill Gardens to Sandhill Park) - scheduled start date still to be confirmed; and
- Orby Gardens - scheduled start date still to be confirmed.

Carriageway Surface Dressing Schemes

- Gilnahirk Road West – further investigation required; and
- Ballyregan Road – works now substantively complete.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will give consideration to a review of the double yellow line parking restrictions along both sides of Prince Regent Road, to facilitate the increasing number of customers collecting letters and parcels from the Royal Mail depot during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 5970/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The double yellow lines at this location have been in place for many years and were introduced in order to improve road safety and address traffic progression problems. The restrictions address manoeuvring issues experienced by lorries and other large vehicles which service businesses in this area on a regular basis.

My Department has in the past received correspondence highlighting issues arising from illegally parked cars and requesting additional enforcement at this location. It is anticipated that making changes to the double yellow lines would likely create difficulties for delivery vehicles and as such it is anticipated that objections would be raised during the legislative process which involves a consultation exercise.

It is my officials' opinion that the waiting restrictions are still appropriate for this location and required for road safety purposes as well as facilitating traffic progression in this busy area. However, I can confirm that blue badge holders are permitted to park on single or double yellow lines for up to 3 hours, if it is safe to do so, but not within 15 metres of a junction or where there are restrictions on loading or unloading. Additionally, although the double yellow lines at Prince Regent Road indicate a 'no waiting at any time' restriction, I can confirm that loading, unloading or dropping off passengers is also permitted.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider a walking strategy for Northern Ireland similar to Let's get Scotland Walking; the national Walking Strategy.

(AQW 5971/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The ambitions set out in 'Let's Get Scotland Walking' (2014) are similar to those outlined in my Department's Active Travel Strategy: 'Building an Active Travel Future for Northern Ireland' (2013) and 'Exercise – Explore – Enjoy: a Strategic Plan for Greenways' (2016). My Department has a number of strategies that clearly articulate my ambition for more active travel and in particular a modal shift away from the car, especially for those shorter journeys, as demonstrated with my recent TV campaign "Great Things Happen When You Walk".

In addition to the Department's strategies with the objective of delivering higher levels of walking, the commitment is now included in Indicator 25 of the Programme for Government. I believe that rather than develop more strategies, the focus must now be on action to deliver the change articulated in strategies and the PfG, especially as we look towards a green recovery. Getting more people to walk requires both a cultural change and provision of better infrastructure. Work is already underway in many of our main towns and cities to help transform our streetscapes that will facilitate more walking and cycling.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in the event of a no deal on the negotiations on the future relationship with the European Union, what steps her Department has taken to ensure that vital supplies of minerals and chemicals for water treatment are not interrupted.

(AQW 6013/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department, along with others, continues to work on its understanding of the implications from Brexit. I am committed to ensuring full implementation of the NI Protocol with Executive colleagues. NI Water will hold stocks to the maximum limit possible, in order to mitigate the risk of a crisis situation developing suddenly. If necessary, in the period between any supply problems being experienced and the stocks running out, action would be taken urgently to secure the necessary chemicals in line with agreed plans. My officials continue to collaborate on an industry wide basis to ensure that stocks are secure and that the position is regularly reviewed in accordance with procedures set in place.

Department of Justice

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice how much public funding has been paid to the Prison Service Trust over the last five years; and whether she can provide the audit of accounts for the Trust for the same period.

(AQW 5871/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The Prison Service Trust has received the following funding over the last five years:

2019/20	£235,518
2018/19	£240,000
2017/18	£235,423
2016/17	£257,616
2015/16	£245,311

As the Prison Service Trust is a registered charity the audited accounts should be obtained directly from the Board of Trustees.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to outline the governance arrangements for the Prison Service Trust, including the oversight mechanisms of the board of Trustees; and to publish the minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Trust for each of the last five years.

(AQW 5872/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Prison Service Trust submits a grant funding application annually before any monies are provided. Accounts are audited independently and an annual report is submitted to the Northern Ireland Prison Service. There is regular contact throughout the year between NIPS and the Trust to ensure that departmental funding is spent on the specified programmes. Internal Audit are utilised to carry out reviews as required.

The Board of Trustees is responsible for financial oversight as it receives monies in addition to the departmental funding. As the Prison Service Trust is a registered charity the minutes of the Annual General Meetings for each of the last five years should be obtained directly from the Board of Trustees.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether she has any plans to introduce legislation that specifically outlaws up-skirting, similar to the Voyeurism (Offences) Act 2019 in England and Wales; and (ii) when any such legislation will be brought to the Assembly.

(AQW 5914/17-22)

Mrs Long: Subject to Executive approval, I intend to bring forward legislative proposals to make up-skirting a specific offence in a Justice Bill planned for introduction in the Assembly in early 2021.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Justice what steps her Department has taken to reduce the availability of illicit prescription medicines, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 5956/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department of Health (DoH) leads on the development of a public health intervention to address problematic substance use, including abuse of prescription medication, but, given the complexities of addressing the social determinants underlying this issue, it is recognised that input from key partners is critical to success, with responses required from those in education, safeguarding, criminal justice, housing and employment.

My Department is a key partner in a cross-sectoral group, led by Department of Health, which has been established to develop a new substance misuse strategy, of which Reducing Supply and Enforcement around illicit drugs, including prescription drugs will be one strand.

In addition, PSNI works closely with partners through the Drugs sub-group of the Organised Crime Task Force to intercept internet-sourced drugs within the postal and courier systems. PSNI and partner agencies, such as UK Border Force and the Department of Health's Medicines Regulatory Group (MRG), make full use of available legislation in order to detect and intercept illicit drugs before they can reach the communities within Northern Ireland.

My Department also supports and delivers a range of interventions to reduce the harmful consequences of all drug use in our society, this includes support for young people and their families referred to youth justice services (YJA), development of problem solving justice approaches - Substance Misuse Courts, Enhanced Combination Orders and Behavioural Change Programmes – and support for offenders within the prison environment.

At a local level, through Policing and Community Partnerships (PCSPs), funded by the Department of Justice and NI Policing Board, and located in each Council area, we have successfully implemented "Remove All Prescription and Illegal Drugs" (RAPID) bins. RAPID is a health and community safety focused initiative that provides a safe and anonymous disposal location to deposit unwanted prescription medications, over-the-counter medications or illegal drugs, in community locations, contributing to making local communities safer. There are now 56 RAPID bins across Northern Ireland and in the past two years approximately 150,000 prescription and non-prescription drugs have been deposited, analysed and destroyed via this scheme.

In 2020/2021 PCSPs have assigned approximately £266,000 to drugs and alcohol initiatives and increasing the number of RAPID bins. PCSPs have identified a raft of actions to further the work of reducing the misuse of drugs, from delivering targeted programmes to young people and families and engagement with schools on awareness-raising sessions, to delivering drug and alcohol support services.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Justice what steps her Department has taken to address the illicit sale of drugs via the internet and the dark web, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6005/17-22)

Mrs Long: Since 2018 the Northern Ireland contribution to Operation Pangea has been coordinated and collated by the the Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF) Drugs Sub Group. This group is one of the thematic sub groups which form part of the multi-agency OCTF structure. Partner organisations involved in the OCTF Drugs Sub Group include: Department of Justice, PSNI, Department of Health, HMRC, Border Force, NCA, PPS, the Coroner's Office, PHA, FSNI, Royal Mail, and NIPS.

Operation Pangea is an international, Interpol co-ordinated operation to disrupt the online supply, by illegal websites, of substandard and counterfeit medicines including prescription medicines. The global operation, involving over 100 countries is the largest internet-based action of its kind, targeting the three main components associated with this type of illegal medicines trade: illegal websites, electronic payment systems and the legitimate delivery system.

Operation Pangea also seeks to increase public awareness and highlight the dangers associated with purchasing medicines from unregulated internet sites and social media platforms.

In March 2020, Operation Pangea XIII activities in Northern Ireland resulted in the recovery of illicit medicines worth over £100k on the black market, including diazepam, modafinil, steroids and pregabalin. Follow-up searches by the PSNI Organised Crime Unit and UK Border Force saw a further 100,000 tablets seized during April and May.

All parties involved recognise the huge problem of the increasing number of drug deaths and drug-related criminality. Operations like Pangea will not solve the problem but do make a difference in reducing the available supply and provides an opportunity to reinforce key messages to the public. It is also a support to the ongoing work of law enforcement agencies who undertake regular local, national and international collaborative enforcement work to seize and destroy illegal and unauthorised drugs and medicines, particularly those sourced via the internet.

PSNI and partner agencies also make full use of available legislation in order to detect and intercept illicit drugs before they can reach the communities within Northern Ireland. Co-ordinated postal interceptions across a range of delivery routes are followed up with premises searches, seizures, arrests and prosecutions. Where paramilitary or organised crime groups are suspected of involvement in drug postal seizures then supporting money laundering investigations are launched so as to deny criminals of the profits of the drug trade.

Department for the Economy

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will provide urgent support for local media, including recommending to the Executive a paid-for public information advertising campaign.
(AQW 4432/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I am aware and sympathetic to the unprecedented and ongoing financial difficulties faced by businesses in Northern Ireland as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This includes local media, who not only provide jobs, but provide a vital service to our communities.

The Executive has rolled out a public information campaign in relation to Coronavirus spending of £1million to date (from March 2020 – June 2020). This multi-channel campaign included key public health messages including stay at home, keep your distance and wash your hands.

This has included advertising in local daily, weekly and Sunday newspapers, television, radio, outdoor and digital. This will be kept under review and future advertising spend will be aligned with Executive key messages in the weeks and months ahead.

Local media organisations are currently able to avail of a range of support measures, both locally and at a UK-wide level, such as the Coronavirus Job Retention scheme and the business rates holiday.

This is an evolving situation and I remain committed, along with Executive colleagues, to provide support to as many local businesses as possible. Any proposals on funding further business support measures, such as specific support for local media, will require collective agreement by the Executive.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether it is her Department's view that, (i) in situations of corporate distress when compiling a statement of affairs, the value of interest and compensation (Late Payment of Commercial Debts Legislation as amended) arising as the result of late payments going back over the 6 year limitation period (5 years in Scotland) should be calculated and included either as a quantified realisable asset or at least referenced as a potential realisable asset; and (ii) subject to the size of the case, the level of funding available and the materiality of matters disclosed, claims for late payment interest and compensation should be pursued as a matter of course.
(AQW 4475/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Question (i)

The Insolvency (NI) Order 1989 requires a Statement of Affairs to be completed as fully as possible by the director(s) of a company, listing all assets and potential assets together with the estimate of the realisable value of each asset. If the director(s) considers interest and compensation for late payments on commercial debts to be an asset of the company, then these should be included in the Statement of Affairs.

Question (ii)

Each case will be unique and so the case owner will take into account a number of factors before deciding if pursuit of the assets would be for the benefit of creditors.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the impact her Department's failure to secure the necessary leases on the Dock and Pump House, adding 20 months to the project timeline and £2.5 million in costs, has had on the reopening of HMS Caroline.
(AQW 5859/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Historic issues relating to the leases for Alexandra Dock and Blocks 1 to 3 of The Thompson Dock Pump House have had no impact on my recent decision not to reopen HMS Caroline, which has been temporarily closed until 31st December 2020.

In 2012 the then Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, now the Department for the Economy, reached an agreement with the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) to retain HMS Caroline (HMSC) in Belfast and to develop it into a maritime heritage visitor attraction. The capital phase of the project was jointly funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and Tourism NI (TNI). This was a unique heritage project and the capital phase was very complex. It encountered a

number of unforeseen difficulties resulting in delays to the original capital project timeline, a revised project scope and an increase in total project costs.

There were delays experienced in agreeing leases for Alexandra Dock and Blocks 1 to 3 of the Pump House and these were primarily due to external and third party factors. There were significant concerns regarding potential contamination to the Ship's hull and in the silt at Alexandra Dock following specialist surveys. This led to delays in the signing of the Agreement to Lease for Alexandra Dock with Belfast Harbour Commissioners (BHC). There was the potential risk of the main shipping channel of Belfast Port becoming contaminated, potentially meaning its closure to allow for an expensive clean-up operation for which the Department would have been liable. In addition, the Department would also have been potentially responsible for contamination at Alexandra Dock. There were also protracted discussions with Catalyst Inc. (NI Science Park) at the time regarding the lease of Block 1-3 of the Pump House for use as a Visitor Centre for HMSC.

Due to the delay caused by the need to resolve these issues and to widen the scope of the original project, the economic appraisal for the project was reappraised in 2016 and additional grant was then provided to NMRN by HLF and by TNI to cover all capital costs fully. This capital phase successfully completed in March 2018.

These issues have had no bearing on the decision to temporarily close the HMSC attraction to 31st December 2020. NMRN have operated the Ship on behalf of the Department since 2016. NMRN confirmed their decision not to renew this Agreement with the Department on 10th June 2020. As this Agreement expired on 30th June 2020, this did not leave sufficient time for my Department to formulate a new funding model, redraft a new operating agreement or to procure a new operator of the attraction. Additionally, visitor numbers to the attraction to date have been disappointing and this has resulted in substantial operational deficits. Prior to the period of temporary closure, my officials had been working closely with NMRN in order to seek to make the attraction more profitable.

In light of all these factors, I decided to extend the current period of closure of the attraction, caused by the Covid-19 crisis, until 31st December 2020. My Department agreed with NMRN that they would provide the necessary maintenance services for the Ship during the period of temporary closure and that we would meet agreed costs.

We will endeavour to keep this period of temporary closure to a minimum and will use it to examine in detail all options and costs for the future of the attraction, taking into account the need to ensure best value for the use of public money. I remain committed to exploring all options to enable this important heritage attraction to remain in Belfast.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will establish a hardship fund for the newly self-employed.
(AQW 5988/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I and my Executive colleagues are aware of the difficulties faced by those who are recently self-employed who have not been able to receive financial support via the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS). This is affecting many individuals across the United Kingdom. Equally, many of these people in Northern Ireland would not have been eligible to receive a grant from any of the Business Support Schemes established by my Department or to benefit from the business rates relief.

There would be specific challenges in establishing a specific NI scheme for the newly self-employed as access to the national tax database would be required. Agreement would be required from HMRC to either provide data or to validate information.

The Department of Finance has contacted HM Treasury regarding a number of issues of the UK-wide schemes including widening the eligibility criteria of the SEISS. The Treasury responded that there are a number of operational reasons why the scheme is designed in this way and that it would not be possible in their view to broaden the eligibility criteria.

The Executive is also currently considering different measures available to support our economy and to promote our economic recovery. In considering further interventions, it will be for the Executive to collectively determine how funding can be allocated to support economic recovery moving forward.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy to provide (i) an update on the measures her Department will put in place to alleviate the new costs that Northern Ireland businesses will incur as a result of Brexit and the need to implement the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland; (ii) how these measures will address (a) customs administration and tariffs; (b) VAT; (c) excise; and (d) manufactured goods regulation; and (iii) what financial resources she will allocate for them.
(AQW 5995/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The responsibility for implementing the terms of the Protocol lies primarily with the UK Government as many of the requirements – such as those on customs administration and tariffs, VAT, excise and manufactured goods regulation – are reserved matters.

The UK Government made specific financial commitments including their New Decade, New Approach commitment to engage with the Northern Ireland Executive as part of wider work examining funding options to support preparedness for NI business from the consequences of EU Exit. I intend to hold the UK Government to those commitments.

Any measures I take to support business will depend both on what actions UK Government takes and on decisions on how the Protocol is implemented. I cannot finalise support measures until we have clarity on these issues.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy how many times she has engaged with HMRC since January 2020 to request clarity on how Northern Ireland remaining in the UK VAT area but complying with EU rules will work in practice.

(AQW 6007/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: VAT policy is set by Treasury and implemented by HMRC. When appointed as Minister, I asked that my officials liaise closely with counterparts in all relevant Whitehall Departments to seek clarity on the implementation of the Protocol. This includes engaging with Treasury on a number of areas such as Article 8 for VAT and excise to seek clarity on the implementation of the Protocol.

I continue to press the UK government for further details on this issue and also on other aspects of the Protocol. The UK government has made a number of commitments in regard to Northern Ireland and I will continue to hold them to account on these matters.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission whether there was an Assembly vote to establish a Youth Assembly and expend £300,000 thereon.

(AQW 5962/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): Section 40(4) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 ('the 1998 Act') provides the statutory basis for the work of the Assembly Commission. The Assembly Commission is the body corporate of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It has the responsibility, under section 40(4) of the 1998 Act, to "provide the Assembly, or ensure that the Assembly is provided, with the property, staff and services required for the Assembly's purposes". It is clear that those services include steps to increase outreach and public engagement with the Assembly.

Although not a part of the Executive, the Assembly Commission is voted resources by the Assembly through the same Main Estimates and Supplementary Estimates processes that are used for all other entities funded from the Northern Ireland Block Grant.

The Assembly Commission's budget was scrutinised by the Assembly's Audit Committee on 4 March 2020. The Assembly Commission's submission to the Audit Committee set out that staffing resources would be made available to make progress on the establishment of a Youth Assembly in 2020-21. The anticipated cost of the Youth Assembly during 2020-21 is £141k.

The Assembly Commission's budget was subsequently incorporated, without amendment, into the budget for 2020-21 laid by the Executive before the Assembly on 31 March 2020 together with the further detailed information laid by the Executive on 30 April 2020. The budget for 2020-21 was passed by the Assembly in plenary on 5 May 2020 with the inclusion of resources for the establishment of a Youth Assembly.

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission whether it is anticipated that any payments will be made to members of the proposed Youth Assembly.

(AQW 5963/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): There is no proposal to make any remuneration payments to members of the Youth Assembly. There is a commitment to cover reasonable travel and subsistence costs of members of the Youth Assembly associated with participation in its business.

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission how membership of the proposed Youth Assembly will be acquired, both in respect of each constituency and additional members.

(AQW 5964/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The proposals for the Youth Assembly were drawn up after engagement with a wide range of stakeholders in the statutory, public and voluntary and community sectors, taking account of the issues faced by the youth forums which exist in other jurisdictions. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Koulla Yiasouma, was a lead stakeholder in this process.

It is proposed that the Youth Assembly will have 90 members in total, of which 36 seats will be reserved for communities of interest and to meet specific Section 75 categories i.e. religious belief, political opinion, race, age, sexual orientation, gender, disability, and those with dependants (e.g. young carers or young parents). To those categories would be added young people who are looked after and those living in material deprivation.

The remaining 54 members of the Youth Assembly will be recruited from the 18 parliamentary constituencies — three members from each.

There will be further engagement with young people and youth sector organisations before determining the recruitment process. The Children's Commissioner has agreed to join a steering group with the Speaker to oversee this next phase.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 21 August 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Ms Armstrong asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will publish all (i) updated; and (ii) new codes of conduct referenced in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 2017/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Work is continuing to finalise these documents. The Executive Office will publish a new version of the Ministerial Code, incorporating a revised Ministerial Code of Conduct, after the necessary legislative, Executive and Assembly procedures to effect amendment have been completed to reflect the New Decade, New Approach deal, and more recently, the provisions of the Executive Committee (Functions) Bill. The department will also publish final versions of the Guidance for Ministers in the Exercise of their Official Functions and the Guide to the Executive process following review and agreement by the Executive to proposed revisions.

The Department of Finance has already published the Code governing the appointment of Special Advisers and the Code of Conduct for Special Advisers. It will publish the Code of Ethics for the Civil Service following consultation and Executive agreement.

We regret the delay in responding to your question.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what process is in place to monitor the requirement in paragraph 9.5 of the Guidance for Ministers in the Exercise of their Official Responsibilities, that party representatives should not be sent official papers; and with what results.
(AQW 4610/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Ministers are expected to comply with the requirement that party representatives should not be sent official papers, and we do not believe that formal monitoring arrangements are required.

The exception to this requirement which has been agreed by the Executive relates to the Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters which replaced the Brexit sub-committee as envisaged in the New Decade, New Approach. The Terms of Reference for that Committee state:-

Papers and presentations for the Committee should be treated in the same way as all Executive papers, with the following amendment:

in recognition of the political input on Brexit issues and to support consultation at Party level in advance of meetings, papers can be shared outside the Committee to a list of designated Party colleagues which should be notified to the Secretariat. This should however be undertaken within the principles governing the confidentiality of Executive business.

Mr Dickson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action has been taken to bring forward an Age, Goods and Facilities and Services Bill to address age discrimination, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 5034/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Appendix 1 to the "New Decade, New Approach" document supports the possible outline of a Programme for Government including the bringing forward of an Age, Goods and Facilities and Services Bill. This will be subject to the Executive agreeing a final Programme for Government. Officials are considering next steps to advance this matter.

Department for Communities

Mr McCann asked the Minister for Communities what proposals she has to introduce developers contributions.
(AQW 3718/17-22)

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): The member will be aware that the Department for Infrastructure is responsible for the ability for the planning system to secure Developer Contributions as provided by Section 76 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

I recognise the potential role that Developer Contributions could play in increasing supply of affordable (social and intermediate) housing and improving tenure mix. Since the then Department for Social Development commissioned and published a research study in 2015 ('Developer Contributions for Affordable Housing'), the position has changed with the move of planning to Local Councils, and work on Local Development Plans commencing.

That research determined that universal introduction of a single developer contribution scheme here was unlikely to work, however, given the right conditions, there may be certain locations with potential for developer contributions.

On that basis officials engaged with councils to inform their local development planning. As part of this, in partnership with Belfast City Council, my Department commissioned an assessment of the viability of developments within the Belfast district, in particular those which might contribute to affordable housing provision.

I am keen to enable Councils to maximise developer contributions and to use these to increase provision of affordable housing. Further work in this area will be taken forward in collaboration with Executive colleagues and Council officials in the context of the Housing Supply Strategy and I look forward to updating the member in the near future on proposals for future policy in this area.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of (i) successful and (ii) unsuccessful Personal Independent Payment appeals in Mid Ulster, in each year since its introduction.
(AQW 5577/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department does not hold information on the number of appeals received per constituency but holds information on appeal receipts per town (Annex A). My department does not hold information on the number of successful/unsuccessful appeals per town, however the overall number of successful and unsuccessful appeals are also shown at Annex A.

Annex A

Personal Independent Payment Appeal Receipts

Venue	16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	Apr-Jun 2020
Armagh	36	156	96	140	10
Ballymena	68	351	933	271	17
Ballymoney	19	114	132	80	5
Banbridge	27	129	189	107	5
Belfast	533	2,811	3,644	2,218	115
Coleraine	52	288	297	156	11
Cookstown	25	94	125	71	2
Craigavon	73	400	518	363	10
Downpatrick	41	342	471	210	10
Dungannon	49	303	341	214	10
Enniskillen	63	292	339	183	10
Limavady	37	91	73	70	4
Londonderry	163	605	469	336	9
Magherafelt	23	153	167	95	0
Newry	72	391	465	291	12
Newtownards	82	417	464	329	14
Omagh	46	282	306	232	8
Strabane	31	152	157	144	2
Total	1,440	7,371	8,752	5,510	254

Of which

Successful	9*	1,476	3,088	4,183	-**
Unsuccessful	14	1,346	2,082	2,021	-**

*At this time there was a transition from DLA to PIP which was introduced on 20 June 2016.

** For the period April 2020 – June 2020 Appeal hearings were suspended due to COVID-19

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities what percentage of (i) all staff; and (ii) staff at Grade 5 and above, working in her Department have completed anti-racism training; and how often this training is updated.

(AQW 5746/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: NICSHR diversity and inclusion training courses are reviewed and updated periodically. Reviews scheduled for 2020/21 are underway.

In 2017, Unconscious Bias training was introduced to the NICS. Whilst information relating to the percentages of staff is not readily available, I can advise that initial classroom based training was provided to Senior Civil Service (SCS Grade 5 and above) staff, with 25 Department for Communities (DfC) SCS staff completing the training. In July 2017, Unconscious Bias e-learning training was made available to all other staff and rolled out on a mandatory basis for line managers up to Grade 6 level. To date, 4131 DfC staff in grades below SCS level have completed this package.

The Introduction to Section 75 e-learning package was made mandatory in DfC for staff at the Staff Officer grade and above. Since roll out in March 2018, a total of 1055 staff, including 19 SCS members, have completed the training.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities how much funding has been provided in the last three years to (i) Ulster Rugby; (ii) Ulster GAA; (iii) the Irish Football Association; and (iv) the Northern Ireland Football League.

(AQW 5955/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The table below provides a summary of funding provided, up to 31 March 2020, to Ulster Rugby, Ulster GAA and the Irish Football Association. The figures also include funding provided by Sport NI, an arms-length body of the Department. During this time, no funding or support was provided to the NI Football League.

	Ulster Rugby	Gaelic Athletic Association	Irish Football Association
2017/18	£324,391	£1,622,229	£480,195
2018/19	£171,255	£750,878	£88,494
2019/20	£205,643	£707,052	£80,199

In addition, the Sport NI Sports Institute also provided support services to each of the 3 organisations as follows: -

- the IFA receive support in terms of sport science to its senior men's international team, valued at £25,000 per annum;
- the UGAA has received support through work completed on specific shorter term projects valued at £6,000 per annum; and
- Ulster Rugby has received support through work completed on specific shorter term projects valued at £3,000 per annum.

Department of Education

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of whether schools restarting will lead to an increase in COVID-19 clusters and infection rates.

(AQW 6028/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): As schools restart, my Department will continue to liaise with the Public Health Agency and Chief Medical Officer on the wider public health conditions and rates of infection.

I would, however, draw attention to the recent paper prepared by the Children's Task and Finish Group (TFC) and Government Office for Science (GOS), published by SAGE on 24 July. This paper explained that in countries where schools have been open for some time, data suggests that school opening has made little difference to community transmission. This will, however, need to be kept under review locally as well as learning from experience internationally.

I would further highlight that the SAGE paper states that there is relatively low immediate risk to children's health from SARS-CoV-2 (high degree of confidence), with evidence indicating that children/adolescents have lower susceptibility to SARS-CoV-2 infection (low confidence) and clinical disease (high confidence) than adults. Furthermore, there is some (but limited) evidence that children play a lesser role in transmission than adults.

The relaxation of any Covid-19 related restrictions is not without risk. In the same way, the re-opening of schools is not and cannot be risk free. However, I believe that the risks related to a full re-opening can be mitigated, they can be managed and that they need to be balanced against the risks associated with ongoing disruption to children and young people.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to accommodate schools restarting in rural areas.
(AQW 6033/17-22)

Mr Weir: The New School Day guidance published on 13 August is relevant to all schools.

I appreciate that home to school transport will be of particular concern for schools in rural areas. The published guidance contains details of the plans for the resumption of home to school transport on the basis that all eligible pupils, including those in rural areas, will be able to access safe and effective home to school transport in the new school year.

Further operational information in relation to the arrangements for home to school transport is also available on the Education Authority website.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of whether the standardisation process used by CCEA was fundamentally flawed and has no place in a fair education system.
(AQW 6050/17-22)

Mr Weir: As is the case each year, standardisation processes are an essential tool used by CCEA in its efforts to ensure a fair awarding process for examinations. The unprecedented circumstances in 2020 necessitated the development of processes, inclusive of standardisation, that would assist the delivery of grades for GCSE, AS level and A level following the cancellation of examinations.

I directed CCEA to review all AS and A-level awards issued on 13 August and issue a fresh set of results that were based on the higher of the original standardised grade or the teacher assessed grade. Those that received standardised grades that are higher than the centre-assessed grades will retain the higher award. While I believe that that was the correct thing to do in the current circumstances, I recognise that there is still an importance to using standardisation and comparability of grades across centres.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education what preparations he has made for the Transfer Test in the context where COVID-19 restrictions remain in place and in-person examinations cannot be conducted.
(AQW 6054/17-22)

Mr Weir: Arrangements for the transfer tests are a matter for the test providers and those schools that use the tests results as part of their admissions criteria. The tests are a private arrangement between schools and the providers and any decision regarding their organisation and timing are not the responsibility of my Department.

Should the tests be impacted because of wider public health concerns in the autumn, it will be a matter for individual Board of Governors in those schools that use the scores from the tests in their admissions criteria to decide what alternative criteria they may wish to use.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education how he intends to ensure that the recent events around exam grading do not happen again.
(AQW 6060/17-22)

Mr Weir: My officials have been working with CCEA on the development of proposals for the summer 2021 examinations series. This work has been reassessed in light of recent events and CCEA will be publishing proposals for public consultation in the coming days.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of deferred entry for university places.
(AQW 6075/17-22)

Mr Weir: The decision to defer entry to university is a matter for the individual student, taking account of their own personal circumstances. Decisions to defer university entry already occur each year. The Department for the Economy is responsible for students accessing higher education.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education what representation he has made to the Minister for the Economy regarding increased student places and the lifting of the maximum student numbers (MaSN) cap.
(AQW 6086/17-22)

Mr Weir: I appreciate the points that have been raised about maximum student numbers, particularly this year. I will discuss this issue with the Minister for the Economy and indeed it will need to be considered by the Executive. It is important that the Executive works together to address the extra burdens placed upon all further and higher education providers this year resulting from COVID-19.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of whether the level of consultation with teachers and principals regarding school restarting has been sufficient.
(AQW 6091/17-22)

Mr Weir: To support the development of the New School Day guidance my Department established a Practitioners' Group which includes twenty principals from pre-school settings (statutory and non-statutory), primary schools, post-primary schools and special schools. These principals represented a range of different school types from across Northern Ireland.

The guidance published as a planning framework on 19 June and the subsequent revision published on 13 August was co-designed and co-drafted with a cross section of practitioners. Their insight has been invaluable and their willingness to work at such intensity above and beyond their 'day job' should be commended. Principals from local boarding schools were also engaged with on specific issues relating to pupils who board.

Furthermore, the Practitioners' group has supported many other areas of work linked to the wider Education Restart Programme.

Given the need for pace in delivery and the wider public health position a wider consultation process was not practical or possible. Timeliness of the guidance was key to support planning. I am content that the engagement and co-design process with Principals was sufficient.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Education what support he intends to provide for young people who are struggling with poor mental health as a result of the stress caused by difficulties over grading.

(AQW 6097/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) provides a range of support services for Children and Young People. The EA has advised that under the new contract for the provision of an Independent Counselling Service for Schools, which came in to being on 1 September 2019, young people can access counselling support during the first and last two weeks of the summer break and this would be available to Year 14s if they requested it. Counselling has been available in post primary mainstream and special schools since Monday 17 August 2020. To date there has been no significant demand on the counselling service and there are currently no waiting lists.

The EA also has a range of wellbeing resources for young people on the Education Restart pages of its website: <https://www.eani.org.uk/information-for-children-and-young-people>. These resources are also available to schools via an online portal specifically designed for schools.

Furthermore, EA Youth Services also provide a range of services which can be accessed via the youth online website: www.youthonline.org.uk.

Department of Health

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health how many of the extra 900 undergraduate places in nursing and midwifery, outlined in New Decade, New Approach, will be specifically for midwifery.

(AQW 1591/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The commitment under New Decade, New Approach is to provide 900 additional training places over three years; that is 300 per year.

My Department has commissioned an additional 25 places for the 2020/21 academic year from the Direct Entry Midwifery course provided by Queen's University.

Commissioning for 2021/22 and 2022/23 has not yet been confirmed.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to outline the list of recommendations, arising from the Home Truths investigation into Dunmurry Manor, that his Department (i) has implemented; (ii) has not yet implemented but intends to implement; and (iii) does not intend to implement, with the reasons for any delays or decisions not to implement.

(AQW 1886/17-22)

Mr Swann: THE COPNI report entitled 'Home Truths: A Report on the Commissioner's Investigation into Dunmurry Manor Care Home' listed 59 recommendations.

- (i) Seven of these recommendations have been implemented and no further action is required by the HSC.
- (ii) Four of the recommendations are specifically addressed to Runwood Homes.
- (iii) The remaining recommendations were either accepted by the Department in the absence of Ministers and are in the process of being implemented or required either legislation or policy changes and therefore could not be agreed in the absence of Ministers. These are currently being considered.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to remove any differentiation in arrangements for giving blood between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

(AQW 2750/17-22)

Mr Swann: In July 2017 the committee on the Safety of Blood, Organs and Tissues (SaBTO) published the Donor Selection Criteria Report which made recommendations on blood donor deferral rules. I considered and decided to adopt SaBTO's recommendations in February 2020 bringing Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK where the changes were implemented in November 2017. I announced the changes on 29 April 2020 and the new policy took effect from 1 June 2020. The press release can be accessed via the link below.

(www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/rules-blood-donation-set-change)

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health to list the meetings of the Disability Consultation Panel, established by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, over the last five years; and to outline the reasons for any interruption or cessation of this programme of outreach.

(AQW 2761/17-22)

Mr Swann: Details of when the Northern HSC Trust's Disability Consultation Panel has met over the past five years are provided in the table below. There has been no interruption or cessation of this valuable programme of work.

2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
23 March	7 March	6 March	9 April	1 April	24 February
15 June	6 June	7 August	4 June	3 June	22 June by Zoom
28 September	26 September		22 October	October meeting postponed	
7 December	5 December	4 December	10 December		

The meeting scheduled for October 2019 was postponed due to the high number of apologies received. The next meeting is scheduled for 25 August 2020.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health what assurances he can give that hospital staff and visitors are following the correct handwashing or hand cleansing protocols in order to minimise the spread of infection.

(AQW 3014/17-22)

Mr Swann: One of the two key public health messages in relation to COVID-19 is to practise good hand hygiene. Healthcare and social care settings are prominently displaying reminders and advice on effective handwashing. Hand sanitisers are readily available in all patient care settings for members of the public to use.

Infection prevention and control are integral elements of care within our health service. I have every confidence that the commitment and professional expertise of our Health and Social Care staff will continue to keep infections to a minimum. At this time no-one is more aware than they are of the importance of good hand hygiene.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Health whether any provision has been put in place to monitor the well-being of people who are living rough on the street or in hostel accommodation during the current coronavirus outbreak.

(AQW 3262/17-22)

Mr Swann: Protecting the health and wellbeing of homeless people in our society is a cross-government issue. The Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) have statutory responsibility for homelessness and contractual arrangements with Homeless Sector Organisations.

The Health and Social Care Board has worked with NIHE, in its coronavirus contingency planning forums, to ensure that the health and social care needs of homeless people are considered.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health what contingency plans he has put in place to manage an outbreak of coronavirus on domiciliary care workers.

(AQW 3335/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department continues to work collaboratively with the HSC Board, HSC Trusts and domiciliary care providers to ensure safe, continuing care during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Guidance for domiciliary care providers, including access to testing, was published on 9 April and has since been reviewed and updated as necessary. The guidance is available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/COVID-19-guidance-for-domiciliary-care.pdf>

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health what guidance his Department has provided to homeless sector organisations on coronavirus, including on self-isolation for homeless people and access to wash facilities.

(AQW 3376/17-22)

Mr Swann: Protecting the health and wellbeing of homeless people in our society is a cross-government issue. The Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) have statutory responsibility for homelessness and contractual arrangements with Homeless Sector Organisations.

The Health and Social Care Board has directed NIHE, in its coronavirus contingency planning forums, to ensure that the health and social care needs of homeless people are considered.

Guidance for homeless providers in Northern Ireland was recently developed in consultation with the Department for Communities and published on the Department's website on 20 March.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to introduce and staff additional intensive care unit beds to deal with the impact of coronavirus.

(AQW 3420/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department published the 'Health and Social Care (NI) Summary Covid-19 Plan for the Period Mid-March to Mid-April 2020' on the 19 March 2020 providing information on the above questions. Further updates will be published in due course.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health, in light of the British Secretary of State's comments that his Government stands ready to provide support to the Department of Health in order to commission abortion services, in line with the new abortion legislative framework and regulations, and the responsibility on the Department of Health to commission these services, (i) what steps his Department has taken to commission abortion services across all Health and Social Care Trusts that are compliant with the abortion regulations, and which go beyond interim provision which has been provided during the COVID-19 pandemic; and (ii) to outline his Department's intention in this regard and the timetable for implementation of long-term abortion provision and services compliant with the abortion regulations.

(AQW 4345/17-22)

Mr Swann: What services might be commissioned will be considered in consultation with Executive colleagues.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health how he is going to include Myalgic Encephalomyelitis in the Review of Existing Care Pathways, as referenced in the Rebuilding HSC - Services Strategic Framework (s. 5.2), when there is no Clinical Lead for the condition in post; and how he will ensure that the voice of the 8000 people living with the condition in Northern Ireland is fed into this process.

(AQW 4905/17-22)

Mr Swann: You will be aware that my Department has been taking forward the Regional Review of Neurology Services, and is working closely with the NI Neurological Charities Alliance, which includes the charity ME Support NI. While the work of the Review was paused in response to COVID-19, I will look for an early opportunity to restart this work within the process outlined in the Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services Service Framework published earlier this month

In addition, the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has confirmed that it is progressing the recruitment of a medical lead for Myalgic Encephalomyelitis for Northern Ireland and an appointment is expected in the next few months. It will be a priority for the appointee to consult with patients and their carers, as well as with other health and social care staff in secondary, primary and community care involved in delivering their care, on the development of care pathways.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health how much money his Department has spent to promote parental, maternal and infant mental health, in the last ten years.

(AQW 5343/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below details the total spend by the Public Health Agency promoting parental, maternal and infant mental health between 2014 and 2020. There were no commissioned programmes prior to this period. The total spend on Family Nurse Partnership is detailed from 2010 to 2020.

Investment	Total Investment (£k)
Perinatal Mental Health	173
Social Complexity in Parenting Programme	201
Solihull Foundation Training	131
Video Interaction Guidance	23
CAPPNI –M7 & M9 Courses	243
Early Intervention Transformation Programme - Getting Ready for Baby & Getting Ready for Toddler	4000
Early Intervention Transformation Programme - Early Intervention Support Service	4085
Mood Matters	127
National Children's Bureau Research & Development	451

Investment	Total Investment (£k)
Family Nurse Partnership	11,700
TOTAL	£21,134k

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to outline the reasons that the draft regulations for fostering, drafted in 2015/16, have not been brought forward to become law.

(AQW 5348/17-22)

Mr Swann: In 2014, the Department consulted on proposals to consolidate and update the 1996 Fostering Regulations. Following consultation, new regulations were drafted and tabled on 9 March 2016 for scrutiny by the [then] HPSS Committee. However, as a result of insufficient time to consider the regulations in detail, the Committee Chair advised that they should be brought back to the Committee in the following mandate. The former Health Minister was considering the draft Regulations when the Assembly was dissolved in 2017. Given the significant passage of time, a further targeted consultation on the draft Regulations will be undertaken. It is expected that the consultation will be completed by December 2020, following which they will be brought back to the Health Committee for scrutiny.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health when fertility treatment will recommence in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 5517/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Regional Fertility Centre (RFC) in Belfast offers a regional service with the full range of fertility treatments. A small range of fertility services is also offered at Craigavon Area Hospital (CAH) in the Southern Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust.

I launched the Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services on 9 June 2020 and Phase 2 Rebuilding Plans, which cover the period July to September, on 10 July.

The focus is on re-starting urgent services first; however, I made it clear that I consider the re-instatement of fertility services to be a priority and I am pleased to advise that services at the RFC restarted on a phased basis on 10 August.

The Southern HSC Trust has confirmed that the fertility service in CAH recommenced on a phased basis on 20 July.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, following the Prime Minister's recent decision to exempt travellers from certain countries from the 14 day quarantine period, whether he plans to extend these exemptions to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 5541/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Executive agreed on 9 July 2020 that Northern Ireland would introduce exemptions from self-isolation for travellers from certain countries from 10 July 2020. The link below contains the most up to date list of country exemptions.

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-countries-and-territories-exemptions>

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of Accident and Emergency attendances at Altnagelvin hospital, in each of the last six months.

(AQW 5563/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is assumed that this question refers to the number of new and unplanned review attendances at Altnagelvin emergency department (ED). Information on the number of monthly attendances at EDs is published on a quarterly basis and available to view or download from:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hs-niwts-ecwt-data-q1-20-21.html>

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health to outline the reasons for the continued closure of urgent and emergency services at Downe Hospital.

(AQW 5566/17-22)

Mr Swann: Part of COVID-19 surge planning inevitably involved the temporary reconfiguration of services, including the Emergency Department (ED) at Downe Hospital, in order to ensure continuity of provision of essential healthcare services for the duration of the pandemic, to protect patients, and to free up stretched health and social care resources. The task of rebuilding services, under the Strategic Framework I published on 9 June 2020, must continue to be balanced against the need to maintain capacity across health and social care to deal with the ongoing and very real threat of COVID-19 transmission. Trusts' Phase 2 Rebuilding Plans were published on 10 July to further increase HSC service capacity as quickly as possible across all programmes of care, within the prevailing COVID-19 conditions.

I am happy to confirm that the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has now confirmed that the planned date for re-opening the Downe ED is Monday 19 October 2020.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what further steps he will take to raise awareness of the symptoms of endometriosis.

(AQW 5603/17-22)

Mr Swann: In October 2017, the Department endorsed National Institute for Health and Care Excellence clinical guideline NG73 on the treatment and diagnosis of endometriosis. The target groups include healthcare professionals and, as well as covering diagnosing and managing endometriosis, the guideline aims to raise awareness of the symptoms of the condition and to provide clear advice on what action to take when women with signs and symptoms first present in healthcare settings. It also provides advice on the range of treatments available.

As endometriosis is a not uncommon gynaecological disorder, all GPs would have had learning/education on the condition, both at undergraduate level and also, in many cases, in the course of their post-graduate hospital attachments. A popular and easy to access avenue for GP training has been provided through the Extension for Community Healthcare (ECHO) project. ECHO is now an integral part of GP specialty training in Northern Ireland. For example, there were a number of modules within the 2018/19 programme which focussed on gynaecological/sexual health and there was a dedicated session which specifically addressed the issue of Endometriosis.

In addition, endometriosis specialist nurses have been appointed in the Belfast and Western Trusts. The Western Trust is already an accredited BSGE (British Society of Gynaecological Endoscopy) endometriosis centre and the Belfast Trust is expected to become an accredited centre in the near future.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health (i) whether operating theatres are currently open; (ii) what the current waiting time is for a theatre bed; and (iii) what the time scale is for urgent referrals to the pain clinic in South Tyrone hospital.

(AQW 5672/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Southern HSC Trust has advised that South Tyrone Hospital theatres are currently open, but are operating at reduced capacity due to COVID-19 social distancing restrictions and theatre staffing availability.

As at 10 August 2020 the waiting time for a theatre bed in South Tyrone Hospital for day case urgent surgery is as follows:

Specialty	South Tyrone Hospital Urgent longest wait
GI Endoscopy	90 weeks
Chronic Pain Clinic	68 weeks
Ear Nose Throat (ENT)	29 weeks
General Surgery	96 weeks
Orthopaedic	130 weeks
Gynaecological	14 weeks

Prior to COVID-19 restrictions, the Southern HSC Trust provided three pain sessions per week. As part of the Southern Trust's Phase 2 rebuild plans (published on 10 July 2020 under the Strategic Framework I published on 9 June 2020), one weekly session has been re-introduced since 9 July 2020, with approximately 5-6 patient slots per list. The Trust aims to increase this to two sessions per week by September. As at 10 August the longest waiting time for urgent outpatient referrals to the pain clinic in South Tyrone Hospital is 30 weeks.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health what additional support his Department is providing to dental practices during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure they can (i) adequately meet the financial cost associated with the procurement of additional personal protective equipment and reduced patient capacity; and (ii) obtain the required personal protective equipment.

(AQW 5742/17-22)

Mr Swann: Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic the Department of Health has provided significant financial support to dentists, primarily through the Financial Support Scheme (FSS). There have been 4 months of FSS payments made to date between April and July 2020. The total level of FSS and net Item of Service payments made over this period is just under £20 million (£16 million FSS) which represents a 23% increase compared with the net IoS payments made over this period in 2019-20.

At the end of June I agreed that dentists should be provided with Level 1 Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to assist them during the phased re-establishment of General Dental Services (GDS). Approximately £1m worth of Level 1 PPE has been procured and is being distributed to individual dental practices; equating to approximately £2,600 of PPE per practice.

I have recently approved the allocation of an additional £3.8 million in funding to assist General Dental Practitioners (GDP) in the purchasing of the Level 2 PPE necessary to undertake Aerosol Generation Procedures (AGPs).

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when the contact tracing data published by the Public Health Agency will contain more localised information, for example by council area or postcode.

(AQW 5780/17-22)

Mr Swann: The latest information on the number of positive tests reports to the Contact Tracing Service (CTS), is published weekly on the Public Health Agency (PHA) website - <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/contact-tracing-service-management-information>.

PHA does not comment on individual cases of COVID-19 or provide the detail of every incident that emerges, as this could lead to people being identified, create stigma, and focus attention on individuals, families or groups, and could therefore deter others with symptoms from coming forward to be tested and from complying with advice relating to self-isolation.

PHA plans to publish regular updates on regional cluster activity, reporting on larger clusters (greater than 5) by Local Authority area on a weekly basis, as outlined in their recent press release - <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/news/pha-cluster-assessment-shows-cases-both-workplace-and-community-settings>.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to develop a new Oral Health Strategy to replace the outdated 2007 strategy.

(AQW 5805/17-22)

Mr Swann: Prior to the Covid 19 pandemic my Department decided that the two sections of the Northern Ireland population that would benefit most from updated oral disease prevention programs were children and the elderly. Unfortunately, the pandemic has delayed the establishment of two planned working groups, one for children's oral health and one for elderly oral health. These will be convened at the earliest opportunity.

It is anticipated that the two groups will be relatively small in size yet will contain a broad range of experience and all the necessary expertise to produce reports that will guide not just the health service but a broad range of stakeholders in what they can do to prevent oral disease, reduce health inequalities and ultimately improve quality of life.

The intention is for each group to establish the oral health needs of children and the elderly in Northern Ireland and review the evidence-base to determine which preventive interventions are likely to be most effective and cost-effective. Key aspects of the approach to be adopted are that the work is undertaken quickly and the findings communicated promptly to all relevant stakeholders.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 5021/17-22, to provide details of the recent update provided by the Director of Transformation to the Unison representative on the Transformation Advisory Board.

(AQW 5808/17-22)

Mr Swann: The update took place via Zoom on Tuesday, 9 June.

During this update the Director of Transformation provided detail on the funding position for Transformation in 20/21 and its support for existing Transformation posts.

She also provided an update on the ongoing work to progress the Strategic Framework for Rebuilding, and an update on the position of multi-disciplinary teams in Primary Care.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, in the event of a no deal on the negotiations on the future relationship with the European Union, what steps he has taken to ensure that vital supplies of medicines and treatments are not interrupted.

(AQW 5835/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department's priority is to maintain the ongoing supply of medicines and treatments to the people of Northern Ireland following the end of the Transition Period in January 2021. Overall responsibility for the continuity of supply of medicines to the whole of the UK rests with the Department of Health and Social Care, however my officials do work closely with the other UK Administrations to ensure that Northern Ireland's interests are protected and that our people continue to have access to the medicines and treatments they need under all scenarios as part of a UK-wide medicines supply contingency programme.

Building on the learning and experiences from previous medicines supply contingency planning arrangements during 2019, on 3rd August 2020 the UK Government set out its plan and requests of the pharmaceutical industry and wider medicines supply chain ahead of the end of the Transition Period to help ensure the continuity of supply of medical goods into and out of the UK. A multi-layered approach is being adopted, with suppliers asked to put in place flexible mitigation and readiness plans in preparation for new border and customs procedures. These measures include plans for re-routing away from the Channel short straits, supporting trader readiness for new customs and border arrangements, and ensuring that additional buffer stocks are available within the UK where possible.

Medicines shortages can and do sometimes occur for a variety of reasons unrelated to exiting the EU, and Northern Ireland already has well-established procedures to deal with medicine shortages if they do occur to mitigate and minimise risk to patients. My Department has worked together with the HSC to further strengthen existing arrangements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic over recent months, and my officials are currently working with the other UK Administrations on steps to secure additional supplies of a range of critical medicines as a further mitigation against supply disruption in preparation for a potential second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the coming months.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of the cost of providing private ambulance cover in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust over the past 12 months.

(AQW 5841/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service has advised that the requested information is not available.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to widen the groups of people eligible for the flu vaccine this year; and to whom and how will it be distributed.

(AQW 5854/17-22)

Mr Swann: The 2020/21 seasonal flu vaccination programme will be extended to:

- Household contacts of those who received shielding letters during the Covid-19 pandemic;
- Staff in independent care and nursing homes; and
- Children in school year 8.

Subject to vaccine availability, which is partly dependent on uptake rates amongst new and existing eligible groups, the programme may be further expanded later in the year to include those in the 50-64 year old age group, starting with the oldest first.

The vaccine will be available through the schools programme, through Trust vaccination schemes for staff, and from GPs. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the flu vaccination arrangements in GP practices may need to be slightly different to take account of enhanced infection control and social distancing requirements. It will be up to individual practices to decide how best to offer the vaccine to their patients.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 5168/17-22, whether the Health and Social Care Trusts have completed their review into the contractual obligations of the fit testing company; and what actions are being taken as a result.

(AQW 5865/17-22)

Mr Swann: All our Health & Social Care Trusts (HSCTs) put in place additional monitoring arrangements to ensure all fit-testing is carried out in line with HSE standard. The independent contractor involved and a number of other companies carried out a re-fit testing programme to retest those staff affected by the fitment issue at no extra cost. The Public Health Agency (PHA) agreed to undertake a regional Serious Adverse Incident review into this episode, which is currently ongoing.

In addition, a regional fit testing group was convened, and issued a learning letter to all HSCTs requiring a number of actions to be taken and to requiring assurance around the fit testing process. Consequently, all HSCTs have reviewed or are reviewing their contractual obligations of the fit testing contractor in question as follows:

- BHST has provided assurance that all required actions have been taken and that the Trust will continue to use the company as a provider for fit testing services.
- NIAS does not hold a current contract with a fit testing company. NIAS has a fit testing programme delivered by internal staff who have undergone training delivered by an independent fit test company and covers the Competent Fit Test Operator.
- NHST has had detailed engagement with the fit testing company to review the issues identified and agree immediate actions to:
 - Identify staff who required re-fit and to arrange re-fit, at no additional cost to the Trust; and
 - Agree amended exchange of information to ensure Certificates are provided and captured on the Trust Database;

The Trust is also reviewing internal arrangements for Fit Test provision in the medium and longer term.

- SEHST has worked closely with the fit testing company to put in place immediate arrangements to re-fit staff against appropriate masks, aligned to the UK standard. This corrective action was at no additional cost to the Trust.
- SHST has completed a review of their contractual obligations with this fit testing company. The SHST no longer uses this company to carry out fit testing. Refit testing was carried out by internal fit testers and another fit testing company to allow this to be completed as quickly as possible. The company who initially carried out the fit testing have been approached to provide a credit note to cover the costs incurred by the SHST (approximately £1,000).
- WHST has advised that the Trust is currently considering its position in relation to the contractual obligations of this supplier.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what share of eligible people are currently receiving cardiac rehabilitation.

(AQW 5886/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care Board has advised that the information is not available in the format requested.

However, it has advised that the majority of eligible patients for cardiac rehabilitation (CR) are normally assessed and educated by the CR specialist nurses in hospital following their acute event. Patients should then be reviewed again within 10 days of discharge and offered a structured education and exercise programme, either in the hospital or community setting.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health what advice he has received on whether the quarantine requirement for travellers returning from Spain should be extended to cover household members who have not travelled but who are potentially exposed to COVID-19 on the return of the traveller.

(AQW 5924/17-22)

Mr Swann: On the 25th July, I took the decision to introduce a quarantine period for anyone arriving from Spain to self-isolate for 14 days following medical and scientific advice. Members of a returning traveller's household will not be required to self-isolate if they have not travelled outside of the UK, unless they develop symptoms.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health to outline the current capacity for daily testing of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 5936/17-22)

Mr Swann: Pillar 1 testing is delivered via Health and Social Care laboratories and laboratories operating as part of the Scientific Advisory Consortium. Current capacity in this testing stream is up to 2,200 tests per day. It is anticipated that Pillar 1 testing capacity will increase further over the coming weeks. Anticipated capacity under Pillar 1 is subject to the availability of reagents, global supply chains and for some laboratories the allocation of ROCHE testing kits which are currently on a national allocation.

Pillar 2 testing is delivered through our participation in the National Testing Programme, as established by DHSC, London. Testing capacity under Pillar 2 is flexible and is informed by the number of bookings made on the programme's digital platform in the preceding 48 hours. The overall testing capacity available through Pillar 2 is up to 6,500 tests per day when operating at full capacity and depending on demand. If demand for testing increases, as recorded on the digital platform, testing capacity can be extended to meet the demand.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 5336/17-22, how regularly staff are tested for COVID-19.

(AQW 5938/17-22)

Mr Swann: To date staff working in the fixed Covid-19 testing sites across Northern Ireland as part of the national testing partnership have not been routinely tested. This is in keeping with the protocol in NI to only test symptomatic individuals. Should any staff member develop symptoms they will be advised to self-isolate and to arrange to be tested.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health what percentage of face masks purchased are clear masks enabling staff faces and mouths to be visible; (ii) who is the supplier of these face masks; (iii) how they will be distributed; and (iv) whether there is a priority in place for the type of staff issued with clear masks.

(AQW 5942/17-22)

Mr Swann: To date clear face masks have not been purchased for Northern Ireland's health and social care system. Work is being undertaken with physical and sensory disability teams across the HSC in NI and part of this work will be to ensure there is appropriate PPE provision for these priority areas going forward. There are procurement mechanisms in place through the PPE dynamic purchasing system, for purchase of transparent masks and as an interim measure NI will benefit from a UK national order for clear face masks.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether the STOPCOVID-19 contact tracing app will be available in (i) the Irish language; (ii) EU26 languages; and (iii) other minority languages.

(AQW 5975/17-22)

Mr Swann: The provision of the proximity app in other languages to address perceived deficiencies in public health contacts with minority communities may be a feature of later versions. No decision has yet been made.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail his Department's investment in the schools vaccination programme for the academic year 2020/21, broken down by level of investment for each vaccination programme for 2019/20 and 2020/21.

(AQW 5977/17-22)

Mr Swann: The vaccination programmes for schools incorporate the seasonal flu vaccine, the HPV vaccine, the school leaver booster and the Men ACWY vaccine. In addition, the MMR vaccine is also offered to pupils in year 11 and 12 who have missed one or both of the doses normally given while children are aged between 1 and 4 years of age.

Some of the vaccine costs are commercial-in-confidence and therefore cannot be broken down into their individual programmes. However, the overall annual cost, based on the normal uptake rates achieved in schools, is approximately £5,870,000. This covers both the cost of the vaccine and the cost of administering the vaccines.

As you will be aware the seasonal flu programme is to be expanded during the 2020/21 flu season to include all children in Year 8. The additional cost of vaccinating this age group is estimated at £400,000.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will have legal authority to decide on regionally significant planning applications once Royal Assent is received for the Executive Committee (Functions) Bill.

(AQW 6085/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I am satisfied that once the Executive Committee (Functions) Bill is granted Royal Assent and comes into effect that I may lawfully take planning decisions on regionally significant planning applications.

Department for the Economy

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy when there will be an announcement for air bridges being created between Northern Ireland and the rest of Europe, which has been announced in England.

(AQW 5520/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): The Executive agreed on 9 July 2020 that Northern Ireland would introduce exemptions from self-isolation for travellers from certain countries from 10 July 2020. The link below contains the most up to date list of country exemptions.

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-countries-and-territories-exemptions>

Mr Frew asked the Minister for the Economy when she will be making any decisions as to arrangements for travel to other jurisdictions, similar to the arrangements in place in England.

(AQW 5612/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Executive agreed on 9 July 2020 that Northern Ireland would introduce exemptions from self-isolation for travellers from certain countries in line with England from 10 July 2020. The link below contains the most up to date list of country exemptions.

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-countries-and-territories-exemptions>

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 28 August 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Carroll asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will restore funding for Black, Asian and minority ethnic-led groups that has been withdrawn over previous years.
(AQW 4724/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Funding specifically for minority ethnic and local community organisations to promote good relations between people of different ethnic backgrounds is provided through the Minority Ethnic Development Fund (MEDF). Funding under the MEDF has increased in recent financial years, with an annual budget of around £1.2m. This has enabled the Department to fund additional groups.

MEDF funding operates on a competitive basis. Successful applications contribute to the achievement of the objectives in the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) to detail the level of investment planned for forest parks; and (ii) how he intends to market the facilities as visitor and tourist attractions.
(AQW 4976/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I am pleased see the positive out-workings of effective partnerships between Forest Service and local Councils which has enabled many new and improved visitor facilities at our Forest Parks in recent years. These partnerships are progressing well developed projects with investments of £3.2 million planned for in this financial year. This includes funding of £1.9 million by this Department through its Targeting Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) programme. The investments are aimed at enhancing forest recreation infrastructure which will contribute to regional tourism, provide greater outdoor recreation opportunities and health and well-being benefits for local people.

The Forest Parks are already widely recognised and promoted as visitor and tourist attractions, to which some 4.7 million visits take place annually. Forest Service are working with local authorities and Tourism NI to ensure that the forests, with new investments, are marketed as key attractions within overall tourist destination areas.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the cost associated with fly-tipping removal for the year 2019/20, broken down by local council area.
(AQW 5026/17-22)

Mr Poots: The majority of small-scale unauthorised waste deposits that would routinely be regarded as 'fly tipping' are dealt with by local Councils, and my Department does not maintain details of their expenditure. The cost of clean-up, for which my Department has taken responsibility, during the 2019/20 financial year, is set out below by Council area.

Council area	Costs for 2019/20 (£)
Antrim and Newtownabbey	0.00
Ards and North Down	10,605.00
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	28,231.60
Belfast	7,735.00
Causeway Coast and Glens	14,383.35
Derry and Strabane	14,567.40

Council area	Costs for 2019/20 (£)
Fermanagh and Omagh	34,274.00
Lisburn and Castlereagh	8,398.10
Mid and East Antrim	7,191.90
Mid Ulster	18,160.05
Newry, Mourne and Down	43,113.68

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has approached the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to ask him to include a sunset clause in the Environment Bill.

(AQW 5046/17-22)

Mr Poots: In conjunction with existing environmental legislation, the provisions of the Environment Bill provide a sound basis for effective environmental protection and improvement in Northern Ireland. If this proves insufficient the Assembly is at liberty to amend the legislation in the future. Consequently, I have not approached the Secretary of State on this matter.

I will be happy to consider alternative proposals in the future but for now my focus is on ensuring that environmental governance gaps are minimised at the end of the transition period through the Bill.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what is the impact of the departmental reprioritisation of £3.1 million in the June monitoring round on his Department's plans and preparation for climate change.

(AQW 5047/17-22)

Mr Poots: As part of the 2020-21 June Monitoring Round, my Department declared £1.5m of the Climate Change Capital budget and reallocated £1.6m Resource primarily intended for additional staff to funding COVID-19 priorities. The £1.5m included £1.0m for the development of an ICT platform to support Climate Change and £0.5m for Research and Development. These budgets were allocated in late March at the time the COVID-19 pandemic was developing. Plans for Climate Change had not had a chance to be fully developed and required additional staff which cannot now be recruited in a timely manner due to the pandemic. Consequently, my Department has not been able to proceed as originally anticipated. I will of course keep this matter under review as the year progresses.

Although the £3.1m funding was declared as a reduced requirement and reallocated to COVID-19 priorities, my Department will still take forward tackling plastic pollution to support the UK Plastics Pact and establishing a grants panel for future capital funding to tackle marine litter. DAERA will also continue to carry out its duties to meet the requirements of the UK Climate Change Act 2008, which will include actions to adapt to a changing climate and reduce emissions to sectors for which my Department has responsibility, for example, in agriculture, land use change, forestry, and waste sectors. DAERA continues to fund Climate NI to increase adaptation awareness and action in the Non-Government Sectors and is also exploring how the Climate NI platform could be used to provide Climate Change Mitigation advice and guidance to Non-Government sectors including Local Government.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what provision is being made to assist potato growers and processors who supplied the hospitality sector and, in consequence of COVID-19, are under severe financial pressure.

(AQW 5224/17-22)

Mr Poots: Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic I and my officials have been in regular contact with industry representatives and stakeholders and I am aware of the impact that the loss of business from the hospitality and food service sectors is having on the market for processing potatoes.

On 30 June I announced that £21.4m from the £25m COVID-19 support package would be directed towards businesses in the beef, dairy, sheep, potato and ornamental horticulture sectors that have been hardest hit financially as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The level of losses within the potato sector for growers who specialise in supplying the food service and hospitality industry with processing potatoes has been assessed and evidence demonstrates a loss to the sector requires an intervention of £1.2 – £1.6m.

I am aware that growers are eligible for the Self Employment Income Support Scheme (up to £7.5k per person) to compensate for loss in profits, and some have taken out the Bounce Back Loan Scheme to reduce costs of capital or fund this year's growing costs. On that basis some support has already been made available, I am making a further contribution to eligible growers that will compensate for 80% of their losses.

It is a priority for my Department to work towards having this funding distributed as quickly as possible so that growers impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic can use this funding to address cash flow issues. Further details of the application process and the distribution of this funding will be made available in the coming days and can be accessed on the DAERA website www.daera-ni.gov.uk

Potato processors have been eligible for a range of other Government COVID-19 support schemes and details of such support measures for businesses can be found on the NI Business Info website www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk. These details are updated and added to on a regular basis.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for an update on the £25 million support package for farmers; and (ii) to detail the amount of that funding that will go to farmers in East Derry.
(AQW 5327/17-22)

Mr Poots: The £25m COVID-19 support package announced by the NI Executive on the 19th May is the most comprehensive allocation made by any UK or EU administration for the agriculture and horticulture sectors during the Coronavirus emergency. Since it was announced, I have consulted with numerous industry representatives and stakeholders, who have provided their analysis of the impacts of the pandemic and their proposals for allocation of the £25m.

During those discussions, there was a clear acceptance of the need for support to be targeted at those sectors hardest hit financially as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On 30 June I announced that £21.4m from the £25m COVID-19 support package would be directed towards businesses in the beef, dairy, sheep, potato and ornamental horticulture sectors. The funding will be available to those that meet the scheme criteria irrespective of their business size or location and it will be available to both full-time and part-time farmers/growers.

It is a priority for my Department to work toward having this funding distributed as quickly as possible so that farmers impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic can use this funding to address cash flow issues. DAERA will contact eligible farmers based on information held by the Department and invite them to apply. At this stage it is too early to indicate the geographic location of eligible farmers. Further details of the application process will be made available over the coming weeks. These details can be accessed on the DAERA website www.daera-ni.gov.uk

To ensure the funding is administered fairly and equitably my Department is committed to discharge its Section 75 obligations and in line with DAERA's Equality Scheme, an equality and human rights screening exercise will be completed as part of the policy to distribute this support package.

We cannot rule out the possibility of further market disturbance as a result of this pandemic and the need for farmer support. For that reason, I will retain a budget of just over £7m based on the residual funding of £3.6m (from the £25m) and the £3.6m that was reprioritised internally. This will allow me to address additional issues and challenges Covid-19 that may present in the weeks ahead.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what support has been offered to food processing and packing facilities in respect of COVID-19 personal protection equipment protocol and assessments.
(AQW 5379/17-22)

Mr Poots: Thank you for your question in relation to those DAERA supportive measures that have been offered to food processing and packing facilities in respect of COVID-19 personal protection equipment (PPE) and assessments.

Firstly, I would like to express my thanks for your recognition and concern for those working in the Agri – Food Industry during these challenging times.

It is worth noting that my Department's scope of responsibility extends to the meat processing sector, and that the responsibility for processing and packaging of other food-stuffs lies primarily with the Food Standards Agency and Local Council Environmental Health Departments.

In response to, and from the outset of this crisis, my officials have facilitated regular (often daily) meetings between the relevant representative industry bodies, individual food business operators (FBOs), Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland (FSANI), Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) and the Public Health Agency (PHA). The principal objective of these meetings and associated communications is to ensure that industry are familiar with and implementing the latest PHA and HSENI guidance, which is primarily aimed at ensuring a safe and hygienic working environment for all personnel and minimising the risk of COVID-19 transmission in the workplace.

These fora have proved hugely beneficial, providing attendees with the opportunity to engage with PHA, HSENI and other relevant officials on a range of COVID-19 related control issues including the appropriate use of PPE and development of associated protocols. In addition, HSENI, as the enforcement authority have strategically rolled out a series of unannounced inspections across the meat processing sector to verify compliance with all relevant public health guidance. Assessment of PPE usage and protocols has been a central theme of these inspections.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on progress to create a plan to eliminate plastic pollution as proposed in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 5437/17-22)

Mr Poots: In the New Decade, New Approach deal, the Executive is tasked with actions to address climate change including creating a plan to eliminate plastic pollution.

My Department has been exploring a range of approaches including partnering with Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful (KNIB) and Sustainable NI in a Tackling Plastic project that is working with schools and businesses and with the public

sector in identifying practical ways to reduce or eliminate many unnecessary single-use plastics (SUP). As part of this work my Department has taken advice from other UK government departments and has been engaging with other agencies, departments and including working with Department of Finance, Construction & Procurement Delivery colleagues to find ways to encourage suppliers to reduce their SUP consumption. Catering and cleaning contracts have been reviewed and wording has already been altered to include an Environmental Statement referring to reducing SUP.

I am also working closely with my Ministerial colleagues across the UK in introducing legislation to promote a Circular Economy waste package which will help to keep plastic in the economy and out of the environment. Together with other UK Ministers I am considering introducing legislation on a Deposit Return Scheme and an Extended Producer Responsibility Scheme, both of which would significantly help to increase the rate of plastic recycling and would be supported by a HM Treasury plastic packaging tax that is specifically designed to incentivise the market for recycled plastic.

I hope you will appreciate that these measures to conserve resources through reuse and recycling would support the twin aims of reducing plastic pollution and addressing climate change.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 5180/17-22, do protocols in operation in his Department not require the Minister to approve a policy decision such as issuing instructions regarding border posts at Northern Ireland ports.

(AQW 5465/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) is the lead Department within the Executive on the SPS Operational Readiness Programme associated with implementation of the Northern Ireland/Ireland protocol. In doing so my officials are working closely with Senior Port Officials to agree the designations that the Ports wish to have in place following the end of the transition period. This work will seek to protect the free flow of agri- food trade, protection of supply chains and disease control.

Part of the process for agreeing the Points of Entry was correspondence between my officials and Senior Port Officials to have a record of the decisions the ports wished to make.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 5180/17-22, (i) what response his Department has made to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) in respect of requirements at Northern Ireland ports; and (ii) are the proposals being taken forward at Northern Ireland ports at the direction of DEFRA or on the initiative of his Department.

(AQW 5466/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) is the lead Department within the Executive on the SPS Operational Readiness Programme associated with implementation of the Northern Ireland/Ireland protocol. Since the programme initiated DAERA has been working closely with the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in order to develop and implement arrangements. This has included Defra's assistance with the preparation of the draft applications to be made by the UK government to the EU Commission to designate NI Points of Entry for Sanitary and Phytosanitary checks in line with the NI Protocol.

In common with the UK Government, I want the Northern Ireland Protocol implemented in a way that minimises any frictions on the flow of agri-food trade and works for our businesses and citizens. I felt that the initial proposals presented to me by officials did not go far enough in delivering against this and I have asked them to reconsider some of the potential delivery options. This work is ongoing.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 5180/17-22, (i) why are the proposals being taken forward at Northern Ireland ports matching to the EU's optimum demands; and (ii) for his assessment that such an approach prejudices ongoing negotiations seeking to minimise same.

(AQW 5467/17-22)

Mr Poots: There is a legal responsibility flowing from the Northern Ireland Protocol to ensure Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) checks will be carried out on the relevant goods entering Northern Ireland at designated Points of Entry, which includes our ports and airports.

I am working on the assumption that if both the European Commission and the United Kingdom Governments are committed to minimising friction on trade, it is reasonable to assume there will be a very small number of checks.

I have made it very clear that the recent proposals submitted to the EU Commission by the UK Government for the Point of Entry designations were not in line with my wishes or instructions.

As such I have asked my officials to consider the options available to me in order to meet this assumption. This work is ongoing.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 5180/17-22, what are the assessed costs, in terms of expenditure and manpower, of the proposals being taken forward at Northern Ireland ports.

(AQW 5468/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials are continuing to develop and refine the proposals to meet our commitments following the publication of the UK Government's command paper on 20 May 2020, which provided the necessary clarification to proceed.

In line with normal business processes, a business case will be developed in the form of a UK Treasury Green Book appraisal and in line with Managing Public Money in Northern Ireland. This will involve looking at the costs and benefits of the different options being considered in meeting our commitments for the purposes of ensuring Value for Money.

We are currently defining the programme's needs and a business case is being developed, this will when it is finalised include the costs of proposed options.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 5180/17-22, whether it is anticipated that pets returning to Northern Ireland with their owners will be subject to checks at Northern Ireland ports.
(AQW 5469/17-22)

Mr Poots: The need for and level of checks required for pets returning to Northern Ireland depends on the status the European Union has allocated to the country from which the pet is travelling.

An application for listed pet travel status has been submitted by the UK to the EU Commission. If approved, this would remove all or most additional requirements for travel with pets from Great Britain to Northern Ireland following the end of the transition period.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 5180/17-22, to detail the level of checks being planned for at Northern Ireland ports for each (i) category of product; and (ii) animal passing through.
(AQW 5507/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am working on the assumption that if both the EU and United Kingdom Governments are committed to minimising friction on trade, it is reasonable to assume there will be a very small number of checks.

I have noted in paragraph thirty-five in the UK Government's Policy Paper, "The UK's Approach to the Northern Ireland Protocol" which states, "The process by which controls are conducted, and their frequency – including the level of physical checks required – will need to be discussed with the EU in the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee, within the context of the provision in the Protocol that both parties must use their "best endeavours" to avoid controls at Northern Ireland ports as far as possible, and adopt recommendations in the Committee accordingly. We will actively seek to simplify and minimise electronic documentary requirements for this trade."

In light of the fact that the above process has not yet been concluded through the Joint Committee, there is lack of certainty around the level of checks required.

I have tasked my officials to continue to scope a range of options and once clarity has been received my officials will be in a position to submit further details in keeping with our shared objectives to ensure compliance whilst mitigating against any potential additional burdens on businesses specifically, and our economy generally.

In all outcomes I am clear it will be vital that physical checks are kept to the minimum required and that no additional burdens are placed on NI business and consumers.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on work on establishing an independent environmental protection agency, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 5536/17-22)

Mr Poots: I believe that good environmental governance is about focusing on environmental outcomes and taking a strategic approach to the environmental challenges that we face here in Northern Ireland and on the global stage.

The Assembly has given its consent to extend the provisions of the UK Environment Bill giving effect to an Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) to Northern Ireland and in due course I plan to issue a discussion document to gauge stakeholder views on how we should deal with environmental plans, principles and governance in the future. The OEP will be independent from Government and able to scrutinise and advise on environmental policy, investigate complaints and take enforcement action against public authorities.

I have committed to considering the implications of the 'New Decade, New Approach' proposal for the establishment of an independent environmental protection agency to form part of a future Programme for Government but an independent environmental protection agency cannot be created overnight – consideration needs to be given to appropriate options and these will all require robust economic appraisal to determine the best option for Northern Ireland. It is no small task to scope all of the potential impacts, including significant legislative, financial and human resource issues, which would be necessary before decisions can be made.

Understandably, in the current crisis resources are spread more thinly than I would like and so some prioritisation has been necessary. There are other issues that need to be addressed first, such as the OEP and Northern Ireland's first overarching Green Growth Environment Strategy, which will help in our recovery from the devastating effects of Covid-19.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many illegal puppy farms were detected and shutdown in 2019/20; and how many prosecutions resulted from the detections.

(AQW 5837/17-22)

Mr Poots: Commercial dog breeding in Northern Ireland is a regulated activity under the Welfare of Animals (Dog Breeding Establishments and Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2013.

Responsibility for the enforcement of the Regulations, including taking action against illegal breeding establishments, rests with local councils. Therefore, my Department does not have access to the information you have requested. I have, however, instructed my officials to write to each council and ask that each council supplies this information directly to you.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the basis for his assertion that there is no climate change emergency, despite scientific evidence that human activities are causing an existential climate crisis.

(AQW 5873/17-22)

Mr Poots: I acknowledge that there is a climate crisis and I have consistently stated that we need to follow the latest climate change scientific advice. The evidence indicates that human actions since the industrial revolution are resulting in an unprecedented increase in greenhouse gas emissions.

Climate change is my top priority and I remain fully committed to ensuring that Northern Ireland plays its full part in reducing our greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to our changing climate.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what percentage of (i) all staff; and (ii) staff at Grade 5 and above, working in his Department have completed anti-racism training; and how often this training is updated.

(AQW 5904/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) In 2017 Unconscious Bias training, which includes anti-racism, was introduced to the NICS. Initial classroom based training was provided to SCS staff with 22 DAERA SCS staff completing the training. In July 2017 Unconscious Bias e-learning training was made available to all other staff and rolled out on a mandatory basis for line managers up to Grade 6 level. To date 1487 DAERA staff in grades below SCS level have completed this package.
- (ii) NICSHR diversity and inclusion training courses are reviewed and updated periodically. Reviews scheduled for 2020/21 are underway.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has given consideration of electronic identification of cattle.

(AQW 5951/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials are actively considering the practicalities of using electronic identification (EID) for cattle. The most recent exercise involved a public consultation on a potential new numbering format for cattle that would be required to enable the implementation of EID. The results of this consultation were published in May 2020.

My officials have also held regular discussions on this matter with officials from the other UK administrations and the Department of Food, Agriculture & Marine in the Republic of Ireland. Officials across the UK and the Republic of Ireland all support the aim of achieving common standards for bovine EID.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how his Department monitors the flows of water through the hydro power station and associated spillage at the ESB system at Ballyshannon.

(AQW 5952/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department has no jurisdiction to monitor or regulate the flows of water through the hydro power station and associated spillage at the ESB (Electricity Supply Board) system in Ballyshannon as these are located in the Republic of Ireland.

The Department for Infrastructure (DfI) has also advised that it does not monitor the flow of water through the hydropower station or associated spillage at the ESB system at Ballyshannon. However, the management and control of water levels in Lough Erne is undertaken by DfI in conjunction with ESB in the Republic of Ireland, under the terms of an agreement made in 1950 when the River Erne was harnessed for hydroelectric power generation.

Water levels are regulated in both Upper and Lower Lough Erne, insofar as climatic conditions allow. This water level management aims to facilitate a range of interests including agriculture, tourism, recreation, conservation and power generation.

The water level at Belleisle (Upper Lough Erne), Portora (Inter-Lough channel at Enniskillen) and Rosscor (Lower Lough Erne) is published each working day on the DfI website at: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/articles/lough-erne-levels>.

The table details of the number of eel catches on Lough Erne by the trap and truck system for the last 7 years. This data includes catches at sites in both the Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland jurisdictions on the Erne. The silver escapement figure is the total weight of eels leaving Lough Erne and includes those caught, transported and released below the hydro station at Ballyshannon.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the number of eels caught in Lough Erne by the trap and truck system in each of the last seven years.

(AQW 5953/17-22)

Mr Poots: The table details of the number of eel catches on Lough Erne by the trap and truck system for the last 7 years. This data includes catches at sites in both the Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland jurisdictions on the Erne. The silver escapement figure is the total weight of eels leaving Lough Erne and includes those caught, transported and released below the hydro station at Ballyshannon.

Year	Silver escapement (kg)	Amount Transported (kg)
2013	73,330	39,139
2014	72,493	48,126
2015	78,034	54,706
2016	62,871	38,264
2017	68,810	43,470
2018	83,033	47,002
2019	66,175	39,651

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the cost of clean-ups associated with the removal of toxic waste emanating from illegal fuel laundering plants, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 5969/17-22)

Mr Poots: Costs incurred by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency for the clean-up of fuel laundered waste since 2017 are set out in the table below.

Financial Year	Cost of clean up
2019-20	£64,434.70
2018-19	£39,692.20
2017-18	£59,118.40
Total	£163,245.30

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 5624/17-22, (i) whether he will bring forward a second consultation relating to proposals which could have an environmental impact, such as wildlife, as stated in his Department's response to the TB Strategic Partnership Group report published in 2018; and (ii) when any such consultation will be launched.

(AQW 5984/17-22)

Mr Poots: The consultation on the Department's response to the TB Strategic Partnership Group report stated that "subsequent and more detailed consultation will take place, if appropriate, once detailed proposals have been developed by the Department, including views on any proposed legislation changes related to badger intervention".

I can confirm that my Department will seek to consult on a wildlife intervention as appropriate and my officials will take the necessary steps. As I have not yet reached a decision on the form of any intervention a date for consultation cannot be provided at this time.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department has any plans to develop the Walled Garden in Crawfordsburn Country Park.

(AQW 5987/17-22)

Mr Poots: At present the Walled Garden area in Crawfordsburn Country Park is under a long term 25 year lease to an Environmental NGO until 31 March 2029.

Owing to the ongoing lease, which gives control of the area to the lease holder, my Department has no current plans to develop the Walled Garden area. My officials in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency are however continuing to engage with the lease holder to discuss historical management onsite and furthermore how the area can be appropriately managed going forward.

Department of Education

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education what advice and training has been provided through the Education Authority Transport Offices to (i) all suppliers of home to school transport; and (ii) passenger transport assistants to ensure that a safe and standardised approach to school transport is provided.

(AQW 6037/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Following publication of revised New School Day guidance by my Department on 13th August, the Education Authority has issued guidance to all private operators contracted to provide home to school transport outlining minimum requirements and advice on key issues such as social distancing, hand hygiene, PPE and vehicle cleaning.

In respect of transport escorts, guidance for EA drivers and escorts has also been developed and return to work inductions for all EA driver and escort staff commenced during week beginning 17th August.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education what agreement is in place with the Department for Infrastructure for students that will be travelling on the Strangford ferry whether (i) they have to wear masks; and (ii) what social distancing will be required.

(AQW 6038/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department for Infrastructure announced on 25 August that from 1 September that as school traffic returns, an "off schedule" service will be in operation on weekday early mornings 7:30 – 9:00am and late afternoons 4:00 – 5:00pm when required. Therefore additional foot passenger only services aimed at school children will depart at 8:10am from Portaferry and 4:00pm from Strangford. These sailings have been coordinated with designated school bus transport to and from Strangford.

The wearing of a face covering on these sailings is mandatory for those aged 13 and over and all pupils will be required to maintain a 1 metre plus social distance on board.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education for an update on the planned development for a new build for Enniskillen Royal Grammar School.

(AQW 6048/17-22)

Mr Weir: An Integrated Consultant Team (ICT), Isherwood & Ellis was appointed to the project in February 2020 to advance the design. A RIBA Stage 1 Technical Feasibility report is due to be submitted to the Department at the end of August. Following review of this by the Department's technical advisers the draft business case will be updated and submitted to the Department of Finance for approval.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education what guidance and support he intends to provide for students and parents in rural areas who rely on school transport.

(AQW 6055/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department published guidance on the New School Day on 13 August which contains details of the plans for the resumption of home to school transport on the basis that all eligible pupils, including those in rural areas, will be able to access safe and effective home to school transport in the new school year. Further operational information in relation to the arrangements for home to school transport is also available on the Education Authority website.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 5219/17-22, for his assessment of whether the Act needs to be amended.

(AQW 6056/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are no plans for the Act to be amended.

The Addressing Bullying in Schools (NI) Act 2016 requires schools to record incidents of bullying, their motivation and their outcome.

Schools, rather than my Department, will use this information to monitor levels and types of bullying behaviour amongst their pupils to ensure that it is addressed as set out in their anti-bullying policy.

I will make an announcement on a date for implementation of the Act in due course.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 5219/17-22, whether his Department will monitor levels of bullying across all vulnerable groups when the Act is implemented

(AQW 6057/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are no plans for the Act to be amended.

The Addressing Bullying in Schools (NI) Act 2016 requires schools to record incidents of bullying, their motivation and their outcome.

Schools, rather than my Department, will use this information to monitor levels and types of bullying behaviour amongst their pupils to ensure that it is addressed as set out in their anti-bullying policy.

I will make an announcement on a date for implementation of the Act in due course.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education (i) whether it is still his intention to amend legislation surrounding socially disadvantaged circumstances to bring working families with a low income within the scope of prioritisation criteria; and (ii) when will he bring this legislation forward.

(AQW 6058/17-22)

Mr Weir: The current legislative priority for children from socially disadvantaged circumstances needs to be amended in the context of the roll out of Universal Credit. I can confirm that I plan to bring forward amendments to the current legislation and am looking at ways of bringing working families on low incomes within the scope of the prioritisation criteria. While there was not sufficient time, due to the Covid-19 outbreak, to effect legislative change prior to the pre-school admissions process this year, subject to the outcome of public consultation and engagement with Executive colleagues, I intend to implement the necessary changes ahead of the 2022/23 academic year.

Department of Health

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of ventilators that are currently available within the Health Service.

(AQW 3692/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): There are currently 267 mechanical ventilators available across the Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of ventilators currently available within the independent health sector.

(AQW 3693/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are currently 12 ventilators available within the independent health sector in Northern Ireland

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to outline the number of ventilators that have been ordered or purchased since January 2020.

(AQW 3694/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care Trusts placed orders for 33 ventilators which have all been delivered. The Critical Care Network Northern Ireland (CCaNNI) have placed orders for 213 ventilators of which 85 have been received with 128 outstanding.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) which Arm's Length Bodies have held board meetings since July 2019; (ii) how many were open to the public or streamed live, broken down for each Arm's Length Body by date of meeting and whether it was open to the public.

(AQW 5806/17-22)

Mr Swann: The dates of Board meetings held by my Department's Arm's Length Bodies are available on each organisation's website and can be accessed via the following links:

Belfast Health & Social Care Trust	https://belfasttrust.hscni.net/about/corporate-info/meetings-minutes/
South Eastern Health & Social Care Trust	https://setrust.hscni.net/about-the-trust/corporate-information/trust-board-meetings-and-papers/
Southern Health & Social Care Trust	https://southerntrust.hscni.net/about-us/trust-board-meetings-and-minutes/
Western Health and Social Care Trust	https://westerntrust.hscni.net/about-the-trust/trust-board/2020-trust-board-meetings-agenda-minutes-and-supporting-papers/
Northern Health & Social Care Trust	http://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/about-the-trust/corporate-information/trust-board/
Health & Social Care Board	http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/meeting/hscb-board-meetings-2020/

Belfast Health & Social Care Trust	https://belfasttrust.hscni.net/about/corporate-info/meetings-minutes/
Public Health Agency	https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/schedule-meetings
Northern Ireland Practice & Education Council	https://nipec.hscni.net/about-nipec/nipec-council/council-meeting-dates/
Northern Ireland Medical & Dental Training Agency	https://www.nimda.gov.uk/about/background/board/
Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency	https://nigala.hscni.net/about-nigala/nigala-board/board-meetings/
Patient & Client Council	https://patientclientcouncil.hscni.net/who-are-we/our-board/
Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service	https://nibts.hscni.net/about-us/nibts-board-members/
Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority	https://www.rqia.org.uk/who-we-are/rqia-board/board-meetings/
Northern Ireland Ambulance Service	http://www.nias.hscni.net/about-the-trust/trust-board/trust-board-meetings/
Business Services Organisation	http://www.hscbusiness.hscni.net/about/1839.htm
Northern Ireland Social Care Council	https://nisc.info/about/council-meetings
Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service	https://www.nifrs.org/about-nifrs/nifrs-board/

Information about Board meetings (dates, agenda, minutes and arrangements for public attendance) is available on each organisation's website. When organisations activated Business Continuity Plans in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, alternative arrangements for Board meetings and facilitation of public access to meetings had to be made to adapt to the circumstances.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Health (i) for an update on the proposed Health Care Centre in Lisnaskea; and (ii) whether the Western Health Trust has submitted a further revised business case to the Department of Health.

(AQW 6043/17-22)

Mr Swann: Following an invitation from Rosemary Barton MLA I visited the Maple Group Practice and ex Lisnaskea High School site on 20th July 2020. The Western Health and Social Care Trust submitted a revised business case to my Department in June 2020 and are currently addressing remaining issues. Once the issues are satisfactorily addressed the business case will be forwarded to DoF for approval. Delivery of this facility will be considered alongside other capital investment priorities, and will be dependent on future budget availability and value for money.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Health (i) for his assessment of the Multi Agency Triage Team; and (ii) what plans he has to further develop or roll out this initiative.

(AQW 6044/17-22)

Mr Swann: Current indications are that the Multi Agency Triage Team programme is working very effectively in the Belfast and South Eastern HSC Trust areas.

A project evaluation is currently being developed and a business case being prepared which will contain a number of options on the future format of MATT. Options including the potential rollout across Northern Ireland and the implications of extending this service to under 18s will also be explored within this paper.

Policy work to consider the optimal delivery of crisis services will be taken forward under the mental health action plan.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) how many incidents of physical assaults (including bites) on nursing staff within mental health and learning disability settings have been reported, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust area, in the last calendar year; (ii) how many have been reported to the police; (iii) whether there are patterns or trends related to (a) particular patients/clients; (b) short staffing levels; or (c) insufficient numbers of adequately trained staff available; and (iv) how the human rights of staff are being protected.

(AQW 6052/17-22)

Mr Swann: This information is not held by my Department and the scope of this request would represent disproportionate use of my staff resource.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health (i) how many people in Northern Ireland have lung disease; and (ii) what percentage of those people who are deemed eligible for pulmonary rehabilitation, are referred for it.

(AQW 6065/17-22)

Mr Swann: The tabulated information overleaf details the number of people in Northern Ireland admitted to hospital with a primary diagnosis of a lung disease for the year 2019/20 (Table A).

Data relating to the estimated number of those eligible for pulmonary rehabilitation is currently not available. However HSCB/ PHA have provided a response to this aspect of the question. "The majority of patients referred to and attending pulmonary rehabilitation courses have COPD, but patients with other lung diseases like asthma or lung fibrosis also attend in small numbers.

In 2019, HSCTs reported that they referred 85% of COPD patients being discharged from hospital to pulmonary rehabilitation.

GPs can refer patients to HSCT pulmonary rehabilitation programmes, but we have only developed a counting mechanism for this and have no data yet. NICHS also offers pulmonary rehabilitation courses, which are counted separately by NICHS themselves.

Every year about 2,000 COPD patients attend HSCT pulmonary rehabilitation programmes. Not every patient with COPD needs nor wants to attend pulmonary rehabilitation."

Table A: Individuals Admitted to a HSC Hospital in Northern Ireland with a Primary Diagnosis of Lung Disease¹, 2019/20^P.

HSC Trust Provider	2019/20 ^P
Belfast	2,147
Northern	1,348
South Eastern	1,693
Southern	1,362
Western	1,262
Northern Ireland	7,812

1 The ICD-10 codes J40-J90 were used to identify a lung disease in the primary diagnostic field of the Hospital Inpatient System.

P Data for this time period is provisional and subject to change.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he has any plans to install a mobile, or other, COVID-19 testing centre in Omagh.

(AQW 6078/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to the answer provided to AQW 4288/17-22.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, whether he intends to introduce measures to ensure that parents caring for children with disability who are in receipt of direct payments can experience flexibility in how these payments can be used,

(AQW 6094/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Coronavirus (COVID-19) – Northern Ireland Guidance for People Receiving Direct Payments was published by my Department on 3 August 2020 and can be accessed at the following link:

www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/guidance-direct-payments

This new guidance sets out how direct payments can be utilised to best support service users during the pandemic. It also asks Health and Social Care Trusts to apply a degree of flex in respect of those payments – however they must be linked to the agreed outcome. Furthermore, I recently approved additional funding of up to £500k to enable the HSC Trusts to mitigate those additional costs necessarily incurred by direct payment users during the period April to June 2020.

Department for Infrastructure

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the significant lobbying being undertaken by Becon (ARC21) and the recent change in legislation allowing her to take planning decisions, when she will make a decision on the building of the Hightown Incinerator.

(AQW 6029/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): My officials are continuing to progress the application in line with planning policy to a point where a decision is ready to be made. When all consultation responses are received and all statutory processes complete, a recommendation will be brought forward by my officials.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has plans to withhold approval for all large scale wind turbine applications until new noise guidelines which protect the health and safety of the public are implemented.

(AQW 6040/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's planning policy for renewable energy already protects against development which would result in an unacceptable adverse impact on public safety, human health or residential amenity (SPPS, paragraph 6.224 refers).

On the assessment of noise impacts specifically, the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy is responsible for the current guidance that applies (i.e. 'Assessment and Rating of Noise from wind farms') known as ETSU-R-97. In addition, 'A good practice guide to the application of ETSU-R-97 for the assessment and rating of wind turbine noise' (Institute of Acoustics, 2013) is also used here and in England, Wales and Scotland. Furthermore, planning authorities can apply the recommendations of the DECC commissioned review of evidence on human response and amplitude modulation which was published in October 2016.

In practice, when considering any noise implications associated with a planning application for large scale wind turbines, a submitted noise report is sent to the relevant Environmental Health Department for expert advice. The consultation response received will be considered, along with the requirements of extant policy and guidance and all other material considerations, in determining if the development is acceptable and if any planning conditions are necessary.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in the absence of any review of the ETSU -R-97 Noise Guidelines since the publication of the Committee for the Environment's report in 2015, why her Department and the Planning Appeals Commission have continued to grant planning approvals for large scale wind turbine applications.

(AQW 6041/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I refer the member to my answer to AQW/6040 17-22 and AQW/6042/17-22 and previous answers to AQW/4598 and AQW/4599. I am aware that the former Committee for the Environment's report recommended that the use of the ETSU guidelines should be reviewed. A review of the guidelines themselves would be a matter for the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS). My Department's planning policy does not permit proposals for renewable development which would result in an unacceptable adverse impact on human health or residential amenity. Noise considerations are informed through consultation with the relevant Environmental Health Department.

Furthermore, the former Department of Energy and Climate Change (DECC, now BEIS) commissioned a review of evidence on the human response to amplitude modulation with the report published in October 2016. The Department has taken account of the recommendations in relation to how excessive amplitude modulation can be controlled at new sites through a planning condition where necessary and as appropriate. These recommendations were also brought to the attention of local planning authorities here at the time. The Department has therefore continued to determine applications within this context. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on matters for the Planning Appeals Commission.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Infrastructure pursuant to AQW 4599/17-22; (i) whether she agrees with the Committee for the Environment's report that the noise guidelines for wind turbines are seriously out of date, not fit for purpose and in urgent need of review; and (ii) why no action has been taken on these findings five years after publication of the Committee's report.

(AQW 6042/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) The Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS), Westminster, is the responsible Department for the ETSU-R-97 guidelines and therefore it is outside the remit of my Department to undertake such a review. These guidelines are applied here and in Scotland, England and Wales. I previously advised that I will decide the way forward for a policy review of strategic planning policy for renewable energy as soon as practicable, taking time to reflect on all relevant matters. Noise and acoustics is a complex and technical area and I will take into account the advice of those with the responsibility for noise matters in undertaking any such review of regional planning policy generally.
- (ii) Since the former Environment Committee concluded their Inquiry the Department took account of the findings, where appropriate, in finalising the Strategic Planning Policy Statement which was published in September 2015. Furthermore, the Department issued a 'Call for Evidence' in March 2016 and subsequently commissioned independent consultants to undertake research to inform the future direction of strategic planning policy for renewable energy development. As indicated above, I will decide the way forward for a policy review as soon as practicable.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy whether workers from outside the UK that provide specialist support to businesses are subject to quarantine rules dependant on the country of origin prior to entry into Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6021/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Executive agreed on 9 July 2020 that Northern Ireland would introduce exemptions from self-isolation for specific categories of travellers. These are designed to ensure those who are required to undertake work which is deemed essential within the 14 day self-isolation period can do so. The link below contains the most up to date list of those exemptions.

Currently there are no plans to restrict specific categories of travellers from certain countries.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-travellers-exempt-from-uk-border-rules/coronavirus-covid-19-travellers-exempt-from-uk-border-rules>

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 4 September 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr McNulty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they expect to (i) lift restrictions and permit gyms to reopen; and (ii) realign restrictions on sporting participation and facilities' access so that they are consistent on an all island basis allowing all sports to harmonize.

(AQW 5214/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Indoor gyms were permitted to re-open on 10 July. Contact sport training resumed from 29 June and indoor sports courts were permitted to re-open from 17 July. These dates are broadly consistent with the relaxations introduced by the Irish Government.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether any meetings or operational workshops have taken place with port officials, in preparation for the points of entry plan, in the last six months.

(AQW 5048/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The publication of the UK Government's command paper on 20 May 2020, provided the necessary clarification to proceed to implement the Northern Ireland Protocol. As the lead Department for the implementation of our obligations in relation to the Northern Ireland Protocol on Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) checks, my officials have had engagement with port officials following initiation of the programme on 26 May. Since then my officials have been working at pace to work to deliver a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) for process design, IT, trained staff and supporting facilities to deliver first day operational readiness for SPS checks at Northern Ireland's Points of Entry (POE) by the end of December 2020.

My officials have held meetings, operational workshops and site visits, throughout June with senior Port Authority officials in Belfast, Larne, Warrenpoint and Foyle and also with counterparts at Northern Ireland's 3 airports.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the introduction of Finn's Law.

(AQW 5203/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am committed to recognising the invaluable work of service animals in Northern Ireland and consider it important that they are provided with the same level of protection here as in England and Wales.

The introduction of Finn's law in Northern Ireland will changes to substantive criminal law which is a matter for the Department of Justice. I have already written to the Minister of Justice, Naomi Long MLA, on this matter and obtained her support in principal.

My Department will continue to work at pace to bring forward the legislation required to introduce Finn's law to Northern Ireland.

Department for Communities

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities when Downpatrick Social Security Office will be open to the public again.

(AQW 5778/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): The re-opening of our Jobs & Benefit offices has already begun, albeit on a very limited basis. I am conscious that the Education Authority has begun its annual exercise for eligible parents to claim Free School Meals and support to buy a school uniform. Whilst many of these applications can be made directly between the

Education Authority and the applicant, I am conscious that many families use our JBO network to have their application forms validated.

I have already excused signing for people claiming Job Seekers Allowance and we will continue to manage our Universal Credit activities remotely. That will not change. I can confirm that Downpatrick JBO has now opened on this limited basis.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities, in relation to COVID-19, whether she intends to discuss with her counterparts at Westminster bringing forward legislation to protect the entitlement to statutory maternity pay for people who received statutory sick pay during their qualifying period where (i) they have a shielding letter; and (ii) their employer declined to use the job retention scheme.

(AQW 5836/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Statutory Sick Pay forms part of the average weekly earnings calculation carried out by employers to determine whether an employee qualifies for Statutory Maternity Pay (SMP), and if so, at what rate. This is due to the fact that for SMP purposes, pay is defined as gross pay due before any deductions. This includes sick pay (and other payments e.g. overtime, bonus payments, arrears of pay).

Therefore, I currently have no plans to change the way that Statutory Sick Pay is treated as part of the average weekly earnings calculation for SMP purposes.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the £36 million sub-regional stadia funding for football.

(AQW 5954/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the “New Decade, New Approach” Deal and my Department has begun work to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the current challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels. Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities (i) how she will ensure the increased number of students attending local universities will have access to appropriate living accommodation; and (ii) whether she could implement a rent cap to ensure students are not charged a rent that is unreasonably higher than rents in the same area during the last year.

(AQW 6034/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Students attending universities or colleges live in a range of accommodation including;

- Halls of Residence
- Purpose built student accommodation
- Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)

The Department for Communities does not have responsibility for the first two types of student living accommodation.

Regarding HMOs, Landlords of this type of accommodation must have a license to operate, and they must meet strict criteria in relation to the standard of the property and satisfy the criteria in relation to being a “fit and proper person” in order to obtain said license. The responsibility for awarding a license is with Councils.

The Department for Communities does not have a legislative power to implement a rent cap for student accommodation.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities for an update on discussions with the Northern Ireland Football League in relation to the commencement of the 2020-21 league season.

(AQW 6047/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The commencement of the 2020-21 Football League season is a matter for the league operators NIFL to decide. The Department has not been involved in discussions on this matter.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities (i) how many applicants are on the social housing waiting list for East Belfast; (ii) the number deemed in housing stress; and (iii) how many are homeless.

(AQW 6071/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has provided the Department with the following information:

The table below details the requested information as of the end of June 2020:

	East Belfast PC	East and South Belfast*
Applicants	1,926	381
Applicants in Housing Stress	1,324	274
Allocations to Applicants	955	194

	East Belfast PC	East and South Belfast*
Applicants awarded Full Duty Status (Homeless)	295	39

* There are 2 NIHE Common Landlord Areas which cross the Parliamentary Constituency boundary between Belfast East and Belfast South. They are Cregagh, Castlereagh and Willowfield/Upper Castlereagh Road.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the disability strategy.

(AQW 6072/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Work on the development of the Disability Strategy is due to commence imminently. The Strategy will be developed using a co-design approach in line with commitments made in New Decade, New Approach and in support of the delivery of the Executive's Programme for Government.

A Disability Strategy Expert Advisory Panel will be established in the coming weeks. It will be tasked with making recommendations on the key themes and priorities that a new Disability Strategy should contain.

A Disability Strategy Co-design Group will be convened to assist in the development of the draft Strategy and its supporting action plan.

I have written to Executive colleagues to secure their commitment to the development of the Strategy, with a view to securing the participation of senior officials in a Cross-departmental Working Group which will provide a platform for all departments to contribute to the development of the Strategy and its action plan.

I am committed to ensuring that the new Disability Strategy is evidence based, developed with meaningful input from disabled people, and targets the areas of greatest need.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities whether she intends to introduce a changing places toilet fund.

(AQW 6073/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I fully recognise the importance of Changing Places facilities to ensuring dignity and equality for people with disabilities. I am committed to ensuring that public buildings and facilities are accessible to everyone.

My Department continues to work in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and district councils to deliver an Access and Inclusion Programme. The programme provides capital grant funding, through district councils and the NI Museums Council, aimed at promoting a more inclusive society by enabling disabled people to participate more fully in arts, cultural and active recreation activities. Projects supported under this Programme have included Changing Places facilities.

Work on a new Disability Strategy is due to commence imminently. The Strategy will be developed using a co-design approach, with meaningful involvement from disabled people and their representative organisations at all stages of the process. Accessibility issues, including Changing Places provision, are likely to be raised in the development of the Strategy and I look forward to working with all departments to ensure that the Strategy and its supporting Action Plan are targeted at the areas of greatest need.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how many social security claimants are waiting for a medical assessment, broken down by benefit type.

(AQW 6074/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Face to face medical assessments have been suspended since the 16 March 2020 due to Covid19. Currently a reduced number of medical assessments are completed by telephone and paper based review. The table below shows the number of cases referred for and awaiting assessment at 14 August 2020 by benefit type and the number of assessments completed from 1 April 2020 to 14 August 2020 by benefit type.

	Awaiting assessment	Assessments Completed
Employment & Support Allowance	996	9,215
Universal Credit	362	5,618
Personal Independence Payment	2,424	9,734
Total	3,782	24,567

Department of Education

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education whether AS level results awarded to students in 2020 will be taken into account for their A2 exams being awarded in 2021.

(AQW 6036/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The AS qualifications awarded by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in 2020 will not form part of the CCEA A-Level award in 2021. CCEA is currently consulting on arrangements for GCSE, AS and A level examinations in 2021.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Education, given that blended learning is often unsuitable for children with disabilities, what support he intends to introduce for parents of children with disability to enable such parents to cope until schools are operating regularly.

(AQW 6093/17-22)

Mr Weir: Following the Executive's decision on 6 August, I announced that "all children were to return to school full-time from week commencing 31 August."

The Department, in partnership with the Education Authority (EA), has worked closely with Special Schools through their Strategic Leadership Group to address issues and produce supplementary guidance (24 August 2020) to support Special Schools' re-opening plans. I agreed with the Group's request for a short 2 week period of flexibility in bringing pupils back reflecting their particular circumstances. Special schools will be expected to operate regularly in line with Departmental guidance from 7 September 2020.

In exceptional circumstances, schools will make appropriate provision in line with the individually assessed needs of the child which may include online engagement, practical sensory resources and other activities.

The Education Authority will continue to provide a range of services to support parents, schools, children and young people in relation to special educational needs and disability and an extensive suite of resources is available on the EA Website:

<https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-support-services>

<https://www.eani.org.uk/information-for-parents-and-families>

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Education to outline the enrolment figures for St Colm's High School, West Belfast, for the year 2020/21.

(AQW 6101/17-22)

Mr Weir: Actual enrolment data is not yet available for the 2020/21 academic year. Enrolment data for grant aided schools is collected during the annual school census. The school census for the 2020/21 academic year will be based on the 9th October with provisional data being released in December 2020. The total actual enrolment for St Colm's High School was 482 pupils in 2019/20.

The approved enrolment for St Colm's High School for the 2020/21 academic year is 680 pupils with an approved admission of 132 pupils.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Education what contingency plans his Department has in place if transfer tests cannot take place during the current school year.

(AQW 6125/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department does not have any responsibility for the transfer tests. Arrangements for these tests are a matter for the test providers and those schools that use the tests results as part of their admissions criteria.

Should the tests be cancelled due to current health concerns it will be a matter for individual Boards of Governors in those schools that use the scores from the tests in their admissions criteria to decide what alternative criteria they may wish to use.

However, my focus is on ensuring that post primary transfer is delivered in a timely manner for every pupil in Northern Ireland.

Department of Finance

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance for an update on progress in making her Department a Living Wage employer as set out in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 6024/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): In setting the 2020/21 public sector pay policy, I have indicated that public sector employers should now actively consider how pay awards for individual staff groups can be targeted to ensure the payment of the Living Wage Foundation Living Wage. HR officials will incorporate this issue into 2020/21 pay considerations for the Civil Service departments.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Finance, with regard to the date set within the agreement being passed, when will the Fiscal Council, as detailed within New Decade, New Approach be formed.

(AQW 6030/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Officials within my Department began examining the options for establishing a Fiscal Council earlier this year, but this work did not progress as intended as my Department had to focus on the immediate COVID-19 response.

However, my officials are now actively refocussing on this as the situation in terms of the demand for Departmental resources to tackle COVID-19 has improved. I remain committed to establishing a Fiscal Council as set out in New Decade New Approach and a clearer indication on the timing of this will be possible once this work has sufficiently advanced.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance whether he will be responsible for the purchase of COVID-19 vaccines for Northern Ireland, or will we share in HMG placed and funded orders.

(AQW 6066/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The purchase of vaccines would be a matter for the Department of Health.

Department of Health

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health to list the meetings of the Older People's Panel established by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust, over the last five years; and to outline the reasons for any interruption or cessation of this programme of outreach.

(AQW 2760/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Over the last five years, meetings of the Northern HSC Trust's Older People's Panel were scheduled for the dates shown in the table below:

2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
4th Mar	17th Feb*	25th Jan	13th Feb**	8th Jan	23rd June (via Zoom)
24th June	11th May		30th May**		
9th Sept	31st Aug	28th Jun	25th Sept	19th Nov	Next meeting to be agreed.
11th Nov	30th Nov				

*The meetings were cancelled due to a high number of apologies being received.

**The meeting was cancelled as only 2 members confirmed attendance.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what arrangements are being made to ensure that adequate personal protective equipment is available to dentists and opticians as they fully re-open.

(AQW 4564/17-22)

Mr Swann: At the end of June I agreed that dentists should be provided with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to assist them during the phased re-establishment of General Dental Services (GDS). Approximately £1million worth of Level 1 PPE has been procured and is being distributed to individual dental practices; equating to approximately £2,600 of PPE per practice.

On 31 July 2020 I approved the allocation of an additional £3.8 million in funding to assist General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) in the purchasing of the Level 2 PPE necessary to undertake Aerosol Generation Procedures (AGPs).

Three months' worth of Level 1 PPE was provided from central HSC stocks for Ophthalmic Practitioners in April 2020. On 3 August 2020 Phase 2 of the re-establishment of General Ophthalmic Services commenced, allowing the main elements of routine eye care, including eye examinations and ophthalmic dispensing and the provision of Enhanced Services to resume. Funding has now been approved for a further four months' worth of Level 1 PPE to be provided to Ophthalmic Practitioners.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether he plans supply dental practices personal protection equipment from stock held centrally, as in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland; and to outline the timescale for this to enable dental practices to open safely.

(AQW 4694/17-22)

Mr Swann: At the end of June I agreed that dentists should be provided with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to assist them during the phased re-establishment of General Dental Services (GDS). Approximately £1million worth of Level 1 PPE has been procured and is being distributed to individual dental practices; equating to approximately £2,600 of PPE per practice.

On 31 July 2020 I approved the allocation of an additional £3.8 million in funding to assist General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) in the purchasing of the Level 2 PPE necessary to undertake Aerosol Generation Procedures (AGPs).

Three months' worth of Level 1 PPE was provided from central HSC stocks for Ophthalmic Practitioners in April 2020. On 3 August 2020 Phase 2 of the re-establishment of General Ophthalmic Services commenced, allowing the main elements of routine eye care, including eye examinations and ophthalmic dispensing and the provision of Enhanced Services to resume. Funding has now been approved for a further four months' worth of Level 1 PPE to be provided to Ophthalmic Practitioners.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health (i) when the report on mother and baby homes will be published; and (ii) for an update on progress to appoint a new independent Chair of the Inter - Departmental Working Group on mother and baby homes.

(AQW 5476/17-22)

Mr Swann: The commissioned research into the operation of Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries has been completed, received by my Department and considered by the Inter Departmental Working Group on Mother and Baby Homes, Magdalene Laundries and Historical Clerical Child Abuse. The research will now be subject to a process of Maxwellisation. When complete, it will be amended if necessary and submitted to the Northern Ireland Executive with options on the way forward.

Judith Gillespie CBE was appointed as the new Independent Chair of the Inter Departmental Working Group on Mother and Baby Homes, Magdalene Laundries and Historical Clerical Child Abuse with effect from 1 June 2020. The appointment was announced on 6 July 2020.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what additional staffing and structures are being put in place to enable GPs to take on triage duties in respect of Emergency Department attendances, as anticipated in the No More Silos document.

(AQW 5607/17-22)

Mr Swann: This is an area of policy in development. No decisions have been made at this time.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health, given that aerosol-generating procedures and treatments are permitted from 20 July, how his Department will assist dentists in accessing level 2 personal protection equipment.

(AQW 5754/17-22)

Mr Swann: I acknowledge that the availability of appropriate quantities of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is a key element in the restoration of comprehensive General Dental Services. Dentists normally source their own PPE from dental supply houses and other local or online providers.

At the end of June I agreed that dentists should be provided with PPE to assist them during the phased re-establishment of General Dental Services.

Although considerable efforts were made to secure a combination of Level 1 and Level 2 PPE, it was not possible to source the Level 2 component. Therefore the decision was taken to use the approximately £1million of funding solely for Level 1 PPE.

It was recognised that this meant that there was still an issue in respect of Level 2 PPE. In response, I have recently approved the allocation of an additional £3.8 million in funding to assist General Dental Practitioners (GDP) in the purchasing of the Level 2 PPE necessary to undertake Aerosol Generation Procedures (AGPs).

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health what logistical and financial support he plans to provide to dentists to help secure and pay for personal protective equipment.

(AQW 5860/17-22)

Mr Swann: Further to the response to your question, AQW 5745/17-22, on 03 August 2020, I have approved the allocation of an additional £3.8 million in funding to assist General Dental Practitioners (GDP) in the purchasing of the Level 2 PPE necessary to undertake Aerosol Generation Procedures (AGPs). This is in recognition that GDPs have been faced with additional costs due to the need to put in place enhanced PPE infection control requirements to allow for the resumption of non-urgent dental care involving AGPs.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health what arrangements are in place in the Western Health and Social Care Trust to ensure that Health Service patients requiring emergency dental treatment, and who continue to be unable to secure treatment at the dental practice at which they are registered, are able to access the treatment at the Urgent Dental Care clinics set up as part of the COVID-19 response.

(AQW 5911/17-22)

Mr Swann: Health Service dental patients in the Western Trust area requiring emergency dental treatment and who are unable to secure such treatment in the dental practice at which they are registered will still have access to emergency treatment. Such patients should be assessed by a dentist in their own practice who can then refer their patient to the hub at Dalriada Urgent Care for triage and, if appropriate, onwards referral for treatment at one of the five Urgent Dental Care Centres.

The acting Chief Dental Officer's letter of 17th July 2020 confirmed that all five UDCs will continue in 7 day operation until the end of August 2020. This arrangement will be kept under review.

Over the last few weeks dental practices have been receiving £1 million worth of level I PPE. On 31 July 2020 I agreed to an allocation of £3.8 million to dental practices for level II PPE. This will enable dental practices to provide comprehensive dental care for their patients.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact on the dental profession, and the future of the profession, of the level of departmental funding provision during the pandemic.

(AQW 5935/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of dentists registered to carry out health service treatment has increased by one third in Northern Ireland over the past decade with the number of dentists per head of population in Northern Ireland significantly higher than in England and Wales.

It is recognised that the restrictions on dental practice activity, necessary to protect public health in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, have had a significant impact on dental practices as they have not been able to provide normal levels of care.

In addition, the infection control requirements in terms of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) have increased the cost of resuming non-urgent care.

In response, the Department of Health put in place the Financial Support Scheme (FSS) which has made £16 million in payments to General Dental Practitioners to date whilst in July I announced that £1 million worth of Level 1 PPE would be provided at no charge to support dental practices as they resumed the provision of non-urgent care. In addition, dentists continue to receive allowances and continuing care payments as normal.

More recently, I have agreed that an additional £3.8 million in funding would be provided to dentists as support in respect of the additional requirements for Level 2 PPE.

The amount of funding support will be reviewed on an ongoing basis, to reduce the risk to the viability of the General Dental Service, in the context of the latest scientific evidence in respect of the Covid-19 restrictions on dental care activity.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to extend administrative support for Parkinson's specialist nurses across all Health and Social Care Trust areas.

(AQW 6062/17-22)

Mr Swann: A regional review of neurological services is currently underway; the work of the Neurology Review is critical in determining the changes needed to ensure neurology services are fit for purpose going forward. The Review incorporates six workstreams, including one on workforce which is well placed to consider all of the aspects required to underpin the design of future neurology services. I recognise that additional investment, recruitment and training is key to ensuring that we have the requirement to meet the needs of neurology patients.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to outline the current provision of neuropsychiatry services in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6063/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is currently no designated neuropsychiatry provision in Northern Ireland. Service users receive rehabilitation across a number of psychiatric specialisms and mental health settings which is a robust way of delivering the service.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health (i) to outline the progress made on safe staffing legislation; and (ii) the timescale under which it will be introduced in the Assembly.

(AQW 6064/17-22)

Mr Swann: Safe Staffing legislation is a commitment of the January 2020 Framework Agreement which resolved the Agenda for Change industrial dispute.

While progress has necessarily been paused during the period of the Covid-19 response, meetings of the Safe Staffing Framework Delivery Group met at the end of July and again in August.

I am committed to bringing this forward at the earliest legislative opportunity, however, the scope of the legislation has not yet been determined so it would not be possible to predict a timescale.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the number of; and (ii) the type of chronic health conditions that have resulted from positive COVID-19 cases.

(AQW 6080/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health does not hold that information at this time.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health why some parents of children with disability in Derry experienced a reduction in their care package during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown when the needs of their children with disability increased. **(AQW 6095/17-22)**

Mr Swann: Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, staff within children's disability services at the Western HSC Trust have continued to work hard to ensure the needs of children with a disability and their families were met.

Short break service provision was reduced to ensure the safety of staff and children. Children's Community Nursing short breaks at home were paused due to either families shielding or parental choice, however this service has recommenced. Across all services, direct face-to-face appointments were significantly reduced although an increased level of contact was provided via virtual platforms. In addition, Direct Payments continued and where appropriate were increased in line with an individual's assessed need.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether sufficient capacity exists within Translink's network to accommodate schools restarting in line with public health guidelines. **(AQW 6081/17-22)**

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I fully recognise the impact COVID-19 has had on our children's education. While home to school transport, including guidance, is the responsibility of the Minister of Education I am grateful for the work that has been undertaken by my officials, Translink and the Education Authority in respect of planning our transport needs for the start of the new school year. This is particularly important given that in addition to dedicated home to school services, many pupils use the main public transport network to travel to and from school.

Safety is always my top priority and work has been ongoing to introduce appropriate school transport from 1st September that aims to maximise services in order to help manage the number of pupils travelling at peak times. This will include operating extra school services and more "school only" services, to provide increased capacity as required. In addition, a number of mitigating safety measures are also being put in place such as recommending the use of face coverings, promoting good hygiene measures, encouraging parents to use alternative ways of getting to school such as walking or cycling, use of pre-paid tickets and advising that any children showing symptoms of COVID-19 should not travel to school.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on when the Inspector's report will be published for the A1 Junctions Phase 2 Public Inquiry. **(AQW 6082/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: At the end of the A1 Junctions Phase 2 Public Inquiry, the Inspector indicated that he wished to undertake a number of site meetings to ensure that he gives full consideration to all the issues raised. Due to the restrictions imposed by the Covid19 pandemic, these meetings were delayed.

The Department is now expecting the A1 Junctions Phase 2 Public Inquiry Inspector's report by early October. I will carefully consider the findings once received.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for her assessment of the proposed changes of the Highway Code in GB announced on 28 July; (ii) when Northern Ireland's Highway Code was last reviewed; and (iii) whether she has plans for a substantial review of the Highway Code as has taken place in GB. **(AQW 6083/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: The proposed changes to the GB Highway Code announced on 28 July 2020 concern improved road safety for cyclists, pedestrians and horse riders. The main changes propose introducing an explicit road user hierarchy with the vulnerable road users at the top. These proposals would mean priority for those walking or cycling over those turning into side streets and include;

- (a) clarifying existing rules on pedestrian priority on pavements, to advise that drivers and riders should give way to pedestrians crossing or waiting to cross the road;
- (b) providing guidance on cyclist priority at junctions to advise drivers to give priority to cyclists at junctions when travelling straight ahead;
- (c) establishing guidance on safe passing distances and speeds when overtaking cyclists and horse riders (1.5m space if driving under 30mph, and 2m if driving over 30 mph);
- (d) Detail on road priority and riding two abreast which aims to clarify a common source of conflict and confusion.

The proposals are out to consultation which closes on 27 October 2020. If the proposals are supported, a number of legislative changes will be required before they will be included in the Highway Code (GB).

I support the changes proposed that are aimed at improving safety for those walking or cycling. Road safety is a devolved matter and, as the consultation proceeds, I will consider whether similar measures should be introduced in Northern Ireland.

The NI Highway Code is normally reviewed when it is approaching its reprint date. The Northern Ireland version of the Highway Code was last reprinted as the 'Twentieth impression 2020' in January 2020. The current estimated reprint date is January 2022.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will commission a feasibility study concerning the extension of the segregated cycle lane beside the A2 Bangor to Belfast Road, from Ballyrobert to Holywood.
(AQW 6084/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to delivering safe routes that give people the freedom and confidence to walk and cycle as part of their everyday routine. This is an important way to achieve higher levels of sustainable transport and fewer car journeys.

While the concept of a segregated cycle lane along the A2 road between Ballyrobert and Holywood has merit, I am advised by officials that developing it would present significant challenges. I have asked for further information on this.

I am grateful for the many requests that my Department has received from elected representatives, Councils and other stakeholders. These requests are being considered as resources permit and, if feasible, will be prioritised alongside other schemes.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will oversee a funded transport plan that ensures goods can flow through Northern Ireland ports without delays or queues.
(AQW 6087/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I fully recognise the fundamental role that our Ports have in supporting strong economic performance and balanced regional growth. Effectively supporting the continuation of their ability to do so in a post-EU environment is a priority for my Department.

The UK Government Command paper clarified that, following EU Exit, there would be no requirement for new physical customs infrastructure, however there will be a need to expand some existing facilities at our Sea Ports for SPS checks.

While I do not currently have a dedicated fund to ensure the free flow of goods through our Ports, my Department continues to work with other departments of Government including DAERA and HMRC to assist on matters relating to Planning requirements and all issues pertaining to road infrastructure around Ports.

My Department previously ran a competition in 2019 for funding from a Port EU Exit Infrastructure fund that provided £2.5m funding, by way of grant, to help the Ports in their efforts to deal with the challenges an EU Exit would bring.

I am also currently taking forward a proposed Harbours Bill through the accelerated passage procedures, which is needed to increase the total loan and grant limit for sea ports. Increasing the loan and grant limit will help ensure that my Department is able to assist in any infrastructure developments required as a result of the pressures being placed on the ports by EU Exit SPS check facilities.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to engage with the British Government regarding the full devolution of vehicle registration.
(AQW 6092/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In the period up to July 2014, vehicle licensing and registration services were delivered in NI by the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) under the terms of an Agency agreement between the Department of the Environment (DOE) and the Department for Transport (DfT).

On 13 March 2014, the Minister for Transport, Stephen Hammond wrote to the Minister of the Environment, Mark Durkan, advising that he had decided to centralise vehicle registration and licensing services in Swansea from July 2014. A decision opposed by the then Environment Minister.

The decision followed a study initiated by (DfT) in 2011, to consider how the planned integration of the separate IT systems for vehicle licensing in NI and GB could best be used to deliver services to customers in NI and followed the decision by the DVLA to close all of its local and regional offices in Great Britain and the centralisation of all functions to Swansea.

Vehicle licensing is taxation and an excepted matter for which responsibility rests with the Secretary of State of Transport. I would be keen to see much greater fiscal powers devolved to the Executive and I am keen to work with Ministerial colleagues to this end.

Department of Justice

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Justice (i) for her assessment of the Stay Onside initiative; and (ii) for an update on any input she or her officials have had in relation to new community programmes which have been commissioned.
(AQW 6027/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I am delighted with the work my Department has been engaged in on the 'Stay Onside' Programme in partnership with the Irish Football Association (IFA), the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), and the

Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI). The programme has been specifically designed to work with prolific offenders within custody or the community, and uses football as a means to engage, up-skill and support them to make more positive choices.

As well as delivering pathways to football-based education, work experience and employment, the programme has provided valuable training on wider personal and social issues, including respect for all, mental and physical health and addictions, nutrition, first aid and finance. Many of these issues may have been a contributory factor to an individual's offending history, so the opportunity to address them as part of the overall programme was an important aspect of the work, and complements the rehabilitation work undertaken with them by the justice family.

In recent years the programme has been delivered in our three custodial establishments at Maghaberry, Magilligan and Hydebank Wood College, although the current pandemic has meant it has not yet been possible to run it in the current financial year. The feedback from participants has been overwhelmingly positive and we look forward to being able to reinstate the work when safe to do so.

In terms of community programmes, both the Belfast and Lisburn Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs) have supported the 'Stay Onside' Programme over the past two years through a small amount of grant funding. Feedback from our delivery partners, the IFA and Glentoran Academy, reports that as well as benefitting from education and training, including the achievement of formal qualifications, the activities deter participants from becoming engaged in crime and anti-social behaviour. Participants expressed increased confidence in the police and were more likely to show respect for them and for their communities. Several participants were also willing to act as peer mentors for future programmes.

In addition to this successful work, the Tackling Paramilitarism, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme has also approved funding of £69K for the Department for Communities to deliver a pilot 'Sporting Partners Project' involving the IFA, Ulster GAA, Ulster Rugby and Belfast Giants. The project aims to use the universal appeal of sport to provide physical activity, sports-based learning and support for individuals, targeting a cohort of hard to reach or vulnerable young people to try and prevent them from becoming involved in, or recruited into, paramilitary activity, organised crime or criminality.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Justice how much money has been allocated to the Attorney General's Office through the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme.
(AQW 6045/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Attorney General's Office receives funding through the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality, and Organised Crime Programme to deliver the 'It's Your Law' Project. The expansion of this project was a commitment within the Executive Action Plan as part of the overall commitment by the Executive to promote a culture of lawfulness.

Please see the table below that details the funding provided to the Attorney General's Office for the last four years (2016/17 – 2019/20) and what is projected for this year (2020/21) for the delivery of the "It's your Law" project.

Project	2016-17 £k	2017-18 £k	2018-19 £k	2019-20 £k	2020-21 £k	Total budget funded/ earmarked £k
'It's Your Law' Project	5	25	42	37	41	150

The aims of the project are: to promote lawfulness; to support law and order and the justice system; and to promote active citizenship in building a culture of lawfulness. It is aimed at the unemployed young people and young people in school who are educationally underachieving, with a particular focus on those schools/young people who are at risk of influence from paramilitary / organised crime. It is delivered in partnership with the Prince's Trust.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Justice, given that with current resources it will be 2028 before the current list of legacy and historic cases can be investigated, what additional funding her Department will make available to the office of the Police Ombudsman NI for legacy investigations.
(AQW 6053/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland have recently submitted a business case for additional funding for historical investigations and this is currently being considered by the Department.

Department for the Economy

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the membership of her Ministerial Trade Forum; (ii) how often the forum has met since its inception; (iii) the terms of reference for this forum; and (iv) the work programme of the forum.
(AQW 3760/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): The Ministerial Forum for Trade (MFT) is chaired by Greg Hands MP, Minister of State for International Trade Policy. In addition to me, other members include Minister Ivan McKee, MSP and Minister Eluned Morgan, AM.

The inaugural meeting of the Forum was held by video conference on 23rd January 2020. There have been three meetings to date.

The Forum's Terms of Reference are still in draft. I expect the Department for International Trade will publish the ToRs when they are finalised.

While a work programme has not been formalised it is expected that the Forum will build and maintain effective ministerial communication between all four administrations at key stages in the FTA lifecycle and in relation to key WTO decisions.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the timeframe for processing applications to the Business Support Grant Scheme.

(AQW 3942/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The £10,000 and £25,000 Business Support Grant Schemes closed on 20th May 2020. I welcome that over £338 million in grants have been issued to date. The Department understands the impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on businesses and fully recognises the need to get the remaining Business Support Grant Scheme payments issued as quickly as possible.

It is, of course, important to ensure that all the necessary validation processes are carried out in order to ascertain eligibility for the schemes and protect against fraud or payment to ineligible businesses, but applicants should be assured that the Department and Land & Property Services (LPS) will undertake to ensure payments are made as expeditiously as possible.

For the £10,000 Scheme, LPS has processed almost all valid applications received via the online application portal before the scheme closure of 20th May 2020, although it is still dealing with a small volume of residual appeal cases and late applications where exceptional circumstances have been demonstrated.

Remaining applications will be processed as quickly as possible.

Information on the number of businesses that have applied to the £25,000 Grant Scheme and received payment, can be accessed online via the following link: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-£25000-retail-hospitality-tourism-and-leisure-grant>

Here you can find information about the operation of the scheme to date. Based upon applications received this details applications by decision status (paid/rejected/being processed), and provides a facility to interrogate by District Council area, Parliamentary Constituency, and supported sector. Whilst all main scheme applications have been processed, this data will be updated on a regular basis until all rental, late & appealed applications are processed. As of 21st August 2020, one application remains for processing.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy how she will support mothers seeking full-time employment.

(AQW 4681/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This question has been transferred to my Department as it has responsibility for a range of services which can be used to help support mothers into full time employment. This includes up to £300 in a rolling 12 month period to purchase goods and services that will remove a barrier to employment thereby improving employability. We also provide financial assistance to unemployed people who find travel costs to attend job interviews prohibitive and deliver the Work Experience Programme, which helps improve employability of customers and provides funding for childcare while mothers undertake work experience placements.

From an employability perspective the Work Coach service provides tailored support to mothers seeking full-time employment which can include assistance with job search activity, providing upskilling opportunities, assistance with CV development, interview skills and general confidence building. In terms of financial support, where a mother is in receipt of Universal Credit, she may be able to claim back up to 85% of registered childcare costs if working or having secured a job offer. Costs of £646 for one child and £1108 for 2 or more children may be reimbursed per month.

My Department has been working on the Employability NI Initiative which will deliver a flexible offer that addresses current labour market needs with a particular emphasis on tackling the barriers to employment faced by those who are economically inactive, including those with family/caring commitments.

The Employability NI Initiative will deliver flexible, tailored support and interventions for each individual to help them on their work and wellbeing journey. I therefore expect that individual circumstances, which would include women and their specific barriers and needs, will benefit from this flexible and specific support and ultimately help women move closer to and into meaningful employment.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for the Economy to consider reprofiling the combined underspend from the three business support schemes her Department has rolled out to provide support to (i) sole traders; (ii) childcare; and (iii) those businesses who are above the £51,000 Net Asset Value and have received no financial support to date.

(AQW 5487/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I recognise that the impacts of the Covid-19 crisis continue to be felt across the Northern Ireland economy. Whilst I welcome that around £320million has been provided in support through the three existing business support measures, I recognise that the allocation of funds for the business support measures established by my Department are

not expected to be fully utilised. Following the closure of the schemes, a reallocation exercise has taken place and the underspend has been returned to Department of Finance.

In considering the approach to COVID-19 recovery it will be for the Executive to determine how funding, including that which may be available from grant related underspends, would be allocated to support economic recovery moving forward.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the OECD Skills Strategy Northern Ireland report's description of the diffused structure of careers guidance and whether she intends to discuss with the Minister for Education the proposal from the Pivotal think-tank for careers guidance to begin in schools at Key Stage 3, in order to encourage career aspiration amongst school pupils in the initial years of post-primary education and to increase the proportion of school leavers with relevant skills and qualifications.

(AQW 5822/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The OECD's 'Skills Strategy Northern Ireland' Report provides an assessment of the skills system in Northern Ireland, along with a wide range of recommendations that the Department is currently considering. I met with the Minister for Education on the 29th July to discuss the range of OECD recommendations related to our respective policy areas. We are both committed to ensure that we deliver better outcomes for children and young people and ensure that they can gain the skills and qualifications necessary to secure careers and fulfil their full potential.

We also discussed the importance of creating a "digital spine" by embedding digital skills as a core component of the school curriculum from primary school through to secondary education, for example teaching coding/programming to all primary school children. This will help create the foundations for digital skills becoming an essential part of a school child's educational life, and in time their work life too.

Careers education is currently part of the statutory curriculum for Key Stage 3, within the subject, 'Learning for Life and Work'. It is a crucial aspect of raising pupil awareness of the changing labour market and the skills that will be required within our economy. In this regard, we welcome the OECD's recommendations which will be considered as part of the review of the current careers strategy, 'Preparing for Success' and in tandem with the development of the new Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland.

I look forward to further discussions with you, and assembly colleagues, as this crucial work develops.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what investigation, and with what outcome, has been conducted into reversion to gas and other fossil fuels; and how does this marry with the Department's commitment to the reduction of carbon emissions.

(AQW 5890/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Although not absolutely clear what investigation your question refers to, if it relates to evidence of RHI Scheme participants reverting from using biomass to gas and other fossil fuels, the Department monitors heat output on the Scheme on an ongoing basis.

Separate to the RHI Scheme my Department is currently developing policy to support the achievement of the UK Government's legislated target of net-zero carbon by 2050. A new Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland will set out the way forward for a transition to a zero carbon energy sector.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy what support her Department gives to promoting co-operatives.

(AQW 5913/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I acknowledge the important contribution made by co-operatives to our communities and the NI economy. My Department actively engages with Co-operative Alternatives and UK Co-operatives to understand the key issues affecting the sector, and has been involved both in a working group to inform the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020. Officials will continue to work with them as we make secondary legislation to enact clauses that will support the sector.

The Department is committed to developing a new Economic Strategy that will set out the strategic framework and ambition required to achieve the Executive's long-term vision for the Northern Ireland economy of developing a more competitive, inclusive and greener economy.

Co-operative models have the potential to play a key role in meeting the Executive's vision. The model lends itself to promoting inclusive growth as well as generating economic growth and jobs.

The development of the Economic Strategy will be based upon a collaborative and partnership-based approach. The Department will work closely with key stakeholders across all sectors throughout the development process. I would welcome engagement with those in the Co-operatives sector in the development of the Strategy and in determining how we can best promote the sector.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for the Economy what process is used to ensure Jobs and Benefits Offices are made aware of employment opportunities in new or developing industries and the relevant training available to help people to access these opportunities.

(AQW 5941/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Co-operation between my Department and the Department for Communities (DfC) has been ongoing to ensure job opportunities are highlighted as effectively as possible throughout the Jobs and Benefits Office (JBO) network. A regular meeting is held between staff from my skills, economic and analytical teams, and their counterparts from DfC with responsibility for the JBO, tasked with looking how we can improve our offer and provide a more streamlined approach for individuals.

My Department's Careers Service works closely with DfC Employer Advisers and Work Coaches, and many Careers advisers are located in Jobs and Benefits Offices. Careers advisers provide impartial advice and guidance to clients of all ages, to help them make informed decisions about their future career paths, including employment opportunities in new and developing sectors and associated training opportunities. My Department also shares detailed economic and jobs data with DfC, highlighting the areas of opportunity, broken down to a regional level.

Each DfC Jobs and Benefits Office works closely with local employers to ensure that job opportunities, including those in new or developing industries, are discussed with people seeking employment. JBO Work Coaches will deliver a tailored response depending on the person, their skills and experience, and will direct them towards relevant training as needed to access these opportunities.

In addition to the training support available to people applying for these developing industry roles, the Department for Communities has both central and local employer engagement staff who work directly with employers to identify employment opportunities, support their promotion via the Department's free vacancy advertising service JobCentre Online, and highlight opportunities to staff within Jobs and Benefits Offices on a daily basis. These teams currently have collaborative relationships with both Department for the Economy and InvestNI, and in line with both Departments' Covid response, my Department is providing DfC with regular data and analysis, including online job postings by sector. These collaborative linkages will be strengthened to ensure close working.

As part of the promotion of our Assured Skills academies, contact is made by Assured Skills with the Department for Communities, Universal Credit operations team, who will disseminate the promoted opportunity to all Jobs and Benefit offices (JBO's). For those who are successful in their application onto an academy, training for in demand skills is provided through the FE/HE sector.

Prior to any opportunity being advertised the Bridge to Employment (BtE) team notify all JBO's of the opportunity. More recently the team have visited Job and Benefit Offices close to where the participating company/ies are situated to inform staff of the opportunities available and to promote the BtE programme.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy whether she plans to deliver a retail industry road map which sets out future tax and regulatory changes; and when can it be expected.

(AQW 5994/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Executive has set out its pathway for reopening this diverse sector, and I am working closely with the sector to ensure it can reopen in a safe and sustainable way. This has included publication of practical advice for safe work places <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>.

The retail sector in Northern Ireland is responsible for generating around £5.8 billion to the local economy, accounting for approximately 14% of total Northern Ireland GVA.

The Executive agreed to deliver two Business Support Grant Schemes during the initial stage of Covid 19. These were to help protect jobs, prevent business closures and promote economic recovery across the economy. My Department has taken the lead on delivering these schemes. To date, over £320 million of financial support has been provided with over 27,000 local businesses receiving grants, providing much needed support to those businesses facing hardship. Full details of the schemes are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/campaign/coronavirus-updates-support-your-business>

The Executive packages set up are in addition to schemes provided by UKG such the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, Coronavirus Self Employment Income Support Scheme, Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme and the Bounce Back Loan Scheme.

Tax is an excepted matter where Treasury is responsible. The Finance Minister has and will continue to press Treasury Ministers to use all the levers at their disposal so that the fullest possible support is to be made available to those businesses and sectors impacted by COVID-19.

I am working with Executive colleagues on the collective response to the ongoing economic, health and social impacts of the pandemic, which will include the retail sector.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm whether her Department will create a dedicated Business Transition Fund to help businesses meet the costs of adapting to any new requirements for checks, controls or administrative processes.

(AQW 5996/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Any new administration and associated cost to business will depend on the practical detail of the implementation of the Protocol which has not yet been agreed by UK government and the EU. I continue to consider how we could best support businesses. However, any measures I take to support business will depend both on what actions UK Government takes and on decisions on how the Protocol is implemented.

In particular, UK Government have announced that they will procure a Trader Support Scheme which would provide support with customs processes. I will need further detail on how this will be delivered and what other support UK Government will put in place before the Executive could finalise a support programme.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy what steps are being taken to ensure Northern Ireland students seeking university places in Great Britain are not disadvantaged following the changed approach to awarding A level qualifications. (AQW 6020/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Higher Education institutions are autonomous bodies and, as such, are responsible for their own admissions criteria. My Department has no remit to intervene in matters relating to entry level requirements.

In May, however, I worked with my UK counterparts on the introduction of a UK Admissions Package which is intended to stabilise the admissions landscape across the UK, prevent exploitative admissions practices, and safeguard student choice to ensure that no young person is disadvantaged.

The recent decision by my Executive colleague, the Minister of Education, with regard to the approach to awarding A Level qualifications in Northern Ireland, is entirely in keeping with those made by his counterparts in England and Wales. This is intended to ensure that NI domiciled students are not disadvantaged in applying to higher education institutions, whether those institutions are local or elsewhere in the UK.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on a tourism recovery plan for Northern Ireland. (AQW 6022/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am aware of the significant impact which COVID-19 has had on our tourism industry. The mitigations implemented at a national and local level (e.g. grant schemes, business rates relief, loan schemes etc.) have played an important part in helping to sustain many tourism and hospitality businesses through the recent difficult months.

Conscious of the importance of planning ahead and of the need to develop plans for recovery of tourism in Northern Ireland, I established the Tourism Recovery Steering Group which I Chair, to lead the planning and preparation for recovery.

The membership of the Steering Group comprises representation from relevant Government Departments, Tourism NI, Tourism Ireland, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, Visit Britain and tourism and hospitality industry representative bodies.

In recognition of the scale and complexity of the challenges, and the need for government and industry to work together to design and deliver a tourism recovery action plan, a Working Group was also established drawing together key stake holders across the industry and chaired by the CEO of Tourism NI.

The Working Group established 10 workstreams to identify the key issues facing the various sectors within the tourism industry and to recommend interventions required to address these issues. Task & Finish Groups were set up under the 10 workstreams to reflect the diverse nature of the industry and inform the Working Group

I have asked the Working Group in conjunction with the Task & Finish groups to develop a tourism recovery action plan to address key issues and actions as we move forward to rebuild the industry and protect jobs. The issues and initiatives identified by the Working Group and Task & Finish groups combined with work across Departments will inform the recovery plan

A substantive draft Action Plan will be presented to the Tourism Recovery Steering Group for initial consideration at its next meeting scheduled to be held on 2nd September.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what action the Department is taking to widen participation in Higher Education in Northern Ireland. (AQW 6023/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Widening Participation in higher education (HE) is a key priority for the Department for the Economy. My Department works with the sector to ensure that opportunities in HE are available to all, regardless of background.

HE providers that charge above the basic fee are required to spend a minimum of 10% of that additional fee income on activities and support to widen access and participation to under-represented groups including low income, young males, people with disabilities, care experienced and adult returners.

It is up to individual providers to determine how to use the additional fee income most effectively and efficiently but spending must be outlined in

Widening Access and Participation Plans submitted to the Department annually for approval.

Access to Success has been our regional HE widening participation strategy since 2012 and will be subject to review in the near future. My officials will be working with a range of stakeholders in the HE sector to take this forward. Ultimately, I want to make sure that there continues to be appropriate support available to students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups to ensure they can progress into and through HE.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will implement a financial support scheme for individual businesses forced to close due to COVID-19 cases amongst staff or customers.

(AQW 6025/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: To date my Department has provided over £320 million of support through the Business Support Schemes to mitigate against the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, to prevent business closure and to retain jobs. In addition to the three business support measures, a wide range of local support has been put in place by the Executive, including a four month business rates holiday for all businesses with the sectors hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic paying no rates for the full financial year up until 31 March 2021.

As we progress through the pandemic, I recognise that businesses may have to close as a result of outbreaks or restrictions. In considering further interventions, it will be for the Executive to determine how future funding would be allocated to support economic recovery moving forward.

Businesses may claim for employee costs through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme if forced to close. This is on the basis that costs for any employees have been previously claimed prior to 30 June 2020. Further information is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme>

I would encourage all businesses to follow the available guidance on social distancing measures to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what action she will take to support and adequately fund local Further and Higher Education institutions to ensure opportunities for young people, as well as maximising the economic benefits of these institutions.

(AQW 6026/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

Further Education

For the 2020/21 period, my Department has already allocated a resource budget of £211.3 million to the Further Education (FE) sector, representing over 20% of the Department's resource budget. The allocation includes £22.8 million of additional funding to colleges this year.

My Department initially secured £1.078 million of additional resource funding for the FE colleges which was allocated as part of June monitoring. This was used to provide laptops, related equipment and software for financially vulnerable learners and staff to assist with digital and remote study and working during the initial lockdown period.

More recently, I secured £5.5 million to support the safe resumption of learning in further education, this will provide additional IT equipment, cover additional staff costs and embed appropriate measures to provide for safe resumption of further education delivery at campuses across Northern Ireland. An additional £0.43 million has also been allocated to meet the cost to date of funding direct payment of Free School Meal Allowances into the households of almost 1,900 eligible school-age FE students.

In addition capital investment of circa £34.4 million has been allocated in the current financial year to enable colleges to progress the delivery of the planned capital works programme. This will also fund essential equipment to deliver critical skills for the Northern Ireland economy and achieve the strategic outcomes which I and the Executive have set.

It is important that FE colleges are enabled to welcome as many learners as possible to return to college and this funding will help progress this.

Higher Education (HE)

HE Enrolments for 2020/21

My Department has already increased the number of higher education places, even before the change in policy on AS and A Level grades. For the academic year 2020-21, the Department has already looked to the potential impact of Covid19 creating an additional demand for local places. Through the June monitoring round, an additional allocation of £1.5 million was secured which would deliver an increase of 5% funded places over three years. At the end of three years, the recurring commitment to maintain that 5% uplift will be £7.1 million. This will see an additional 1,232 places available within the local HE sector, with 410 available for academic year 2020-21.

My Department advised the universities that it is reinstating maximum student number (MaSN) to the level it was in 2015 prior to budgetary cuts which were applied to the sector which saw an agreed reduction to MaSN. Including the 410 mentioned this will increase the MaSN for the sector for 2020-21 by 1,730.

Until our universities have received access to the full range of revised grades for all applicant students, they will not be able to confirm places for students or otherwise. As such, we don't yet know whether the overall quantum will actually remain fairly stable for Northern Ireland as a whole, with any potential increases focussed only in a single institution, or whether we will see increases across the institutions.

While we will need to examine the issue in the round, taking into account the impacts on different institutions, the higher education sector as a whole, and the impact on the FE colleges, I am very pleased that my Executive colleagues share my

belief that we have a responsibility to our young people, and have agreed to provide any additional funding which may be required.

HE Mobility

International students are vital to our universities from an economic and social perspective, providing diversity on campus by exposing local students to different cultures and different ways of thinking, and by generating income and enabling universities to continue to maintain and develop high quality teaching and learning for local students. I have therefore raised the subject of our HEIs' difficulty in attracting international students directly with Minister Donelan, Minister of State for Universities, and have written to the Home Office outlining the issues and requesting further support. I will continue to seek bold and proactive measures in the area of immigration and visa issues to assist our HEIs achieve their international student aspirations.

Widening Participation

My Department requires that HE providers that charge above the basic fee must spend a minimum of 10% of that additional fee income on activities and support to widen access and participation to HE. HE providers must detail this spending in widening access and participation plans which are submitted to my Department for review and approval on an annual basis. Providers are required to determine the most effective way to spend this money which is used for direct financial support to students, outreach and retention activities. This is a means of ensuring there are opportunities for young people from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds to enter and progress through HE.

HE in FE

There are a range of opportunities for young people to study HE within the FE Colleges. For various reasons, the FE sector has not met HE enrolment targets in recent years. My Department is working with the sector to address this in order to ensure this HE pathway, which offers routes to employment and progression opportunities for young people, is fully utilised.

Research

Universities play a key role in sustaining and growing a vibrant economy, particularly in a small economy such as Northern Ireland. Recent Studies by London Economics found that Queen's and Ulster Universities contribute a total of £3.2 billion to the UK economy. It is estimated that every £1million invested in research activity at Queen's and Ulster generates an additional £3.9 million and £3.17 million respectively across the UK economy.

The role of the higher education research base will be vital as we seek to rebuild our economy in the wake of the Covid19 pandemic. My Department has already provided an additional £5.6 million to support Queen's and Ulster University's research functions at this time, and is actively exploring opportunities to attract further funding for local university research.

Employer Skills

Through my Department, the Assured Skills programme continues to be delivered both by Further and Higher education institutions in response to business needs. In response to the pandemic, the Assured Skills team reacted quickly to the needs of business and in working closely with both FE and HE training providers, successfully transitioned from classroom based learning to delivering online Academies.

Companies coming out of lockdown are very encouraged by this new way of remote learning and as at 21 August 2020, eight academies are at various stages of recruitment and delivery, with two completed, resulting in 38 of the 41 participants gaining employment.

In June 2020, 150 free places were funded by the Department for the Economy (£307,000) for a Post-Graduate Certificate in Software Development at Queen's University Belfast. This part-time course offered an opportunity, for those whose careers were impacted by COVID19, to upskill individuals in a subject area anticipated to be in demand for future economic growth.

The Skills Focus programme, delivered by my Department across Northern Ireland by the six FE colleges, is targeted at companies with fewer than 250 employees, and is now offering fully funded upskilling for employees including those who are furloughed. The 25% cost to businesses has been removed, until 31 March 2021, to support companies throughout the pandemic.

In June 2020, my Department published 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy', a framework for the next 12-18 months to build a more competitive, inclusive and greener economy that delivers higher paying jobs, a highly skilled workforce and a more regionally balanced economy

My Department is currently developing a new Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland. It is clear that as we continue to rebuild our economy, for the benefit of all Northern Ireland's citizens, strong, strategic investment in the skills system will be vital. The skills of our people are Northern Ireland's most important resource.

I will continue to make the case for prioritisation of skills funding to my colleagues in the Executive, Assembly and across civic society.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what criteria she has chosen for the selection of maritime consultants on the future of HMS Caroline; and (ii) in view of the fact that her Department does not own the ship, what legal basis she has for engaging such consultants.

(AQW 6031/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) Following the decision to temporarily close HMS Caroline (HMSC) until 31st December 2020, my Department has appointed independent external consultants to identify options for the long term future of the attraction in Belfast. In addition, in order to consider all the options for HMSC, it is necessary to determine the costs of transporting the Ship to the Historic Dockyard in Portsmouth, in the event that it is necessary to meet this obligation.

My officials are working to appoint a specialist marine consultant to take forward this work over the coming weeks. Central Procurement Directorate is currently taking forward a tender process to appoint an appropriately qualified and experienced Marine Consultant to scope and fully assess all viable options for HMSC's removal, transportation and relocation in Belfast or handover to the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN), Portsmouth. This will include reporting on costs, risks and associated timeframes. The criteria set for selecting this consultant includes the necessity to have experience of a similar undertaking, possession of relevant professional qualifications and an outline of an appropriate methodology and approach. Together with the work of the consultants in assessing the options for the future of the attraction, this work will inform the way forward for HMSC in Belfast.

- (ii) Under an Agreement signed in 2012, the Department leases HMSC from NMRN, which owns the Ship. In the event this Agreement is terminated, the Department is responsible for the relocation of the Ship to Portsmouth. Therefore, in order to be able to fully consider all the options for HMSC, it is also necessary to determine the costs of relocation of the Ship in Belfast or to the Historic Dockyard in Portsmouth. We have discussed the appointment of marine consultants with NMRN and it will be an important stakeholder as the project moves forward. NMRN has already acknowledged our right to carry out this work and the Department will ensure that any proposals for the relocation of HMS Caroline are consistent with the conservation needs of the Ship.

It is also important to note that the full attraction also includes blocks 1 – 3 of The Pump House and the Alexandra Dock and Wharf areas.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for the Economy what financial assistance is available for students from Northern Ireland who wish to study veterinary science at Warsaw University, or any other university in Poland.

(AQW 6039/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Under the Education (Student Support (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 (as amended) students from Northern Ireland, who are studying for a higher education qualification in another EU Member State, such as Poland, are not eligible to apply for tuition fees, maintenance grant or maintenance loan support from this Department.

However, the principle of free movement within the EU does apply to students and their associated right to study in other Member States. The policy on charging tuition fees varies across Member States. If a Member State waives tuition fees or provides fee loans to its domiciles then it must do the same for domiciles from other Member States. This is because a tuition fee loan (or indeed a fee waiver) is considered as part of the conditions of access to education. There is no such obligation for Member States to provide maintenance support to students from other EU Member States.

The Polish Government's student support policies are a matter for them and I would therefore recommend that any interested students contact the relevant authorities or their University to ascertain what support may be available. The following links may be useful: <https://educationpoland.pl/> and <http://www.european-funding-guide.eu/articles/funding-overview/financing-your-studies-poland>.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy what further actions or measures her Department will put in place to support the independent travel agency sector which has been one of the hardest hit sectors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 6051/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In recent months, the NI Executive and UK Government have introduced a wide range of support measures to businesses across all sectors, including independent travel agents. These were established to mitigate against the worst impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, to prevent businesses from closing and to retain jobs. The financial packages include, but are not restricted to the following:

- Job retention and Self-employment schemes, both now extended;
- Business Support Grants;
- Business Interruption Loans;
- Rates Holidays and other Rates Relief measures;
- Charities Fund; and
- Increased access to more unemployment benefits.

To date, my Department has provided over £320 million of support to over 30,000 businesses through the Business Support Schemes for large, small and micro-businesses throughout Northern Ireland.

I do not underestimate how difficult a time this is for all concerned and I continue to examine and pursue further means to support the local economy in whatever way possible.

In considering further interventions, it will be for the Executive to determine future funding to support economic recovery moving forward. I am also working closely with others, both within government and with key stakeholders from various industries, including the Tourism sector, on an economic recovery plan.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what plans Invest NI has to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland around the world.

(AQW 6069/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is currently considering plans for marking the centenary and has had discussions with Invest NI on a number of options. I will update the Member when plans are at a suitable stage.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how she intends to address the impact of the amended AS and A level grades on universities place numbers; and (ii) whether additional places will be funded if required.

(AQW 6076/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Until our universities have received access to the full range of revised grades for all applicant students, and have processed these, they will not be able to confirm places for students or otherwise. It will only be at this point that my Department and the NI Executive will be able to assess whether additional places are required, and where they may be required.

I have already sought and received agreement in principle from Executive colleagues that, if there is a need for additional higher education places, then the Executive will provide funding for such places.

This is of course a very fluid situation at present, and outcomes will only become clearer when the local universities have finalised their acceptances. Once the quantum of any additional required places has been finalised, I will cost this out and put a further submission to the Executive.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy what measures will be put in place by her Department to ensure that Northern Ireland firms are not at a competitive disadvantage, relative to the rest of Great Britain despite the potential new costs, in terms of tariffs, paperwork or staff hours.

(AQW 6088/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The measures that would place NI businesses at a competitive disadvantage would be taken by UK Government. It is vital that NI businesses are not placed at a competitive disadvantage compared with other members of the UK internal market. I will continue to press the UK government, and to work with the other Devolved Administrations, so that NI businesses are not at a competitive disadvantage in the UK market.

In recent weeks, the UK government has published information regarding its vision for the UK internal market – including the commitment for NI goods to have unfettered access to the GB market – and for the procurement of the Trader Support Service. It is important that we continue to engage in such policies to ensure the best possible outcome for NI businesses and consumers.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy what mechanisms will be put in place by her Department to manage regulatory divergence over time between Great Britain and Northern Ireland while the Protocol is in place.

(AQW 6089/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The responsibility for managing regulatory divergence relating to the Protocol lies with the UK Government as many of the requirements, such as those on customs administration and tariffs, VAT, excise and manufactured goods regulation are reserved matters.

I have and will continue to push to protect Northern Ireland business and consumer's access to our most important market in Great Britain. I expect to see the UK Government deliver in full on its commitments to legislate to ensure unfettered access and to preserve Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market.

In relation to devolved matters which can impact trade, to protect the functioning of the UK's internal market, officials in my Department continue to engage with the UK, Scottish and Welsh Governments to develop a series of common frameworks across policy areas where powers are being repatriated from the EU.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy what measures will be put in place by her Department to ensure unfettered access while protecting the reputation and integrity of Northern Ireland produce post-Brexit.

(AQW 6090/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: It is a priority for me to ensure Northern Ireland businesses continue to have unfettered access to our most important market in Great Britain. I want to protect and preserve NI's place as an integral part of the UK internal market.

Delivering unfettered access is primarily a reserved matter and is therefore the responsibility of the UK Government. However, I have been engaging with stakeholders, including those in the agri-food sector and other manufacturers across NI, and making representations on their behalf to ensure their voices are heard by the UK Government as it develops this policy.

I intend to closely examine the legislation, once this is forthcoming, to ensure it meets the requirements of our stakeholders and protects the reputation of our manufacturers across all sectors as well as that of our high quality local produce.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for the Economy what budget her Department has to assist universities and colleges with a potentially higher than usual intake from the 2020/21 academic year.

(AQW 6126/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

Further Education (FE)

For the 2020/21 period, my Department has allocated resource funding of £211.3 million to the FE sector, representing over 20% of the Department's resource budget. This allocation included £22.8 million of additional funding to colleges this year.

In addition to this £1.078 million of additional resource funding was provided to FE colleges as part of June monitoring. This was used to provide laptops, related equipment and software for financially vulnerable learners and staff to assist with digital and remote study and working during the initial lockdown period.

More recently, I secured £5.5 million to embed appropriate measures to provide for safe resumption of further education delivery at campuses across Northern Ireland. An additional £0.43 million has also been allocated to meet the cost to date of funding direct payment of Free School Meal Allowances into the households of almost 1,900 eligible school-age FE students.

Capital investment of circa £35 million has been allocated in the current financial year to enable colleges to progress the delivery of the planned capital works programme. This will also fund essential equipment to deliver critical skills for the Northern Ireland economy and achieve the strategic outcomes which I and the Executive have set.

It is important that FE colleges are enabled to welcome as many learners as possible to return to college and this funding will help progress this.

Higher Education (HE)

HE Enrolments for 2020/21

My Department has already increased the number of higher education places, even before the change in policy on AS and A Level grades. For the academic year 2020-21, the Department has already looked to the potential impact of Covid19 creating an additional demand for local places. Through the June monitoring round, an additional allocation of £1.5 million was secured which would deliver an increase of 5% funded places over three years. At the end of three years, the recurring commitment to maintain that 5% uplift will be £7.1 million. This will see an additional 1,232 places available within the local HE sector, with 410 available for academic year 2020-21.

My Department advised the universities that it is reinstating maximum student number (MaSN) to the level it was in 2015 prior to budgetary cuts which were applied to the sector which saw an agreed reduction to MaSN. Including the 410 mentioned, this will increase the MaSN for the sector for 2020-21 by 1,730.

Until our universities have received access to the full range of revised grades for all applicant students, and have processed these, they will not be able to confirm places for students or otherwise. As such, we don't yet know whether the overall quantum will actually remain fairly stable for Northern Ireland as a whole, with any potential increases focussed only in a single institution, or whether we will see increases across the institutions.

While we will need to examine the issue in the round, taking into account the impacts on different institutions, the higher education sector as a whole, and the impact on the FE colleges, I am very pleased that my Executive colleagues share my belief that we have a responsibility to our young people, and have agreed to provide any additional funding which may be required. The exact funding required will be costed, once we have full details of any additional places required.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy to provide an update on the creation of a trusted trader scheme to allow for the movement of goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland after 31 December 2020 reflecting the needs of businesses and consumers.

(AQW 6141/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Responsibility for processes for goods between GB and NI sits with the UK government. As such I cannot provide an update on whether they have progressed a trusted trader policy for this trade.

I would support any measures such as a trusted trader scheme which can reduce the burden on businesses and ensure trade between NI and GB continues to flow.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has prepared answers to the below issues in light of the eventuality that the UK Government fails to have the requirement for exit summary declarations lifted on NI-GB movement; (i) what this will cost and who will bear this cost; (ii) what training support packages will be given to NI firms; (iii) where the customs office of exit will be; (iv) can the exit summary declaration be submitted electronically, and to whom; (v) how long in advance of the consignment arriving at the port of departure must paperwork be submitted; (vi) what is the procedure for clearing a consignment at the port of exit, and what time this will require; (vii) how can goods manufactured in Northern Ireland, but stored in Ireland or shipped via Dublin before delivery to Great Britain, avoid the costly task of transit

formalities in order to remain competitive within the UK internal market; (viii) whether a simplified approach recognising the nature of all-island supply chains and the use of Dublin Port for just in time freight to Great Britain possible; and (ix) would it be recognised by the UK and EU to ensure continued unfettered access of Northern Irish goods to the GB market.

(AQW 6142/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I continue to press the UK Government for clarity on these issues and others. It is right that internal UK trade should not be subject to any unnecessary administrative or financial burdens. Great Britain is by far our largest market and it is vital that NI businesses continue to enjoy unfettered access to it and remain competitive within it.

As your question is about how customs will be implemented and this is not a matter within my remit, I cannot provide the detailed answers you seek.

Recent guidance published following the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster's visit in August restated the UK Government's commitments to unfettered access and Northern Ireland's place in the UK internal market.

I expect to see legislation confirming the treatment of NI firms' access to the GB market in very short order.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 11 September 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Frew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister where within the five-step plan can (i) weddings; (ii) caravan parks; and (iii) podiatrists open or take place.
(AQW 4184/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): We are committed to the Executive's agreed process of continuous review of the restrictions put in place to slow the spread of Coronavirus.

Currently, it is the case that weddings, both indoors and outdoors, are permitted with maximum numbers determined by the venue on a risk assessed basis; caravan parks are permitted to open; and chiropody (podiatrist) practices may conduct business.

In all circumstances, it is important that those responsible for the provision of businesses and services ensure appropriate adherence to relevant public health and industry guidance.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to hotels being allowed to take future bookings, whether this includes (i) self-catering establishments; (ii) bed and breakfast establishments; and (iii) all others offering services in the tourism sector.
(AQW 4361/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: All forms of tourist accommodation were allowed to take advance bookings from 8th June 2020.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the compatibility with the independence of the Northern Ireland Civil Service to have the Head of this Civil Service chosen in a process culminating in a selection interview with the First Minister and deputy First Minister.
(AQW 5893/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Recruitment policy for the NICS recognises that there are a very small number of competitions, including that for the Head of the Civil Service, in which Ministers may wish to have an involvement. The policy has been designed to ensure that all appointments, including those with ministerial involvement, are made on merit and are free from personal or political partiality. Ministerial involvement is also a feature of similar competitions in other administrations.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to COVID-19 financial support, to confirm when affected farmers and sectors will receive payment.
(AQO 585/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I fully understand the importance of making these payments worth up to £21.4m to those farm and horticulture businesses that have been hardest hit financially as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is a primary focus for my Department to issue payments as quickly as possible.

The Agricultural Commodities (Coronavirus, Income Support) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2020 which covers the dairy, beef and sheep sectors opened for applications yesterday, 7th September. Applications for the potato sector will open tomorrow, Wednesday 9th September.

The scheme will remain open for the dairy, beef and sheep sectors until midnight on the 23rd September and for the potato sector it will close at midnight on the 30th September.

Processing of payments for the 11,300 eligible dairy, beef and sheep farm businesses will begin immediately after the closing date and I expect that those payments worth some £18.3m will have been made within two weeks of that date.

Payments to eligible potato businesses will be processed following the closing date and as potato business are required to submit further evidence, payments may take a longer period of time to issue, depending on accuracy of information received.

Full details of the scheme, including eligibility criteria and how to complete the application process can be found on the DAERA website.

The Ornamental Horticulture Industry (Coronavirus, Financial Assistance) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2020 will open on a later date in September and I will announce further details on this in due course.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs given the recent collapse in prices, how he will support wool producers.

(AQO 587/17-22)

Mr Poots: The £25m funding package that was announced by the Executive in May has been a welcome boost to the Agriculture and Horticulture industry. In allocating this funding I must ensure the funding packages that are developed comply with State Aid rules.

I am aware of the difficult trading conditions that currently exist for wool as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as this year's wool hasn't yet been marketed, support payments cannot be made as this could potentially interfere with the future market prices.

My officials and I are continuing to meet with industry stakeholders and are monitoring the impact of COVID-19 on the market for wool. We are exploring options as to how the demand and market for wool could be enhanced. The need for further support will be assessed as circumstances evolve.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will provide support for beef suckler farms in the distribution of COVID-19 crisis funding.

(AQO 588/17-22)

Mr Poots: Since the NI Executive announced the £25 Million COVID-19 Support fund I have consulted widely with a range of industry stakeholders and representatives on a regular basis to discuss their concerns and proposals on how sectors should be supported.

During those discussions, there was a clear acceptance of the need for support to be targeted at those farm businesses hardest hit financially as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The support schemes that have been developed are targeted towards those most in need, are evidence-based and will be distributed on an equitable basis.

The Agricultural Commodities (Coronavirus, Income Support) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2020 opened yesterday, 7th September. It will benefit more than 11,300 farm businesses and deliver over £7.3m of much needed support to the beef and sheep sector. This scheme covers the dairy, beef, sheep and potato sectors with the livestock element of the scheme open until 23 September.

Suckler beef farm businesses that slaughtered beef cattle, cull cows or bulls between 29 March and 16 May, may be eligible for a payment of £40 per head and a second payment of £33 per head if they slaughtered the same types of cattle between 16 February and 30 June. They may also qualify for payments on cattle they sold to other farmers for finishing and slaughter if they were the last registered keeper of the animal on 15 February and / or 28 March. The payments are subject to meeting eligibility criteria in relation to who was the last registered keeper on the qualifying dates.

Specific details of the scheme, including eligibility criteria and how to complete the application process, can be found on the DAERA website.

I also fully understand that the autumn and early winter period is a critical time for suckler beef farms with many farm businesses marketing weaned calves and store beef cattle. We cannot rule out the possibility of further market disturbance during this period as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. For this reason I have retained a budget of just over £7m. This will allow me to address additional issues and challenges COVID-19 may present for the agriculture and horticulture industry in the weeks and months ahead.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline the measures taken by his Department to protect the hen harrier and other birds of prey.

(AQO 589/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Hen Harrier, and indeed all birds of prey, are protected under the Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 (as amended).

Protection is also afforded through Planning and other regulatory processes. DAERA provides environmental advice to Planning Authorities on development proposals where there is potential for impact on these species and it is the responsibility of the Planning Authority to make decisions on whether to approve or refuse planning permission.

Within designated sites, protection of these species is also achieved through a permitting system under the Environment Order (NI) 2002. This aims to ensure any activities or operations are carried out in line with the conservation objectives of the site. In addition, my officials provide advice to other schemes, permitting regimes, plans etc where there is the potential to impact Hen harrier and other birds of prey. This advice is extended to other public bodies who have a general duty to further the conservation interest of protected sites under the Environment Order (NI) 2002, and indeed to conserve biodiversity more generally, under the 'Duty' in the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act (NI) 2011.

Due to their low breeding densities and wide-ranging behaviour, there is limited scope to designate protected areas specifically for birds of prey. DAERA has classified three suitable areas as Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for the conservation and protection of birds of prey under the EU Birds Directive in Northern Ireland. These SPAs are Slieve Beagh - Mullaghfad - Lisnaskea for breeding Hen Harrier, Antrim Hills for breeding Hen Harrier and Merlin, and Rathlin Island for Peregrine Falcon.

NIEA have embarked on a 4 year work programme which will see the development of Conservation Management Plans for Northern Ireland's most important protected areas – 54 Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and a number of Special Protection Areas (SPAs). These will set out the conservation measures necessary to restore these sites to favourable conservation status.

With respect to Special Protection Areas which have been designated for birds of prey interest, Conservation Management Plans are being developed for Antrim Hills SPA and Slieve Beagh – Mullaghfad - Lisnaskea SPA. These will provide vital information on the habitat requirements for the bird species of interest and the pressures and threats impacting the species, to best inform conservation actions to ensure protection of Hen Harrier and other species, as well as conservation of habitat range.

In addition, DAERA participates in the Partnership For Action Against Wildlife Crime (Northern Ireland) group (PAW NI), together with Police Service of Northern Ireland and environmental non-government organisations. The PAW NI Raptor sub-group collates information on persecution of birds of prey, and is involved in a number of initiatives including nest surveillance and protection.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has any plans to support fishermen on Lough Neagh with a financial package to mitigate against financial losses caused by COVID-19.
(AQO 591/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am keen to provide support to the Lough Neagh fishermen and have asked officials to explore the use of the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund. The package would be based on income foregone during the time of the pandemic and I am hoping to announce further details within the next week.

A further £250k scheme of support for inland fishermen who are involved in the Lough Neagh eel and scale-fish fisheries is currently being finalised.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to confirm the number of Borough Council recycling centres that are not yet open due to COVID-19 restrictions.
(AQO 592/17-22)

Mr Poots: The latest figures received by my Department show that of the ninety-six Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) in Northern Ireland, a total of ninety sites have now re-opened. Councils are working to re-open the remaining six sites as soon as possible.

Department for Communities

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities whether she will maintain the measures introduced to enable claimants to access Jobs and Benefit Office services during the COVID-19 pandemic.
(AQW 6115/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): While we had to close our network of Jobs & Benefits offices during the Covid-19 crisis, arrangements were made for people to contact the Department either digitally, or by phone. More recently, we re-opened our network of Jobs & Benefits offices for people needing help to apply for uniform grants or free school meals. Plans to assist a broader range of vulnerable customers by appointment and in a manner which is safe for both customers and our staff are currently being progressed in consultation with staff and Trade Union representatives.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department will establish a new strategy for the independent advice sector.
(AQW 6116/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Access to good quality, independent advice is important in addressing poverty in our communities.

The New Decade New Deal Agreement commits to the development of a suite of social inclusion strategies which includes an Anti-Poverty Strategy. A co-design, co-production approach will be applied to the development and delivery of these strategies, taking into account the views of key stakeholders at all stages of the process. I will make an announcement on the development of an Anti-Poverty Strategy imminently.

Access to advice services will be a key element of the Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what support she will provide to Universal Credit claimants who are in rent arrears as a result of the error made in the housing element being sent to them directly rather than their landlords.

(AQW 6117/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department works with tenants and landlords to ensure the prompt and timely provision of rental and bank account details so that the direct payment can be put in place as early as possible. This is important to minimise the risk of arrears.

As part of this work a number of enhancements to the service have been introduced to assist landlords to more easily provide rental and bank account details. The introduction of the Landlord Portal for social rented sector landlords in September 2018 has allowed landlords to request the direct payment arrangement as part of the social housing costs verification process, reducing the level of clerical intervention. For private rented sector landlords, the Department introduced an NI Direct online facility in September 2019 to allow private sector landlords to provide Universal Credit with their bank account details through a secure online form and to request the setting up of the direct payment to landlord arrangement.

While the Universal Credit statement has always provided a full breakdown of entitlement including details of housing costs, the Department enhanced the customer's statement in May 2019 to provide a further breakdown of the housing support a household is entitled to, and additionally, whether it has been paid directly to the customer's landlord or the customer. As the Universal Credit Housing Element will not in all circumstances cover the full rental costs, in these cases the Universal Credit statement clearly states whether the Universal Credit payment to the landlord covers the full rental amount or not.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Communities why Northern Ireland is not implementing the Kickstart Scheme, aimed at helping 16-24 year old's gain work placements, given that the rest of the UK is offering the scheme.

(AQW 6157/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is currently developing an equivalent scheme for young people aged 16 to 24 years old.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of (i) households affected by the two-child maximum tax credit rule; and (ii) children in those households, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 6172/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As my Department is not responsible for the payment of Tax Credits we are unable to provide the above requested information. All statistical data related to Tax Credits can be obtained through HMRC.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what is the average amount deducted from households affected by the two-child maximum tax credit rule.

(AQW 6173/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As my Department is not responsible for the payment of Tax Credits we are unable to provide the above requested information. All statistical data related to Tax Credits can be obtained through HMRC.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to provide financial support to new claimants for Universal Credit during the five-week wait for the first payment

(AQW 6174/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Immediate financial support is available for anyone struggling financially while waiting for their first payment of Universal Credit by applying for a repayable advance payment of up to 100% of their estimated entitlement. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the standard allowance entitlement was increased, from 6 April for one year, by £86.67 per month for everyone claiming Universal Credit.

Further financial support was introduced in July 2020 via a two-week 'run-on' of benefit payment for new Universal Credit claims for people who were previously claiming Income Support, Jobseeker's Allowance or Employment and Support Allowance.

Anyone suffering financial hardship during the five-week period can also apply for support from Discretionary Support or to the Universal Credit Contingency Fund.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of whether domestic abuse and the abuse of older people are two separate issues.

(AQW 6182/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Domestic abuse is a wide-ranging scourge which can impact on all sections of society and all age groups.

Unfortunately, Abuse of older people comes in many different forms, and could include domestic abuse

The Executive's Active Ageing Strategy, which DfC leads on, contains actions which are aimed at supporting older people across a wide spectrum of issues, including the fear of crime amongst older people.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Communities how many Personal Independence Payment decisions were appealed during (i) 2017; (ii) 2018; and (iii) 2019.

(AQW 6215/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There have been 21,554 appeals lodged in relation to Personal Independence Payments claims from April 2017 to March 2020; each year is set out in the table below.

Personal Independence Payment Appeals received

2017/18	7329
2018/19	8752
2019/2020	5473

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities when an equivalent of the Green Homes Grant scheme will be available in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6234/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department of Finance has informed me that following the British Chancellor's announcement on 8 July, Treasury is undertaking further refinement work, following which will receive additional funding as a Barnett Consequential. The Executive will then decide how any additional funding will be allocated.

The Department currently fund two grant Schemes aimed at reducing fuel poverty by increasing the energy efficiency of households the Affordable Warmth Scheme and the Boiler Replacement Scheme.

Since the introduction of the Affordable Warmth Scheme in September 2014 a total of 34,194 energy efficiency measures have been installed in 20,710 homes, at a cost just under £77m.

A total of 37,079 boilers have been replaced under the Boiler Replacement Scheme since its introduction in 2012, at a total cost of £20.5m.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities whether she will amend the Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance to provide an extension for those who fail to apply within seven days of the flood.

(AQW 6248/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department follows the guidance issued by the then Department of Finance and Personnel in 2004 for the Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance. This guidance sets out the criteria by which householders are assessed to ascertain their eligibility for the £1,000 payment. One of these criteria is that the flooding must be reported to the local council within 7 days of the flooding event.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities to detail the process by which she activated the Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance on 25 August 2020.

(AQW 6249/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 26 August 2020, a Resilience Manager representing the councils contacted my Officials to inform them of internal household flooding in a number of council areas. In line with agreed protocol, my Officials then sought approval from the Department of Finance (DoF) to activate a Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance. Once DoF approval was received I activated the Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance from 26 August 2020 – 25 September 2020.

A Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance had been in place from 25 July 2020 until 25 August 2020 following reports of flooding on 25 July 2020 in a number of council areas.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities whether the Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance will automatically reactivate when it expires on 25 September 2020.

(AQW 6250/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance is valid for a period of 1 month following activation. The current scheme is in place from 26 August to 25 September 2020. The scheme does not reactivate automatically when it reaches the final date.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities whether she intends to amend the Scheme of Financial Assistance to encompass (i) holiday homes; and (ii) self-catering accommodation.

(AQW 6251/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department follows the guidance issued by the then Department of Finance and Personnel in 2004 for the Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance. This guidance sets out the criteria by which householders are assessed to ascertain their eligibility for the £1,000 payment. One of these criteria is that the house-holder can produce evidence that the property for which assistance is being claimed is their main place of residence. This does not extend to holiday homes or caravans. With regards to self-catering accommodation, the scheme does not extend to any form of business that has been affected by flooding.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Communities how many households claiming Universal Credit have been impacted by the benefit cap during the period 1 January 2020 to 31 August 2020.

(AQW 6325/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The most recent published statistical data related to Benefit Cap is available at:

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/benefit-cap-statistics-may-2020>

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Communities to detail the latest available figures for the number of people claiming Universal Credit who are impacted by the two child policy.

(AQW 6326/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As at the 31 May 2020, 2,620 of the 108,620 households on Universal Credit were impacted by the two child policy.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Communities what is the latest available figure for the number of households claiming Universal Credit who are impacted by the bedroom tax.

(AQW 6327/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The most recent published statistical data relating to Social Sector Size Criteria is available at:

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-annual-report-welfare-supplementary-payments-2018-2019.pdf.pdf>

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the progress of legislation to extend and strengthen the current welfare reform mitigation measures.

(AQW 6328/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The extension of the welfare mitigation measures will require new primary and secondary legislation. A draft Bill to amend the Welfare Reform (NI) Order 2015 to provide for an extension of welfare mitigation payments for people affected by the bedroom tax "bedroom tax" has been shared with Executive Ministers. Once agreement to proceed is secured I will ensure the draft Bill is introduced to the Assembly as a matter of urgency.

I will also be bringing forward new Regulations to provide for the extension of the remaining welfare mitigation schemes. These will be subject to the affirmative resolution procedure and I expect they will be laid shortly after the draft Bill is introduced.

Pending the approval of the new legislation my Department has introduced contingency arrangements to ensure that people who would otherwise be entitled to a welfare mitigation payment are not disadvantaged. In practice this means that mitigation payments are currently made under the sole authority of the Budget (No.2) Act. These arrangements continue to be kept under review and will be extended if necessary.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what ministerial directions have been issued since January 2020.

(AQW 6336/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: No ministerial directions have been issued since January 2020.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities (i) whether easy-read versions of (a) Personal Independence Payment; and (b) Capability for Work forms exist for applicants; and (ii) if not, why provision of easy-read versions have not been made.

(AQW 6355/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Easy Read versions of Personal Independence Payment and Capability for Work forms are not available. Easy Read Standards developed by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), in partnership with Mencap, advise that the maximum length of an Easy Read product should be no more than 20 pages. By way of example, to convert an ESA application form to Easy Read format would result in about a 200 page long form.

GOV.uk has recently published Easy Read information leaflets about Personal Independence Payment. My department will shortly publish the equivalent versions for here on NI Direct.

Customers here can avail of the services offered by the 'Make the Call' team, who will support them and assist with making a claim and filling out forms.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the sub-regional stadia fund.
(AQW 6413/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the "New Decade, New Approach" Deal and my Department has begun work to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the current challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels. Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Communities to outline the level of support her Department has made available to concert bands in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.
(AQO 603/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I was pleased to meet recently with representatives from across our local music sector to discuss the support that is required in light of the COVID-19 emergency.

The Organisations Emergency Programme reopened on Thursday 3rd September and concert bands who meet the criteria will be eligible to receive funding.

My Department has made a bid to the Department of Finance for the full thirty three million Arts and Heritage Barnett Consequential funding. This will be coming to the Executive shortly. I look forward to continuing my engagement with the Cultural sector, including with representatives of the local music industry, to prioritise how this funding can be best used to support the recovery and renewal of the Sector.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on people living in poverty.
(AQO 604/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Official measures of poverty which would allow for a direct assessment of the impact are not currently available for the period covering the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, other economic indicators highlight the scale of the crisis. Unemployment levels have increased significantly, the number of people on the claimant count (experimental) was sixty two thousand eight hundred in July 2020 more than double the number recorded in March. From 1 August 2019 to 31 July 2020, eight thousand seven hundred and fifty five redundancies were proposed, the highest annual total since records began. Economic research indicates that this impact is likely to grow particularly as furlough ends.

The economic impacts are likely to be felt by citizens who have not traditionally required support from DfC as well as compounding the hardship faced by many in areas of existing deprivation and poverty. The option of working from home is more likely to be available to those in better paid employment. Vulnerable sectors such as hospitality and retail are more likely to have employees on short term contracts and lower levels of pay.

The response to COVID-19 has clearly demonstrated the level of support that has been required. During COVID-19 my department has processed approx. four hundred and sixty six thousand Universal Credit payments and provided over one point nine million pounds in Discretionary Support COVID-19 payments.

Officials have worked closely with partner organisations to support the most vulnerable within our communities. Over thirty eight million pounds in emergency funding has been provided including support to Charities, Sports, the Homeless, Community sector, and Arts organisations.

Two hundred thousand food packages were supplied to councils for distribution and a Covid-19 Advice helpline was established. Community pharmacy support was provided as well as independent welfare advice on social security entitlements.

My Department has also focussed on the prevention of homelessness, protection of tenants and ensuring continued provision of social housing.

The legacy of COVID-19 will shape the forthcoming Anti-Poverty strategy, which will be a key delivery mechanism for the Executive's longer-term interventions in respect of the crisis. A co-design approach will ensure those in the greatest need will have their voices heard as the strategy is developed.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Common Selection Scheme for social housing.
(AQO 605/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A consultation on 'A Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations' ran from September to December 2017.

I am actively considering the proposed changes to the Common Selection Scheme and important issues raised by the Review. Progress has been affected by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during which I have updated Executive colleagues and the Communities Committee.

I am keen to progress the Review by publishing a consultation report that not only details stakeholder views but that importantly provides a clear way forward and includes an implementation plan. I anticipate publication of the report in the autumn.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Neighbourhood Renewal strategy.
(AQO 606/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has provided annual Neighbourhood Renewal funding of approximately eighteen million pounds to support around three hundred organisations in delivering key services to address deprivation across those communities most in need.

In recognition of the programme's positive impact, Minister Hargey announced in February that this annual budget was to be protected up to 2022. This commitment provided certainty to those organisations delivering at grass roots for communities most in need.

During the pandemic my Department has worked closely with delivery partners to ensure vital services are continued, including by advancing funding of some seven million pounds in April and arranging for a further seven million to be advanced in October. In addition, my officials have worked in partnership with organisations so that service delivery can be flexed to meet the needs arising from the emergency. I want to build on this partnership approach as we review Neighbourhood Renewal using a co-design approach.

The updated model will be needs based and will take account of learning to date. The updated Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy will be an important element of the anti-poverty strategy which is currently being developed by my Department.

The positive impact that Neighbourhood Renewal funding has had was clearly evident throughout the emergency, and made a huge difference to people in those communities when they needed it most.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister for Communities when she will introduce sign language legislation to the Assembly, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQO 607/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A draft framework and policy proposals for legislation on sign language was consulted on prior to the publication of New Decade New Approach.

Following on from some further co-design and co-production work I intend to be in a position to advise on a timeframe in the coming weeks for bringing forward legislation to the Assembly.

The Legislation will be built on the principles of equality and social inclusion in ensuring that the deaf and hard of hearing community here have the same rights and opportunities as those in the hearing community and are able to access services in their own language.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities what measures are being taken to support the arts sector.
(AQO 598/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: At the outset of the emergency, Minister Hargey announced £1.5m Creative Support Fund, recognising that further support would be required.

I secured an additional £4m in June Monitoring to reopen the Fund: first for individuals, including freelancers and self-employed within the sector, and then for organisations.

This funding is in recognition of the importance of a vibrant arts sector for wider social and economic recovery.

The Department has submitted a bid to the Executive for £33m to secure financial support for culture, language, arts and heritage organisations, local musicians, freelancers and artists at a time when they are struggling to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. This will be coming before the Executive shortly.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Sports Hardship Fund.
(AQO 599/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department's Sports Hardship Fund was put in place to support sports clubs to maintain facilities while restrictions were in place. The fund opened on 14th April with an initial budget of £500k. The need was such that a further £750k was allocated from Sport NI. Through June Monitoring I secured a further £1m added to the Fund and £1m to provide essential PPE for sports clubs.

So far more than 350 sports clubs have each received the £2k grant. This number will increase as Sport NI assesses the remaining applications.

A comprehensive breakdown of how the fund was allocated is on the Sport NI website.

My Department and Sport NI continue to support the sector by providing advice and guidance for Governing Bodies, clubs and participants on managing financial challenges and a safe return to sport.

Department of Education

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Education to provide (i) a breakdown of any additional funding schools have received to help with mental health in the Colin area of West Belfast in the past four years; and (ii) what additional mental health funding schools have received in the Colin area to help and assist with the reopening of schools in the context of COVID-19.

(AQW 6102/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): According to the Extended Schools Action Plans submitted during this period, circa £31k of Extended Schools funding has gone towards mental health support between 2017/18 and 2019/20, delivered by two individual schools operating in the Colin area. During the same period, approximately £43k was also utilised by local Extended Schools Clusters towards relevant activities. Relevant data for 2020/21 is not yet available.

As part of the Education Restart Programme, in July / August 2020, Good Shepherd Primary School and St Kieran's Primary School participated in the voluntary Summer School programme supported by the Department, availing of a total of £20k. This funding was part of a suite of interventions aimed at addressing the impact of Covid-19 and enabled schools who had expressed an interest to help pupils re-establish routines, mix with peers and assist with settling back into school life.

The most significant element of the same Covid-19 funding package is the 'Engage' programme (worth over £11m in the 2020/21 financial year) which is due to be launched shortly. This programme will provide additional funding to all primary and post primary schools to support the provision of additional teaching resource to be used to help pupils re-engage with learning during the 2020/21 academic year.

It is also anticipated that funding will be allocated directly to schools during the 2020/21 academic year to enable them to provide health and wellbeing support for their pupils and/or staff as part of the Wellbeing element of the Restart Programme. This is subject to the business case approval process.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 5219/17-22, whether he will ensure there are sufficient resources to effectively implement the provisions of the Act.

(AQW 6123/17-22)

Mr Weir: Schools should already be recording instances of bullying and addressing them through their anti-bullying policies so additional resources are not expected to be required.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education how many bus and rail passes have been issued to school pupils from Lagan Valley from 1 September 2020.

(AQW 6148/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are currently 3,177 pupils residing in the Lagan Valley constituency in receipt of either an Ulsterbus pass or a Northern Ireland Railways pass for the 2020/21 academic year. The breakdown is as follows:

- Ulsterbus pass – 2,899
- Northern Ireland Railways pass – 278

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education what guidance is available to uniformed voluntary youth organisations relating to the recommencement of face-to-face activities.

(AQW 6149/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) Youth Service has published its guidance to the sector for Youth Restart which is available on www.youthonline.org.uk. This guidance provides the framework for the sector to move towards a full resumption of services in line with the Northern Ireland Assembly 5 step strategy. Currently the EA is advising that they are at step 3 of that process.

A second edition of Youth Restart, to contextualise the New School Day guidance for youth and voluntary settings, which includes the Uniformed Sector, is currently being finalised. It is anticipated this will be published in the coming days.

Senior EA officials have met with the Uniformed Sector on two recent occasions to support them returning to normal services and advising that preparation work can be carried out in September for generic services restarting in October.

While generic youth service restart is planned from October, I have agreed that the provision of some limited voluntary youth summer activity is permissible into September in line with PHA guidance - <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/support-during-july-and-august-2020-vulnerable-children-and-young-people>

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education whether he intends (i) to recommend a postponement of primary seven transfer tests this autumn; and (ii) to instruct post-primary schools to make available their entry criteria for September 2021 as soon as possible anticipating postponement or cancellation.

(AQW 6164/17-22)

Mr Weir: Responsibility for setting the dates of the transfer tests lies with the test providers rather than my Department. You will be aware that the test providers have now announced that the tests have been moved to January 2021.

Admissions criteria, meanwhile, are a matter for individual Boards of Governors, however my Department is currently working with the Education Authority (EA) to determine the post-primary admissions timetable for 2021 and this timetable will set a deadline for Boards of Governors to supply their criteria for September 2021 admission. This date will allow the EA to publish admissions criteria at least six weeks before the deadline for nominating preferences.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to outline (i) the process for primary and post-primary schools if a member of the school tests positive for COVID-19; (ii) what financial and other support will his Department and the Executive provide for schools with a positive case of COVID-19; and (iii) what recommendations he will make to the Executive to support childcare for children who must isolate at home due to COVID-19.

(AQW 6165/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) In primary and post-primary schools, where a staff member or pupil tests positive for COVID-19, the individual self isolates for at least 10 days in line with the Public Health Agency (PHA) advice. The individual will inform the school of positive test. The individual should co-operate with the Test, Trace, Protect / PHA Contact Tracing Service.

The school management team will draw up list of potentially exposed contacts and will proactively contact parents to advise potentially exposed individuals to remain at home. The PHA Contact Tracing Service / Health Protection will work with school management to clarify 'close contacts' using an agreed pro-forma and provide advice on self-isolation/ next steps. The school management team will complete the 'Confirmed Covid-19 Case Pro-forma' (available through C2k and the Education Authority (EA) website) and email it to the EA at a dedicated email address. The School management team will consider implications for staff / pupils at risk and seek further advice if required. If a COVID-19 confirmed case occurs in a statutory setting, the EA Cleaning Service will be notified. The school management team will communicate with the school community as soon as is practicable, to reassure them that safety measures are being taken and that the environment is safe.

The school management team will make alternative arrangements depending on PHA advice and also consider staffing implications and implications for after school activities. Exceptional Closures should only be applied for when PHA advise a school closure is necessary and after engagement with relevant Managing Authority. The school management team will review internal procedures and risk assessments, and consider any learning that could be applied for future cases.

- (ii) To help support schools address many of the new pressures arising as a result of Covid-19, I outlined a significant package of funding to help support the safe reopening of schools, details of which are available on the Department's website.

The Department, in conjunction with the EA, will continue to monitor funding requirements as schools reopen and as the pandemic progresses, and any school facing financial difficulty should contact the EA as Funding Authority for grant aided schools, in the normal way.

Schools are also supported through dedicated Link Officers who are trained to provide support and guidance in the event of a positive test. Schools can also request support from the EA in terms of cleaning.

- (iii) Where a positive case of COVID-19 is identified in a childcare setting, the PHA will offer bespoke advice based on all information available. Employers will need to be fair and reasonable with parents during this time. They will need to show some flexibility if a parent needs to remain at home, because a child is unable to attend childcare due to a suspected, or a positive, case of COVID-19.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the future plans of the former Strabane Grammar School site located on Liskey Road, Strabane.

(AQW 6170/17-22)

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 current vacated property at Liskey Road has been the subject of ongoing anti-social behaviour and vandalism therefore EA have approved the demolition of all existing buildings on the site other than the original Milltown House and Gate Lodge.

The EA are aware that there are a number of local community expressions of interest in the site and the original buildings; representatives of the local council have been liaising with EA officers in relation to these.

The EA is currently considering the potential for future alternative educational uses on the site and should there be no alternative educational use for the site the EA will take forward a disposal in line with public sector disposal guidance, (for the entire or surplus areas of the site), entitled "Disposal of Surplus Public Sector Property in Northern Ireland"

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to increase the payment for childminders up to £500 per month to help them manage difficulties throughout the COVID-19 period.

(AQW 6220/17-22)

Mr Weir: I recently met with the Northern Ireland Childminding Association (NICMA) and Unite the Union Childminding Branch to discuss the allocation to childminders from the Childcare Recovery Support Fund. At those meetings, I asked Unite and NICMA to provide a robust evidence-based proposal to support their request for additional funding for July and August from the Fund. This proposal has now been received and I will write to NICMA and UNITE when I've had the opportunity to consider the proposal in detail.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) his rationale for not allowing AS level grades to be assessed in a similar way to GCSE and A levels in 2020; and (ii) how he envisages AS levels to be assessed in 2021.

(AQW 6223/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) AS grades were assessed in the same way as GCSE and A levels in 2020. Students taking AS level qualifications were awarded the higher of the standardised grade or the centre assessed grade.
- (ii) On 24 August, CCEA launched a public consultation on proposed arrangements for CCEA GCSE, AS and A level qualifications due to be awarded in Summer 2021. Further information will be made available when the responses to the consultation have been fully considered.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education when he expects a single transfer test to become available for Year 7 pupils.

(AQW 6235/17-22)

Mr Weir: The transfer tests are a matter for the Association for Quality Education (AQE Ltd) and the Post Primary Test Consortium (PPTC) and not my Department. They will have to determine the way forward in terms of the delivery of the tests including consideration of a single transfer test option. I am, however, supportive of any move which might ease the burden on young people who wish to sit the tests and would welcome a move to a single test.

I understand the test providers have convened a working group to consider how a single test can be agreed but that no agreement has been reached and further development work will be needed. I do not have a timescale for completion of this work as my Department is not involved in it.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education whether schools will be re-embursed for resources purchased, such as cleaning materials and sanitiser, to allow them to reopen for staff and students.

(AQW 6270/17-22)

Mr Weir: To help support schools address many of the new pressures arising as a result of Covid-19, I outlined a significant package of funding to help support the safe reopening of schools, details of which are available on the Department's website.

As Funding Authority, the Education Authority (EA) advised schools on the funding available, on 2 September.

The Department, in conjunction with the EA, will continue to monitor funding requirements as schools reopen and as the pandemic progresses, and any school facing financial difficulty should contact the EA as Funding Authority for grant aided schools, in the normal way.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the decision to hold the post-primary transfer tests so soon after the Christmas and New Year school break.

(AQW 6295/17-22)

Mr Weir: Arrangements for the transfer tests are a matter for the test providers and those schools that use tests results in their admissions criteria. The tests are a private arrangement between schools and the providers and any decision regarding their organisation and timing are not the responsibility of my Department. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on or provide an assessment in relation to their timing.

I want to ensure that the post-primary transfer is delivered in a timely fashion for every pupil in Northern Ireland. My Department and the Education Authority are working to accommodate the revised dates within the overall timetable for the post-primary transfer process, which applies to all young people transferring regardless of whether or not they sit the tests.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education (i) what plans he has to support children taking transfer tests who have lost or will lose class time due to isolation related to COVID-19; (ii) whether he has any plans to change special circumstances entry criteria to post-primary schools for September 2021 to account for circumstances related to COVID-19; and (iii) to outline alternative plans to sitting the transfer test in January 2021 should it not be possible due to COVID-19.

(AQW 6323/17-22)

Mr Weir: The "Engage" programme aims to limit any long-term adverse impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on learning by supporting the learning and engagement of pupils through provision of high quality one to one, small group or team teaching support in every school in Northern Ireland. This support is for all children regardless of whether they take the transfer test or not.

Additionally, I have also provided funding for the purchase of online virtual learning resources for children going into Year 7 to help with literacy and numeracy skills and funded a number of summer schools.

The application of admissions criteria are matters for Boards of Governors including consideration of special circumstances arrangements. Current guidance makes clear that it is important that schools that use the results of an entrance test as part of their admissions criteria make use of a special circumstances procedure as part of their process.

The arrangements for the transfer tests do not fall within my Department's remit and are a matter for the test providers and those schools that use the tests results as part of their admissions criteria. Should the tests be impacted because of wider public health concerns in the autumn, it will be a matter for individual Boards of Governors in those schools that use the scores from the tests in their admissions criteria to decide what alternative criteria they may wish to use.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education what steps has his Department taken to address alcohol and drug misuse education, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 6329/17-22)

Mr Weir: Schools have a statutory duty to deliver Drugs Education (which includes legal and illegal substances) as part of the statutory curriculum for Personal Development and Mutual Understanding at primary level and Learning for Life and Work at post-primary level and have access to a range of curricular guidance and teaching support materials on the subject. In 2015 Revised Drugs Guidance for schools was published by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA). This is designed to reflect current legislation, technological advances and societal changes and it provides the context for why and how drug education should be addressed in schools.

As in all areas of the curriculum, schools are best placed to make decisions about which resources to use to address the needs of children and young people.

The Department's "iMatter" Programme (introduced during 2013) includes resources to support the entire school community at post primary level to be engaged in promoting resilient emotional health. A range of posters and leaflets provide information on coping with emotional issues, including 'Alcohol, drugs and solvents' and signposts to other organisations for further support. The Department is currently reviewing the "iMatter" resources with a view to enhancing the contents.

I can also confirm that over the last four years, the Department of Justice has supported the Lyric Theatre in taking their "Blackout" play to secondary schools across Northern Ireland, building on work in previous years reaching out to young people at Hydebank Wood Secure College and Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre.

"Blackout" is a short play performed by Lyric Theatre actors, followed by a question and answer discussion with some young people in the criminal justice system about their experiences. The target audience is young people and the play aims to develop awareness of the consequences of substance misuse, offending and other relevant themes.

My Department has supported the production of the Blackout play financially, to a very small degree last year and would be happy to do so again when required.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education when he will make another call for a new round of capital works.
(AQW 6349/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have stated my intention to ask my officials to commence preparation for a further call for project nominations later in the year to facilitate a further announcement in 2021. This is in line with my commitment to announce smaller lists of schools to proceed in design on a more regular basis.

The Protocol for the Selection of Major Capital Works will first be reviewed and, if necessary, updated based on learning from the latest announcement and any new policy developments. This will be published in advance of the call to allow schools in conjunction with their managing authorities and sectoral bodies to consider their options and eligibility.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education for a full breakdown on the mechanisms used to score the different elements within the capital build process.
(AQW 6350/17-22)

Mr Weir: A total of one hundred and twenty points were available in the scoring element of the latest major capital works call assessment process.

Full details of how points were awarded are detailed in Section 5 of the Protocol for 2019/20 Major Works Call for Projects. The Protocol is available on the Department's website and can be accessed via the following link:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/protocol-201920-major-works-call-projects-june-2019>

As detailed, fifteen points were awarded to schools that had gone through recent amalgamations. This was determined as schools that had been re-configured as part of a Development Proposal that had enabled rationalisation of a number of schools in an area since the introduction of Area Planning in 2011.

Fifteen points were awarded to schools that are operating on a split site.

Both the suitability and condition elements, were assessed through surveys carried out on the applicant schools. A total of twenty five points were available for suitability and a total of five points were available for access to outdoor space. These elements were assessed against the degree to which accommodation meets the requirements for delivery of the curriculum as set out in the Department's Building Handbooks. A total of thirty points were available for condition of

existing accommodation and a further twenty points were available for reliance on temporary accommodation. Temporary accommodation was determined as modular accommodation over five years old.

A total of five points were available for the percentage of pupils with a level 5 statement of special educational need and a total of five points were available for the percentage of pupils allocated free school meals.

Following completion of the scoring element of the process schools were placed in ranked order.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Education whether any plans exist to facilitate more outdoor learning.
(AQW 6359/17-22)

Mr Weir: Work is in progress to restart generic Youth provision from October 2020 on a phased approach. In preparation for this, the Education Authority (EA) Youth Service published its guidance to the sector for Youth Restart which is available on www.youthonline.org.uk. This guidance provides the framework for the sector to move towards a full resumption of services in line with the Northern Ireland Assembly 5 step strategy. Currently the EA is advising that they are at step 3 of that process.

A move to reopen Outdoor Learning Centres is scheduled as part of Step 4, though I recently asked the EA to consider the potential for residential activity commencing at an earlier stage than currently planned. This will require development of additional guidance which EA are currently progressing, subject to agreement by Public Health Authority/Department of Health.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether additional PPE will be supplied to schools if his Department decides to have COVID-19 testing kits returned to schools for onward transit to testing agencies.
(AQW 6374/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is not a school's responsibility to register tests with testing agencies. Accordingly there are no Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) issues arising.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education whether he intends to bring forward any proposals in terms of adding flexibility around the issue of school starting age for children.
(AQW 6417/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am mindful that some parents feel that it is not in their child's best interests to start school at four years of age and I do sympathise with their genuine concerns. The uncertainties generated by the current public health situation have clearly heightened these worries.

I will give consideration to whether changes to provide for legal deferral of school starting age, in a small number of limited or exceptional circumstances, may be the most appropriate way forward.

Department of Finance

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Finance whether he will take action to ensure accurate data is collected on the number of people suffering from gambling addiction is recorded by all Health and Social Care Trusts.
(AQW 3349/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The overall policy responsibility for gambling rests primarily with the Department of Communities.

There are no plans to collect data on gambling additions as no specific services are provided by the Department of Health.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Finance what discussions he has had with the UK Treasury concerning the potential for extra money arising from Barnett Consequentials to support universities and colleges to manage a higher intake for the 2020/21 academic year.
(AQW 6128/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My officials are in regular contact with their counterparts in the Treasury on the issues relating to COVID-19.

To assist with the COVID-19 response Treasury has provided the Devolved Administrations with an upfront allocation of anticipated Barnett funding for this year. This has guaranteed the Executive £2.2 billion of additional funding this financial year. The expectation is that this will cover any further Barnett funding and no additional funding will be made available.

You will be aware that it is for the Executive to decide where to allocate any funding received, in line with local needs and priorities.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance whether he has any plans to extend non-domestic rates relief to businesses operating within the events sector, given their operations remain limited due to ongoing restrictions imposed by the UK Government and the Executive as a response to COVID-19.

(AQW 6162/17-22)

Mr Murphy: A 12 month holiday from rates has been granted to business uses within the hospitality, leisure and tourism sectors as they were considered to be in greatest need. This includes premises used as concert halls, music halls, public exhibition centres, theatres, sporting premises, recreation grounds and hotels, where in normal times events would take place. I acknowledge that many businesses are facing difficult times, and that is why all businesses were given 4 months rates relief. I have no plans to widen the 12 months relief to include other businesses.

Businesses which do not qualify for the 12 months rate relief may consider the Hardship Rate Relief scheme, which provides support for businesses and organisations that are in crisis because of an exceptional circumstance and supports by alleviating the business from payment of business rates for a period of time. In order to qualify for this relief, businesses are required to provide Land & Property Services with evidence of a significant loss of trade caused by the exceptional circumstance. Further information on this scheme can be found at the following link:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/hardship-rate-relief>.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance what consideration he has given to the Department for Communities' bid regarding the allocation of the £33 million that was received as a result of the Barnett consequential of the UK Government's support for art venues; and when it will be allocated.

(AQW 6175/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive will consider all bids for further funding as soon as possible.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance when he intends to bring forward legislation to amend Building Control Regulations to include mandatory provision of changing places toilets.

(AQW 6179/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have tasked my Department's Building Standards Branch (BSB) with incorporating mandatory requirements for Changing Place Toilets (CPTs) into local Building Regulations.

The Department will bring forward these requirements as early as possible.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what supervision arrangements have been in place for civil servants working from home during COVID-19.

(AQW 6187/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Departments have been provided with a wide range of guidance for line managers and staff including keeping in touch, attendance management, performance management, work prioritisation and health and wellbeing. In addition on-line training is available to support line managers in the supervision of staff working remotely.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what steps are being taken to get civil servants back working in their offices.

(AQW 6188/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The approach of the Executive to date has been that office based staff that can work from home should continue to do so.

Indeed as recently as the 4th of September the Chief Medical Officer stated that "Unambiguously and without equivocation my professional advice is that all civil servants should continue to work from home where they can do so efficiently and effectively". Hence the focus in the NICS remains on minimising the risk of transmission, ensuring that key public services continue to be delivered without interruption while helping to protect and not overburden the NHS.

Social distancing has proven to be the most effective means of preventing the spread of the virus. As a result the number of staff who can safely work within our offices has been considerably reduced as we maintain social distancing in the workplace. This measure is likely to be in place for some time while the risk of transmission remains high.

For those staff where working from home is not possible, or there is a requirement to work in an office environment, a comprehensive set of guidance relating to returning to the workplace has been developed. This will help departments, accommodation and premises officers, line managers and staff to do so safely. This guidance is available on the NICS COVID-19 website <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/nics-recovery-plan-guidance>.

The Executive will, of course keep the guidance and approach under review to ensure continued alignment with the Executive's Recovery Plan and emerging health and scientific advice and guidance.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance what support is provided to foster carers for assistance in paying rates.

(AQW 6191/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There is no specific support provided to foster carers for assistance in paying rates, although there is a range of general assistance measures for rates available. All foster carers get an allowance which includes provision for household costs to contribute to food, household and travel expenses as they feel benefit the child most.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance how many civil servants in each Department are under the age of 23.
(AQW 6205/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Numbers of civil servants in each Department under the age of 23 is detailed in the table below:

Department	Headcount
DAERA	9
DfC	2
DfE	3
DE	1
DoF	30
DoH	0
DfI	10
DoJ	27
TEO	0
PPS	0
Other	0
Total	82

Data Source: NISRA HRCS: Employee dataset for Equality Statistics in the NICS report <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/equality-statistics-northern-ireland-civil-service-2020>

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance whether any civil servants working from home during COVID-19 were required to be challenged about their output and effort; and what are the arrangements in place for doing so.
(AQW 6256/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Information in relation to whether any NICS staff who are working from home during COVID 19 have been challenged about their output and effort is not held centrally because in the Civil Service responsibility for managing performance rests with line managers.

Each manager is responsible for ensuring that their staff have realistic and achievable personal performance objectives. They are also responsible for monitoring progress against those objectives and for providing regular feedback and support to their staff to help them reach and maintain the required performance standards and achieve their objectives. This includes addressing underperformance, where it arises, at the earliest opportunity and giving the member of staff a reasonable opportunity to improve their performance.

The arrangements set out in the Performance Management policy apply to staff working from home in the normal way.

The policy provides managers with detailed guidance on how to recognise and manage underperformance issues, along with appropriate tools and template documents. Managers are required to keep a note of any informal meeting with staff about underperformance issues in case further action is required.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to explain the operation of sick leave arrangements in respect of civil servants working from home during COVID-19.
(AQW 6259/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Existing sickness absence procedures continue to apply to all NICS employees who are working either from home or in the work place, during COVID-19.

Although some aspects of the implementation of these procedures have been adapted to adhere to public health advice, line managers continue to maintain regular contact with any of their staff who are absent due to illness, providing support and making temporary adjustments, where applicable, to help facilitate their return to work, whether that is office based or at home.

NICSHR continue to both monitor and manage the progress of all sickness absence cases, maintaining contact with line managers and referring absent staff to the appropriate support services, such as Welfare Support Services, if required.

A range of options already exist for absent staff to engage in the sickness absence process, such as conducting meetings by telephone and submitting written submissions.

Discussions are currently ongoing with CTUS regarding the arrangements around face to face meetings and the feasibility of online meetings using a secure network, such as Webex, to further support the sickness absence process.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to publish the list of persons designated by the parties with whom papers can be shared relating to the Renewable Heat Incentive sub-committee.

(AQW 6260/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Members of the Executive Sub-Committee on Reform following the RHI Inquiry may share papers outside of the Sub-Committee, to designated Party colleagues which should be notified to the Department of Finance; to date no such notifications have been received.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to detail the amount (i) received to date in 2020/21 in terms of Barnett consequentials; (ii) spent to date; and (iii) expended on spending areas different than those which gave rise to the allocations.

(AQW 6334/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The attached table sets out the Barnett consequentials allocated to the Executive for 2020-21.

Barnett consequentials are unhypothecated, meaning that it is for the Executive to decide how to allocate them in line with local needs and priorities.

A list of Executive allocations to date can be found on the Department's website at:

<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-funding-allocations>

Barnett Consequentials			£million
England Only Measures	Resource	Capital	FTC
Budget20 LA hardship fund	16.4		
Business support grants (total cost)	406.9		
Business rates reliefs (total cost)	353.2		
Charity support - National Lottery Community Fund	10.2		
Charity support - direct grants (inc hospices)	8.5		
Fisheries Support	0.2		
Rugby League Support (FTC)			0.4
Coronavirus Emergency Response fund	0.0		
Enhanced NHS discharge/suspension of means test	42.6		
Local Authority COVID support package	52.4		
Purchasing independent sector capacity	45.2		
Shielding - food packages	6.9		
Shielding - DHSC elements	9.6		
DfT - Emergency Management Agreements	95.0		
PPE procurement	3.3		
DWP additional funding for operational resilience	4.7		
Call centre for the National Shielding Centre	1.8		
NHS Workforce	48.6		
GP and Community Pharmacy Easter Bank Holiday Opening	2.9		
Emergency Management Agreement for railway services (19-20)	19.3		
Advance Ticket Refund	1.0		
Voucher scheme to replace free school meals	7.1		
Shielding - food packages	1.9		
Councils	52.4		

Barnett Consequentials			£million
England Only Measures	Resource	Capital	FTC
Shielding - food packages	19.7		
Shielding - DHSC elements	0.2		
DfT - Emergency Management Agreements	0.8		
PPE procurement	35.9		
MHCLG Homeless (Capital DEL)		3.1	
Test and Trace Funding	9.8		
NHS Workers	8.3		
GPs support in care homes	1.5		
Contact tracers	7.4		
Flu vaccines	6.5		
PPE (second tranche)	157.3		
Budget Capital DEL		1.3	
Historic Royal Palaces	0.8		
Economically vulnerable food support	2.1		
Summer food fund	3.9		
Schools catch-up	16.4		
Community Pharmacy Support Fund	3.9		
Contact tracers	-7.4		
Test and Trace (LA element)	36.1		
Health and Safety Executive	0.4		
Telephony services	1.4		
Fire services	1.1		
Homelessness (resource)	4.2		
Local authority support package (2nd July)	16.4		
Prison service support	1.3		
Cultural Recovery Fund	32.6		
Large Zoo Support	2.8		
GP and Community Pharmacy Easter Bank Holiday Opening	0.0		
UKG Announcement of guaranteed funding	600.0		
Summer Economic Update	46.2		
Totals	2,199.5	4.4	0.4

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance (i) whether he will request an extension of the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme for Northern Ireland; and (ii) what bids his Department has received to help those who are self-employed, have been negatively impacted by COVID-19 and have not received any other financial assistance to date.

(AQW 6357/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have been pressing Treasury Ministers since the onset of the COVID-19 crisis to ensure that the fullest possible support is made available to those businesses and households that need it.

I have recently written to the Chancellor to call for an extension to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), and in particular for those industries that have been hardest impacted by COVID-19. I also highlighted in that letter the important role the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) has in sustaining livelihoods here. I will continue to press the Treasury to ensure that adequate support continues to be provided for all those that need it during this difficult time.

To date my Department has not received any formal bids for support for the self-employed. The Executive is considering a number of bids that will support economic recovery and the details of allocations will be announced in due course. The Executive continues to keep this matter under review.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance how much the Executive is to receive as a Barnett consequential of the £2billion Green Homes Grant fund; and whether this money will be used to fund a similar scheme here.
(AQW 6377/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In his statement on 8 July 2020, the Chancellor announced over £3 billion of funding for green buildings, including a £2 billion Green Homes Grant scheme to upgrade people's homes.

The Executive may receive a Barnett consequential on any additional funding provided for the scheme. The amount has not yet been confirmed by the Treasury.

As with all Barnett consequentials it is for the Executive to decide on the allocation any funding received in line with local needs and priorities.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what ministerial directions have been issued since January 2020.
(AQW 6401/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Minister of Finance has issued no ministerial directions since January 2020.

Department of Health

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what is the total average cost to each Health and Social Care Trust of a care package.
(AQW 3196/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): This information is not collected centrally and cannot be collated due to disproportionate costs.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the accuracy of the published statistics for COVID-19, particularly in relation to the number of deaths.
(AQW 3965/17-22)

Mr Swann: You asked for my assessment of the accuracy of the published statistics for COVID-19, particularly in relation to the number of deaths. I refer to the notes pages of the dashboard of statistics, where specific reference is made to the quality of each of the data sources. Data are largely drawn from operational and administrative systems used for the delivery of direct patient care. As such, whilst they are considered to be robust and reliable, they are subject to revision and amendment. This is a common approach used across the UK and in line with other jurisdictions.

The daily number of deaths reported refers to the PHA surveillance data set. This records deaths of individuals reported as having a positive result for SARS-COV2 within 28 days of the specimen date for which the first positive test result was received, whether or not COVID-19 was the cause of death. Information is sourced from a regional web reporting system, which is updated by HSC Trust staff, and refers to the position at 9:30am on the morning of the report. This is an accurate data source, however, as it is a working data set, it is still subject to update and revision as more information becomes available. The official source of information on COVID-19 deaths is the NISRA weekly deaths bulletin.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Health why the Derry Community Crisis Intervention Service was not included within the Mental Health Action Plan on evaluation of crisis services; and whether he supports a further extension of the service.
(AQW 4280/17-22)

Mr Swann: Action 8.2 of the Mental Health Action Plan is to 'Reconfigure mental health crisis services.' It is a review of the wider context of crisis support in mental health and all evidence available to the Department will be considered in the course of taking this action forward, including existing work by the HSC Trusts, community and voluntary sector and others.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail all the questions and responses his Department submitted to the COVID-19 SAGE since its formation, including the date on which the questions were submitted.
(AQW 4342/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is a formal system to send commissions to SAGE, generally used by the Cabinet Office and occasionally by others. The Department of Health have not submitted a formal commission to SAGE.

Within SAGE meetings participants ask oral questions and express views. The minutes (now publicly available on the SAGE website) capture the key points, however the Department does not hold a record of oral questions asked.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what has been learned about the behaviour of Coronavirus in Northern Ireland from the re-introduction of contact tracing in April 2020.

(AQW 4563/17-22)

Mr Swann: As far as it has been possible to ascertain, the behaviour of the virus in NI is similar to that which has been the case globally. There is evidence of person to person transmission and there is a risk of transmission to other household members when one member acquires the infection.

The international evidence suggests that maintaining physical distance, frequent hand washing, minimising touching of potentially infected surfaces, good ventilation and early isolation of potentially infected cases and their close contacts can reduce transmission.

Further evidence may emerge in due course.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to outline the timescale for the provision of guidance on appropriate health and safety measures for children in childcare in line with the current epidemiological evidence on COVID-19, including reference to infection control and hygiene.

(AQW 4565/17-22)

Mr Swann: Updated COVID-19 childcare guidance for childminders and childcare settings (including guidance on COVID-19 infection prevention and control) was published and circulated to all childcare providers on Tuesday 9 June 2020. The guidance is also available on the Family Support NI website: <https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/Support/91/covid19-childcare-options-and-associated-guidance>

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether his Department is committed to recurrent payments in parity with England for those with contaminated blood, as referenced in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 4580/17-22)

Mr Swann: On 30 August 2020, I announced increased payments for infected beneficiaries of the Northern Ireland Infected Blood Payment Scheme, representing an additional annual funding commitment of £1.1 million.

The increased annual payments, made to people on the NI Infected Blood Payment Scheme who were diagnosed with Hepatitis C or HIV after receiving NHS-supplied infected blood or blood products, range from £18,745 to just under £45,000 (depending on diagnosis) and bring Northern Ireland's rates into line with England, where payments were increased significantly in April 2019. These increased payments will continue into future years.

Those infected and /or affected by contaminated blood have suffered tremendously and it is my sincere hope that this significantly increased financial support will provide ongoing financial certainty and help mitigate the harms and afford the best means to live as normal a life as possible.

When I took up post as Minister of Health in January of this year, this issue was an immediate priority for me. Having met with a number of people who have been infected and / or affected, I am acutely aware of the considerable impact that this has had on their lives and the suffering they have had to endure physically, emotionally and indeed financially. In recent months the COVID-19 pandemic has added greatly to the concern already felt by many in this community. That is why I asked officials on 31 July to bring Northern Ireland in line with England on the rates paid to infected scheme beneficiaries.

I will continue to strive to ensure that those infected and /or affected get the support they need and deserve. The 'New Decade, New Approach' document sets out a commitment stating: "The Executive will bring about parity in financial support to victims of contaminated blood in Northern Ireland with those in England". However, this oversimplifies a complex issue.

There are other elements to consider beyond the regular payments to those infected. These include financial support for the bereaved, psychological support and various models for enhanced support for Hepatitis C beneficiaries. The schemes in Scotland and Wales offer more generous support than England in these areas. A survey will shortly be conducted to seek feedback from all scheme beneficiaries in Northern Ireland on the support provided on the Scheme. I want to ensure that the views of beneficiaries are taken into consideration as we progress with Phase 2 of the ongoing review of the Scheme. The feedback from the survey will be invaluable to help inform potential reform of other areas of the Scheme.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health to detail the average number of tests being carried out daily at each COVID-19 testing centre.

(AQW 4785/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is assumed that this question refers to the number of samples taken at each COVID-19 testing centre in Northern Ireland. Information on the average number of tests carried out daily at each COVID-19 testing centre (Pillar 1 and Pillar 2) is not available at this time; although, on average 5,200 COVID-19 samples (tests) have been taken at Pillar 2 testing centres in Northern Ireland each day over the last 4 weeks.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health whether he will provide specific guidance which would allow groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and other organisations helping with addiction to meet at the present time.

(AQW 4827/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Coronavirus Regulations permit a group of individuals to gather indoors or outdoors (excluding private dwellings) up to a maximum of fifteen people. This would enable AA meetings to recommence in suitable indoor public settings while ensuring social distancing and hygiene guidance is followed. The Department of Health's advice is that in all settings including AA meetings, everyone should maintain at least 2 metres social distancing from others outside of their household to minimise exposure to the virus. The Department also strongly advocates good hand hygiene practices, respiratory etiquette including the wearing of face coverings in all indoor settings (where possible), the cleaning of shared surfaces and good ventilation as a means to mitigate the potential spread of the virus. Larger indoor and outdoor gatherings involving more than 15 people (excluding private dwellings) can also take place if managed by a responsible person who has undertaken a risk assessment and implemented measures to eliminate or reduce transmission of the virus.

Further information on the regulations and guidance including about gatherings is available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/coronavirus>.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health when his Department will have guidelines in place for the safe reopening of leisure centres and swimming pools ahead of the proposed date.

(AQW 5484/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health and the PHA have developed a number of guidance documents. However the Department does not publish sector-specific guidelines as these are best developed by the individual sectors and authorities responsible for running these facilities. The easements to the restrictions to sport announced by the Executive have been agreed on the basis that the protocols developed by sports Governing Bodies will be followed. These protocols outline how social distancing will be maintained by anyone not actively participating, how proper hygiene measures will be observed and that attendance records will be kept.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health (i) when day-care services such as adult centres and satellites will resume; (ii) whether availability will be less than prior to lockdown; and (iii) whether Direct Payment will be made available to families who are receiving less buildings-based provision.

(AQW 5575/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) are coordinating the development of operational recovery plans across disability services to restart services in a regionally consistent and phased manner. Incorporating the learning and new approaches developed in response to the pandemic will be central to our approach to restarting services and, indeed, to the future shape of learning disability services in Northern Ireland. Decisions to restart, prioritise and scale up services will be informed by factors such as safety, individual need, transmission rates, public health guidance, workforce readiness/re-deployment, risk assessment and estate capacity for social distancing measures within each Trust.

Timescales within this phased restart will be guided by the safety of those using the services and determined by sustained reduction in the risk of COVID-19 spreading to people using services and to staff; guidance regarding the need for social distancing measures and learning disability services having access to its full staff complement.

Direct Payment is available to any individual (or their nominated representative) following a request for a formal assessment of their needs by a Health and Social Care Trust. A Direct Payment is a payment made as an alternative to services which would have been provided, or purchased, by the Trust.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 4904/17-22, whether the cost in the answer includes the payment to GPs for their time, such as their wages and locum cover while they work at the COVID-19 centre.

(AQW 5599/17-22)

Mr Swann: The cost outlined in AQW 4904/17-22 represents the total cost of all payments made in respect of COVID-19 centres at the date of answer. This includes payments made in respect of invoices received from GPs.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to outline the workstreams that will be established to support the Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services, particularly with reference to whether there will be a dedicated workstream for rebuilding services for long-term conditions.

(AQW 5606/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Rebuilding HSC Services Management Board is currently overseeing the development of rebuilding plans in 28 areas including cancer and screening services, primary care, urgent and emergency care and mental health services. The Board is also overseeing surge planning for any future waves of COVID-19. It is anticipated that a number of workstreams will impact on services accessed by people with long term conditions.

In addition, services are being developed for people with long term conditions in line with the Long Term Conditions Policy Framework which reflects the wide range of needs across the range of conditions.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what consultation was conducted with GPs before the No More Silos document was issued imposing duties on GPs to triage in respect of Emergency Department attendances.

(AQW 5608/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer to my answer to AQW 5607/17-22.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update of the status of the Research Report commissioned in 2018 by the Inter-Departmental Working Group into Mother and Baby Homes and the Magdalene Laundries.
(AQW 5693/17-22)

Mr Swann: The commissioned research into the operation of Mother and Baby Homes and Magdalene Laundries has been completed, received by my Department and considered by the Inter Departmental Working Group on Mother and Baby Homes, Magdalene Laundries and Historical Clerical Child Abuse. The research will now be subject to a process of Maxwellisation. When complete, it will be amended if necessary and submitted to the Northern Ireland Executive with options on the way forward.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health, given the increase in men coming forward to report incidents of domestic abuse during the COVID-19 lockdown, what additional support he intends to make available to the voluntary sector to support these victims.

(AQW 5694/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am acutely aware that the response to covid-19 and the subsequent easing of lockdown has brought new challenges for people living through domestic abuse. My Department continues to work closely with other government departments, the PSNI and the voluntary and community sector to ensure that support services continue to operate during these difficult times.

The Domestic and Sexual Abuse Helpline continues to be available 24/7 for both men and women. This is a regional Helpline jointly funded by DoH, DoJ and DfC. It received an additional £20,000 at the start of the pandemic and has increased staffing levels to ensure it remains fully operational.

The Departments of Health and Justice jointly published additional guidance which brings together information and contact details of support services available to help all victims of domestic abuse. The document is available on the Department of Health website at: www.healthni.gov.uk/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-support-victims-domestic-abuse

My Department is also piloting the IRIS (Identification and Referral to Improve Safety) programme with GP practices in two GP Federation areas (East Belfast and the Newry/Down district). IRIS provides GPs with training and support to help identify patients (male and female) affected by domestic and sexual abuse and refer them to specialist support. The pilot which is being delivered through a 'consortium' approach by Women's Aid, Men's Advisory Project, Nexus NI and Victim's Support Service, is running for 12 months and will be evaluated at the end of the year to inform consideration of any further roll out.

Longer term, the Department continues to progress the delivery of the 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy' in partnership with the Department of Justice. I have just published a new action plan for 2020/21 along with a progress report on work taken forward over the previous twelve months.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health for an update on providing women with three free cycles of IVF treatment.
(AQW 5722/17-22)

Mr Swann: I announced, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, my plans to establish a Project Board to take the New Decade, New Approach commitment to increasing the number of publicly-funded IVF cycles forward. However, although representatives to the Project Board have been nominated from the relevant areas, due to the temporary reconfiguration across the Health and Social Care system to ensure continuity of provision of essential healthcare services for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, work has not progressed as anticipated. Until the Project Board reports back, and any necessary funding has been secured, I cannot provide an implementation date.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health, given recent reports about the neurological impacts of COVID-19, whether his Department has carried out an assessment on whether there is a sufficient numbers of neurologists in place.
(AQW 5847/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Regional Review of Neurology Services which commenced in December 2018 has been tasked with identifying future workforce requirements for the next 10-15 years. This will include both the Consultant workforce and the potential role of a Specialist Neurology Nursing workforce. The Review will subsequently take the steps needed in terms of recruitment and training to achieve the workforce required.

The work of the Review has been paused due to the need to redirect resources to respond to the challenges posed by COVID-19. While I believe this was a necessary and correct decision, I am acutely aware that Neurology services are in need of reform and will give careful consideration as to how best and quickly we can move forward with the Review. This will include the identification of final recommendations, in the context of my priorities for rebuilding health and social care services.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health when he plans to allow the opening of soft play areas locally.
(AQW 6077/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Executive has been considering timescales for the reopening of soft play facilities based on the current level of risk related to the rate of spread of Covid-19 infections. This is being kept under constant review. Unfortunately the rate of transmission of Covid-19 and the R number has been growing recently and the Executive is monitoring this situation in relation to the potential impact of any further relaxations. As Minister for Health I do not want any business to remain closed any longer than is absolutely necessary.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the negotiations between the Health and Social Care Board and Vertex Pharmaceuticals regarding the use of the triple combination treatment Kaftrio for cystic fibrosis.

(AQW 6110/17-22)

Mr Swann: I announced on 30 July 2020 that an agreement with Vertex Pharmaceuticals had been reached. Subsequently I welcomed the news that Kaftrio received its licence for use in Europe on 21 August 2020.

Contractual arrangements are being finalised and the Health Service is taking forward plans to enable eligible patients in Northern Ireland to begin to access treatment with Kaftrio in the coming weeks.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the report published on 8 July 2020 by Baroness Julia Cumberlege following a review into the use of several medical devices and medicines including vaginal mesh, primodos and sodium valproate over many years.

(AQW 6120/17-22)

Mr Swann: Baroness Cumberlege's report highlights failure of the healthcare system in a number of areas including the need to listen and understand patients' voices and their concerns raised around certain treatments. The recommendations of the report require careful consideration for Northern Ireland and my officials have established a working group in order to carefully consider them and our response.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health why his Department has not published statistics from the Substance Misuse Database since 2017.

(AQW 6122/17-22)

Mr Swann: Statistics from the Substance Misuse Database (SMD) were not published in either 2017/18 or 2018/19 due to concerns that data returned to the Department were not sufficiently comprehensive. Contributions to SMD are made on a voluntary basis by drug and alcohol services throughout NI (both statutory and voluntary). Statisticians within the Department have been liaising with service providers to improve the quality of the SMD information and as a result, the SMD statistical series is to be resumed shortly with a statistical publication based on 2019/20 information planned for October 2020.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health whether planning is underway to return GP appointments to a face to face basis.

(AQW 6129/17-22)

Mr Swann: GP practices are currently operating a telephone triage system which allows patients to continue to seek medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP then uses their clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be safely managed over the telephone or whether a face to face appointment is required. This ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential. Some practices have also utilised other technologies such as video conferencing.

The telephone triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face to face assessment to one of the Primary Care COVID-19 centres which have been established in Northern Ireland. This ensures that these patients do not attend the GP Practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimal disruption.

GP practices are still providing face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them and all practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment to allow them to do so safely.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices on 30 July 2020 to ask that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices have been advised to communicate to patients (on posters, practice website, or practice newsletter) about the practice services that are available and how to access them and to ensure that this information is made clear to patients.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health, in circumstances where a person was eligible for free dental treatment during lockdown because they had a child under 12 months, but, due to dentists closure, could not receive non-emergency treatment and the child is now older than 12 months, could they receive free treatment in retrospective entitlement.

(AQW 6138/17-22)

Mr Swann: Exemptions to dental charges are outlined in the Dental Charges Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1989 (as amended) and the Travelling Expenses and Remission of Charge Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2004 (as amended).

The exemption status of a patient is determined at the time that the Health Service Dental Claim form is signed for acceptance of treatment. The exemption status remains for the course of treatment even if the individual's qualification for the exemption changes.

There has been no change to this policy with respect to the challenges posed by COVID-19 as this would require legislative change which would not be expected to represent value for money in the context of the financial challenges faced by the health & social care sector.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 5841/17-22, (i) whether the information requested is available within his Department; and (ii) in the absence of such information, on what basis the cost of providing private ambulance cover is (a) budgeted for, monitored and controlled; and (b) demonstrated to provide value for money.

(AQW 6143/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) The information is not held within the Department. The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service is a regional service and invoices for private ambulance cover do not detail Trust areas. In addition to these regional arrangements, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust also contracts directly with Independent Ambulance Providers (IAPs). The cost of these arrangements to the Southern Trust for the financial year 01/04/19 – 31/03/20 was £316k.
- (ii)(a) IAPs are budgeted from staff vacancies within the operational budget. Expenditure beyond budgeted vacancies is funded from specific allocations to the Trust to support service delivery including demography, winter resilience and most recently COVID-19 allocations.

The use of IAP's is instigated by NIAS Ambulance Control. Use is monitored frequently and flexed in response to changes in demand and the availability of NIAS resources.

IAP arrangements are managed under a framework agreement issued and administered by the Business Services Organisation Procurement and Logistics Service on behalf of all NI Health and Social Care Trusts.

All invoices for services are validated against the rates contained within the framework and against ambulance control records. Overall expenditure is reported as part of the Trust's routine financial management and reporting processes.

- (ii)(b) The HSC-wide Framework Agreement has been competitively tendered and contractors are ranked and selected by lowest cost to ensure value for money.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what funding his Department has made available for charities supporting survivors of the abuse of older people.

(AQW 6178/17-22)

Mr Swann: Currently the Department of Health does not provide funding to charities specifically to support survivors of the abuse of older people.

However grants from the Department of Health to charities to assist in the care and wellbeing of older people total £494,094 over the past 18 months.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of whether domestic abuse and the abuse of older people are two separate issues.

(AQW 6181/17-22)

Mr Swann: Abuse is the misuse of power and control that one person has over another. Anyone can become a victim of domestic abuse, regardless of their age. Domestic abuse includes threatening, controlling, coercive behaviour, violence or abuse and occurs in couple relationships or between family members.

In addition to domestic abuse, abuse of older people may also be perpetrated by a wide range of people, including those who are usually physically and/or emotionally close to the individual and on whom the individual may depend and trust. In addition to a partner or other family member, this may include, but is not limited to, a person entrusted to act on behalf of the adult in some aspect of their affairs, a service or care provider, a neighbour, a health or social care worker or professional, an employer, a volunteer or another service user. It may also be perpetrated by those who have no previous connection to the victim.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health when AQW 4827/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 6222/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Coronavirus Regulations permit a group of individuals to gather indoors or outdoors (excluding private dwellings) up to a maximum of fifteen people. This would enable AA meetings to recommence in suitable indoor public settings while ensuring social distancing and hygiene guidance is followed. The Department of Health's advice is that in all settings including AA meetings, everyone should maintain at least 2 metres social distancing from others outside of their household to minimise exposure to the virus. The Department also strongly advocates good hand hygiene practices, respiratory etiquette including the wearing of face coverings in all indoor settings (where possible), the cleaning of shared surfaces and good ventilation as a means to mitigate the potential spread of the virus. Larger indoor and outdoor gatherings

involving more than 15 people (excluding private dwellings) can also take place if managed by a responsible person who has undertaken a risk assessment and implemented measures to eliminate or reduce transmission of the virus.

Further information on the regulations and guidance including about gatherings is available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/coronavirus>.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health, given the significant cost of addressing alcohol misuse, why is a small budget allocated to addressing the problem.

(AQW 6247/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department currently allocates over £16 million per year towards the provision of alcohol and drug prevention, treatment, and support services aimed at addressing the harms caused by all substance misuse in Northern Ireland.

My Department has been working in conjunction with key stakeholders on developing a new substance use strategy and this will be issued for public consultation later this year. Any associated funding requirements will form part of the strategy development process.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health whether his Department will commit to updating the Substance Misuse Database for the years (i) 2017/2018; (ii) 2018/2019; and (iii) 2019/2020.

(AQW 6332/17-22)

Mr Swann: Statistics from the Substance Misuse Database were not published in either 2017/18 or 2018/19 due to concerns that information returns received by the Department were not sufficiently comprehensive. During this period, the Department undertook a Census of Drug and Alcohol Services as an interim measure; the results were published on 25th September 2019 and are available online at: [Census of drug and alcohol treatment services in Northern Ireland - 30th April 2019](#).

The statistical series is to be resumed shortly with a 2019/20 Substance Misuse Database statistical publication planned for October 2020.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the recommendations of the recent audit office report into addiction services; and for an update on the implementation of each of these recommendations.

(AQW 6437/17-22)

Mr Swann: I welcome the publication of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on addiction services, and the range of issues and recommendations within it. My officials are currently considering the report in detail, however I note many of the issues raised were already identified in the review of our current substance misuse strategy that was published by my Department last year. Indeed action is already underway to address many of the issues outlined, such as improving data collection.

Work is well underway to co-develop a new substance use strategy for Northern Ireland, and I plan to bring forward a formal consultation on this strategy in the near future. The Audit Office report has informed this process and the new strategy will seek to address the issues it raises.

Department for Infrastructure

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) when sector-specific advice will be provided to the taxi industry to confirm whether passengers are required to wear masks in taxis; and (ii) what support she will provide the industry to ensure those transporting special education needs pupils are informed of measures they are required to take to protect themselves and passengers from COVID-19.

(AQW 6035/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure):

- (i) As you will be aware the wearing of face coverings on public transport has been mandatory from 10 July. When the Executive agreed on 10 August to extend the requirement for mandatory face coverings to include certain indoor settings where social distancing cannot be maintained, it was my understanding that this would include enclosed indoor places such as taxis and buses. I have subsequently written to the Minister for Health to confirm this.

You will note from the beginning of this crisis, I have consistently called for a societal approach to the use of face coverings to ensure that all steps are taken to help prevent the spread of Covid-19. I can assure you that it is my firm view that following Executive agreement on 10 August, that face coverings must be worn in all enclosed settings where social distancing cannot be maintained.

That said, while face coverings can offer protection to others, they are not a substitute for other protective measures and it is important that people continue to follow social distancing and wash or sanitise hands regularly.

Further information on face coverings can be found at: www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-face-coverings

and on social distancing at:

www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/sites/default/files/Covid-19-Working-Through-This-Together.pdf

- (ii) The transportation of pupils to school with special educational needs is the responsibility of the Department of Education. Further guidance on school transport can be found in Section 3 of the following: Re Opening Schools Guidance (August 2020) (<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/NorthernIrelandReOpeningSchoolsGuidanceNewSchoolDayVersion213August2020.pdf>)

and for special schools at: Supplementary Guidance for Re Opening Special Schools (August 2020) (<http://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Supplementary-Guidance-for-Re-opening-Special-Schools-24-August-2020.pdf>) from the Department of Education.

The general public health advice is to reduce the number of passengers carried, avoid a passenger travelling alongside the driver and travel with windows lowered to increase passenger compartment ventilation.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) why the people in Northern Ireland cannot apply online for a provisional driving license, like other parts of the United Kingdom; and (ii) what steps can be put in place to make this possible. **(AQW 6131/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) is responsible for the administration of driver licensing for those who are resident in Northern Ireland (NI) and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) is responsible for the administration of driver licensing for those drivers who are resident in Great Britain (GB).

In February 2018, the DVA introduced the first of its online driver licensing services enabling customers to Apply to Renew a Driving Licence Online, Notify a Change of Address Online and Apply for a Duplicate Licence Online. In May 2019, the ability to upload a photograph with a renewal application was also introduced. These services are the first in a programme of digital enhancements to deliver improved customer service and increased efficiencies through online processing.

The introduction of a service to enable the customer to apply online for a First Provisional Licence requires the availability of a means to verify the identity of the customer applying to use the service. The DVA is currently working with the Department of Finance's Digital Transformation Services on the roll out of the NI Identity Assurance solution which will be then enable further online service transformation.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on transfer of functions concerning the Reservoirs Act. **(AQW 6133/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: A Transfer of Functions Order is required to transfer responsibility for the statutory functions under the Reservoirs Act (NI) 2015 from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) to the Department for Infrastructure. At the request of the DAERA Minister, and with my agreement, the First Minister and deputy First Minister have agreed to the transfer of function and to include the provision to transfer in a Transfer of Functions Order.

The next stage is for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to seek Executive approval to the making of the Order. Following Executive approval, and scrutiny by the relevant Committees, the Order will be laid and a debate scheduled for Assembly agreement. The Order will come into operation on the day after it is affirmed by resolution of the Assembly.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline arrangements in place to ensure the regular removal of detritus near the Blue Bridges, Newcastle, in order to reduce flooding in the area. **(AQW 6199/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: A partial blockage to a bridge on the Bryansford Road, known locally as the Blue Bridges, occurred as a result of the high water levels in the Shimna River carrying debris down the watercourse on 25 August 2020. This blockage is thought to have been a contributory factor to the flooding that occurred.

My Department inspects the Shimna River at the Bryansford Road annually and if works are identified these will be added to a programme for maintenance. In addition my Department also responds to any reports made by the public or elected representatives of debris building up in this watercourse.

My Department is mindful of the need to provide and maintain its infrastructure. However, it is not always possible to ensure that flooding can be avoided. During severe weather events the volume of rainfall can exceed the design capacity of drainage infrastructure and blockages similar to what occurred at the Bryansford Road, despite the vigilance of my operational teams, can occur.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he intends to investigate upstream land management as a possible way to mitigate against further floods in Newcastle. **(AQW 6200/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: My Department is taking forward the Shimna Flood Alleviation Scheme and this project will involve the construction of approximately 1400m of flood defences and cost approximately £6.5million.

As part of the Scheme development my Department considered and investigated a number of flood alleviation options including the use of upstream storage to mitigate against further flooding in Newcastle. However, the use of upstream storage was ruled out due to the topography of the catchment. The most feasible option was found to be the provision of flood walls to prevent water from leaving the Shimna River, both upstream and downstream of the Bryansford Road Bridge.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure when MOT testing will resume to the same capacity available prior to the lifts failure and the COVID-19 pandemic.
(AQW 6203/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There has been a gradual resumption of MOT services from 1 June 2020, when the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed Individual Vehicle Approval testing.

From 20 July, the Driver and Vehicle Agency resumed MOT testing for priority vehicle groups, including those vehicles that are not able to avail of a Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC). This includes taxis and buses due a first time test, vehicles not previously registered in Northern Ireland, vehicles whose MOTs have expired by more than 12 months that includes vehicles previously declared SORN and those sold by car dealerships.

From 1 September, MOT testing for four year old cars and motorbikes and three year old light goods vehicles also resumed and for those vehicles in this category that currently have a 6 month TEC, they will be called for test when their TEC expires. In addition, the DVA recommenced testing of heavy goods vehicles, trailers and buses.

It is my priority to ensure that our staff and customers remain safe. The DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health advice to ensure that necessary and proportionate control measures relating to Covid-19 are incorporated into its risk assessments for safe vehicle testing. Like many other public facing services, vehicle testing capacity will increase as restrictions ease and as risk assessments are updated and this is being kept under constant review. In the interim period, the DVA is continuing to carefully manage the TEC process to prevent customers from being disadvantaged and to ensure all eligible vehicles can legally remain on the road.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 6014/17-22, whether there was a dedicated discussion for opportunities for cross-border rail links, specifically for the northwest, during her meeting with her counterpart Minister Eamon Ryan.
(AQW 6207/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I was delighted to meet with Minister Ryan at the NSMC meeting in July 2020 to discuss how we can work collaboratively, in partnership across our island. In particular, Minister Ryan and I agreed that we have shared priorities, including delivering cleaner, greener sustainable transport that transforms communities and enhances our island economy.

We discussed then, and have since, how the new feasibility study for high/higher speed rail north-south will be taken forward. We are continuing our discussions and hope to be in a position to provide a further update shortly.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on a timeline for the repair of the subsidence on Mullaleish Road, Richhill.
(AQW 6213/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently progressing the design and delivery of a remedial scheme to repair the subsidence on Mullaleish Road, Richhill arising from the collapse of a retaining wall and verge. Regrettably the Covid-19 crisis has delayed progress but a design is now complete and the land acquisition process can now commence.

I will ensure that, upon successful completion of the necessary acquisition of land, the proposed scheme which includes work to construct a new embankment, provision of a new vehicle restraint and reconstruction of the carriageway, is programmed as soon as practicable. However, given the scale and extent of the works, it is likely to be early 2021 before they will be completed.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider relaxing planning permission requirements for the erection of awnings to assist businesses to adapt in the context of COVID-19.
(AQW 6284/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In June 2020 I issued a letter to all councils asking that in exercising their functions under planning legislation including planning enforcement, they should temporarily, take a flexible and pragmatic approach to the use of on-street seating for cafes and bars, beer gardens and similar outdoor areas to accommodate physical/social distancing. In doing so I also made clear that, where development does take place associated with pavement cafes etc, such as for example, decking, permanent fencing and other permanent structures, planning permission may well be necessary and businesses should seek to obtain the appropriate permission(s), as failure to do so could result in the council initiating enforcement action.

The installation of new commercial awnings would normally be considered operational development under section 23 of the Planning Act (NI) 2011 and require express planning permission. Such fixtures raise a number of important material planning considerations including: the potential health and safety issues arising from their extension over pedestrians and the public pavement; and the effects such fixtures could have on the external appearance of buildings, particularly in the case of high-street establishments, listed buildings and within designated areas such as Conservation Areas or Areas of Townscape

Character. In addition, such fixtures to the outside of commercial premises may also require advertisement consent where any branding or logos displayed on the awning are considered as advertisement when in public view.

Given the nature of the material issues to be considered in the erection of commercial awnings, and within the context of my recent advices to councils, I do not believe there is a strong enough case to merit a relaxation on existing planning requirements in this regard.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the public can expect safety improvements for the A1 road to be delivered.

(AQW 6285/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am keen to progress the A1 Junctions Phase 2 road improvement project to the next stage as quickly as possible, whilst of course completing all of the necessary statutory processes. The Public Inquiry Inspector's report is expected by early October 2020 and, upon receipt, I will carefully consider its findings.

The next stages of development of the project would involve making the Statutory Orders, preparing a formal economic case, securing the necessary funding for construction and preparation of contract documents. Subject to the completion of the statutory processes and the availability of funding, the start date will be as quickly as practically possible.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much her Department has spent in promoting road safety among motorcyclists, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 6304/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department for Infrastructure has spent the following on promoting road safety among motorcyclists in the last three years.

Year	Spend
2019/20	£47,823
2018/19	£44,010
2017/18	£63,405
	£155,238

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure on what basis is new infrastructure for border posts at our ports being treated as permitted development.

(AQW 6338/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department has not received any planning requests regarding border posts at ports.

Any consideration of permitted development rights would be for the relevant planning authority to consider in line with existing planning policy.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure why assurances given regarding the pumping of flood waters adjacent to Mill Place, Limavady, between 30 August 2020 and 1 September 2020 were not acted upon by her Department.

(AQW 6341/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I understand from my Officials that they met you on site on 27 August 2020 to assess the damage caused by the recent flooding. It was agreed that the priority was to reduce the floodwaters on the playing surfaces at Limavady Rugby and Cricket Club sufficiently to allow machinery to access a breach in flood defences.

My Department gave a commitment to deploy four pumps to the area on Saturday 29 August 2020 to reduce water levels, carry out an inspection on Sunday and if necessary resume the pumping operation. An inspection of the site, carried out on Sunday 30 August 2020, found the water level to have receded to a satisfactory level and a contractor employed by my Department has commenced works to repair the flood defences. This work is ongoing and will be completed in the near future.

My Department resumed the pumping operation on Tuesday 1 September 2020 to clear water on nearby agriculture land. On Friday 4 September the floodwaters had receded to a low level where the pumps were unable to lift any more water. In line with what was agreed, the pumping operation at this location has now finished.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure what progress has been made with regard to a flood alleviation scheme for the Clonduff estate, in particular Clonduff Drive.

(AQO 558/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has already carried out a high level study of the flooding in this area and this has indicated that it may be possible to develop a financially viable flood alleviation scheme. In order to further examine the potential for a scheme to be developed, a detailed feasibility study and economic appraisal are currently being taken forward. It is expected that draft reports will now be completed this autumn as a number of additional requirements for the study have been identified.

If a financially viable scheme is identified as part of the feasibility process, the next stages will involve the detailed design and construction of flood alleviation works. At this stage construction details are not fully developed but the potential scheme, to protect approximately 20 properties, may require the construction of a number of new culverts.

I will also 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 when this or other capital projects could commence on site.

I appreciate the interest you have in this area of work undertaken by my Department and officials will be happy to update you on progress at any stage.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the project to provide a right-turn pocket from the A24 Saintfield Road into Baronscourt Road, including a timescale for the completion of the ongoing feasibility study.
(AQO 556/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that my Department has commenced a feasibility study to examine a number of options for the potential provision of a right turn pocket and pedestrian facilities at the A24 Saintfield Road / Baronscourt Road junction. As part of this study, a number of preliminary layouts have been identified.

However, to further consider these options, a topographical survey is required to provide an accurate layout of the existing junction and determine the impact of each option on adjacent land and properties. Completion of the required topographical survey has been delayed by the COVID19 pandemic and once current restrictions have been fully lifted, the topographical survey will be carried out and the junction assessed to consider a number of preliminary alignments.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether sheltered waiting facilities will be provided at all test centres for driving instructors while their students are taking their driving tests.
(AQW 6388/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) has carried out an extensive review of its risk assessments to ensure that all relevant control measures relating to Covid-19 have been incorporated into its driver and vehicle testing processes. This has enabled MOT centres to safely reopen from 20 July, and practical car driver testing to recommence from 1 September.

One of the risks identified in the risk assessment is interaction with the public and the potential of contracting or spreading Covid-19. In order to mitigate against this risk, and to meet PHA guidelines in relation to social distancing, it has been necessary for the DVA to take steps to reduce the number of people in the test hall and reception areas. Therefore DVA customers have been asked to wait outside until the vehicle or driving tests have been completed. This requirement was detailed in the stakeholder information pack provided to Approved Driving Instructors.

I fully appreciate driving instructors concerns and accept this is far from an ideal situation. I would stress that these temporary measures have been put in place to ensure the safety of customers and staff, which remains my priority at this time. I do, however, recognise that for driving instructors in particular, many of whom will regularly visit DVA test centres, a review of this position is required and DVA officials are urgently exploring options to identify practical solutions to this issue.

I am very conscious of the disruption and inconvenience being experienced by driving instructors and learner drivers at this time but please be assured that the DVA is working to restore normal services as soon as possible.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what schools in the Ards and North Down Borough Council area will benefit from a reduction to a 20mph speed limit on adjacent roads.
(AQW 6442/17-22)

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 that traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year’s capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools across Northern Ireland. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from these schools on a daily basis. I am determined to make using the roads around all of our schools safer for everyone, and it is my intention through future programmes that many more schools will also have a 20mph speed limit on the roads outside their gates.

I can confirm that the six schools listed below within the Ards and North Down Borough Council area are included within the list of 100 schools which are being progressed this financial year:

- Abbey PS, Movilla Rd, Newtownards;
- Andrew Memorial PS, Ballygowan Rd, Comber;
- Carrowdore PS, Castle Place, Carrowdore;
- Kirkistown PS, Main Rd, Cloughey;
- Loughries Integrated PS, Ballyblack Rd, Newtownards; and
- St Patrick’s PS, Ballygalget Rd, Portaferry.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 5045/17-22, whether a date for the resurfacing of the A23 Ballygowan Road has been agreed.

(AQW 6475/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that a resurfacing scheme on the A23 Belfast Road, Ballygowan has been included in the programme of work to be carried out during the current financial year.

However, I regret that I am unable at present to confirm a specific date for the commencement of this scheme as details remain to be finalised with the contractor. As is normal practice the commencement of the scheme will be advertised via the usual media channels.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the partially developed Comber Greenway will be completed.

(AQO 559/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In the twelve years since the Comber Greenway was 'opened', it is clear that, in the urban environment, greenways have the significant benefit of improving off-road routes for commuting to and from work and places of education. In recent years, data from the counters on the greenway indicate that there are of the order of 300,000 journeys made on the greenway each year.

My Department continually invests in the Comber Greenway and development is an ongoing project. In recent years a total of around £1.5 million has been invested by my Department and other stakeholders. This investment includes around £500,000 on widening the greenway from 3m to 4m (in association with the Department for Communities), and around £500,000 improving access points at the Grahamsbridge Road junction and a new walking and cycling bridge at the Dundonald International Icebowl (a Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council project supported by my Department).

As highlighted during the Member's Adjournment debate in March this year, there are other improvements that could be considered. I want to assure the Member that I am keen to consider carefully how the development of greenways generally can deliver projects that have the potential to improve the lives of people and connect communities.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on MOT services.

(AQO 560/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There has been a gradual resumption of MOT services over the summer as COVID 19 restrictions have eased. From 1 June 2020, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed Individual Vehicle Approval testing.

On 20 July, the DVA resumed limited vehicle testing for:

- vehicles not registered in Northern Ireland and due a test
- vehicles with MOT expired by more than 12 months
- vehicles currently declared SORN; and
- buses due a first time test (not for 'hire and reward' use)

From 1 September 2020, the DVA extended vehicle testing to further categories of vehicles to include:

- four year old private cars and motorcycles
- three year old light goods vehicles
- heavy goods vehicles
- trailers

The owners of these vehicles will now be issued with a reminder notice which will contain instructions on how to book a test. Reminders will be sent as the vehicles approach their test due date.

To manage capacity, TEC's will continue to be issued for all other eligible vehicles until vehicle testing services can be fully reinstated.

Vehicles whose existing MOT certificate expired from 26 March 2020 or will expire before testing for their category resumes will be automatically exempt from testing for a full 12 months, with their new MOT expiry date pushed forward into 2021.

For vehicles which have previously been issued with a TEC as a result of issues with the scissor lifts, their TEC will also be automatically extended to the maximum period of 12 months.

Before the TEC period ends DVA will issue a reminder notice to the registered keeper to book and present their vehicle for test together with instructions on how to book a test.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for Infrastructure following recently released figures showing a rise in cycling casualties, to outline how she will address the safety concerns of cyclists.

(AQO 561/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In recent years we have seen an increased interest in cycling as a mode of travel here. I would like to see more people choosing to cycle. However, research shows that more people would consider cycling but felt the roads were not a safe place to do so.

The Road Safety Strategy recognises people who cycle as a vulnerable road user group and includes a range of actions that relate to their safety. To improve the safety of those who already cycle on our roads and to encourage more people to cycle my Department developed a new cycling safety campaign in February 2019.

The campaign is designed to help keep those who cycle safe by addressing key lifesaving driver and cyclist behaviours. It encourages drivers to give extra consideration to people who cycle as they share the road; and encourages cyclists to take measures to keep themselves safe on the road. The campaign also communicates the fact that we all have equal rights to use the road; as quite often vehicle drivers consider themselves to have priority. My Department regularly uses TV, radio outdoor, digital and social media activity to promote cyclist safety.

In addition I have committed £20 million this year to blue / green infrastructure in support of walking and cycling measures. A number of cycle lanes have recently been put in place in Belfast and Derry and my Department continues to work with other Departments and District Councils in order to get more done.

I can assure the Member that this is only the start and that segregated infrastructure along with repurposed streets will go a long way to address the safety concerns of cyclists.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Ministerial Advisory Panel on Infrastructure. (AQO 562/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The first meeting of the Ministerial Advisory Panel on Infrastructure took place on 25 August 2020.

The scope of the Panel will reflect the hard infrastructure which falls within the remit of the Department for Infrastructure.

The Panel have been asked to consider how an Infrastructure Commission for Northern Ireland might support more effectively the long term planning and development of relevant infrastructure here and how it might underpin my objective of delivering cleaner, greener, sustainable and inclusive infrastructure.

The Panel comprises a small group of independent experts and is being chaired by Kirsty McManus of the Institute of Directors. The Panel are currently undertaking an evidence gathering exercise which includes engagement with key stakeholders and consideration of global best practice in respect of infrastructure development and delivery.

It is anticipated that the Panel will present a report of their findings by the end of September 2020 and that this will form the basis of a series of recommendations which will be brought to the Executive for consideration in Autumn 2020.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the roads' maintenance budget for 2020-21. (AQO 557/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the importance of investment in the roads network to improve connectivity, help communities and tackle regional imbalance and have maintained an allocation of £75m capital to structural maintenance of the road network for 2020/2021. Out of this £75m, I have allocated £12m to a Road Recovery Fund, with £10m of this specifically targeted to improving rural roads.

Capital structural maintenance is only one element of the roads maintenance programme and there are a number of roads maintenance activities that are funded through the Resource budget. These include street lighting inspection and testing, street lighting maintenance, pot-hole repairs, grass cutting, gully emptying and weed spraying all of which are important aspects of road maintenance in ensuring public safety.

A Resource allocation of £46.1 million was provided for roads maintenance in Budget 2020-21 and while this is welcome, my Department's overall Resource budget remains constrained and presents a challenging position in terms of delivery services across the Department. An independent assessment carried out on behalf of the Department (The Barton Review) has identified that a Structural Maintenance budget of £143m is needed annually and given that there is currently a significant shortfall, I will continue to bid for the necessary funding to seek to enhance my Department's capability to properly maintain the road network.

Department of Justice

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Justice whether she has an indicative timetable for the recommencement of appeal tribunals for those appealing the non-award of injury on duty police pensions. (AQW 6113/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): All appointments for medical appeals in respect of injury on duty awards were suspended in March 2020 due to Covid-19. Unfortunately, we are not in a position to recommence injury on duty medical appeal appointments at Waterside Tower until the Northern Ireland Policing Board is in a position to facilitate them.

I recognise and understand the adverse impact the prolonged suspension would have on those officers awaiting assessment which can be a stressful process for some. Ultimately, the health and well-being of applicants, staff and doctors attending assessments is of paramount importance. However, I can advise that my officials are working with Northern Ireland Policing Board officials in an effort to recommence Independent Medical Referee appointments as soon as possible.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Justice what charities her Department has engaged with to address multi-generational abuse.

(AQW 6121/17-22)

Mrs Long: The commitments of the 'Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse in Northern Ireland' Strategy led by my Department in conjunction with the Department of Health are delivered in partnership with a wide range of voluntary and community sector organisations to ensure a multi-agency approach to tackling this important area. This includes the formation of a dedicated stakeholder group comprising a wide range of voluntary sector organisations representing the interests of various victim groupings such as Women's Aid, Men's Advisory Project, Action Against Elder Abuse (now Hourglass), NSPCC, Victim Support, Nexus, Rainbow, Cara-friend and Disability Action. This group provides the voluntary sector with an opportunity to work with Government Departments collaboratively and to contribute to the development and implementation of the various strategic action plans. Members continue to work together to promote societal change in attitudes around domestic and sexual abuse and to support early intervention and prevention work streams which aim to break the cycle of abuse which passes through generations of families.

One of the key actions of the Strategy is creation of a new domestic abuse offence, which has since been developed in close partnership with statutory and voluntary sector partners including: Action on Elder Abuse (now Hourglass), Men's Advisory Project, NSPCC, Nexus and Women's Aid Federation in consultation with representatives from police, the Probation Board and the Public Prosecution Service. Provision for the new offence is included in the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill which I have introduced to the Assembly. I would hope that this new offence will go some way to help break the pattern of domestic abuse which runs through different generations of families and to tackle familial abuse between different generations, including adult child/grandchild to parent/grandparent abuse.

On a practical level, my Department also provides funding for the administration of Support Hubs, an exemplar of collaborative working, which bring together key partners, including Health, to facilitate early, better quality information sharing and decision making to allow them to work with specific vulnerable individuals to improve their circumstances and help address underlying issues. This can help to address issues that cause people to be vulnerable to abuse, or to being perpetrators of abuse, and as such tackle any link to multi-generational cycles of abuse. There are currently ten Support Hubs in operation, with one aligned to each council area in Northern Ireland and with access to relevant local charities who can assist with any help required. The final Support Hub, for Belfast, is in the process of being established.

My Department is committed to the establishment more generally of a strategic, co-ordinated approach to early intervention; it has been proven that intervening early where problems are beginning to manifest is the most effective means of achieving longer-term positive outcomes. In recognition of this increasing importance and effectiveness of Early Intervention, a Justice Early Intervention group has been established. Whilst initially membership has been drawn from Justice stakeholders, there are plans to extend it to other partners (including other Departments and the VCS) in due course, as workstreams are developed.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice what rehabilitative programmes exist for those in prison service establishments who have been convicted of driving offences.

(AQW 6151/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Prison Service (NIPS) recognises that a key element of any sentence must be the focus on enabling offenders to reform and to desist from future offending behaviour. NIPS operate a Prisoner Development Model which is a multi-agency approach focusing on a robust needs analysis, risk assessment and reduction of risk through structured Personal Development Planning. Interventions are provided at various levels to challenge offending behaviour and to provide opportunities for offenders to take responsibility for addressing their behaviour and develop actual life skills to support community reintegration.

The interventions available are individually tailored not just to specific offences but also to address any contributing negative risk taking behaviours which contribute to driving offences such as addiction, impulsive behaviour, poor problem solving and a lack of consequential thinking. Interventions include:-

Your Choice – This is a virtual reality education programme delivered by Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. It consists of a virtual reality film highlighting the consequences of poor decision making by a driver and passengers which culminates in a crash. Offenders experience the reality of being trapped in a vehicle as a front seat passenger. They will also experience the dramatic sights and sounds of emergency services arriving at the scene with the resulting rescue and removal of the casualties. The aim of the programme is to contribute to attitudinal change and road user behaviour helping to reduce casualties on the road.

Road Safety Course – This course is delivered by Police Service Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service and is specifically for offenders with driving offences. Offenders get to see the stark reality of a serious road traffic collision caused by dangerous driving. A person who has lost a family member explains how losing a family member by dangerous driving has affected them.

Motor Cycle Awareness – This is a cross community pilot project funded by the Assets Recovery Scheme in Hydebank Wood College. The course covers both classroom and practical sessions teaching bike safety and riding skills. On successful completion participants receive a certificate in First Aid, Basic Maintenance and Riding Skills. The aim is to reduce the anti-social issues around illegal and dangerous use of off road vehicles on open ground and public highways.

AD:EPT – AD:EPT provide a comprehensive drug and alcohol service based on a multi component model of delivery. The aim is to provide a range of individually tailored services to offenders who are experiencing problems associated with the misuse of alcohol and substances. Alcohol and substance misuse interventions contribute to an offender's ability to engage in other programmes and activities that support their rehabilitation.

Motivational Enhancement Group (MEG) – This programme explores the idea of motivation and encourages offenders to think about changes that they may need to make in their lives. The objectives are to motivate offenders to take the necessary steps to change their behaviour, to become more aware of personal responsibility for change and to accept this responsibility to build motivation and strengthen commitment to change.

Gaining Opportunities & Living Skills (GOALS) – This programme specifically targets self-esteem, what it is, what raises it and what can destroy it. The programme encourages and supports offenders to take responsibility for all their actions and overcome any barriers in life. It addresses the events in a person's life and their reactions to these which determine the outcomes. It encourages personal target and goal setting that are realistic and achievable. The programme focuses clearly on repetition and practice which enhances self-belief.

Thinking Skills Programme (TSP) – The aim of this programme is to address the cognitive deficits of offenders and enable them to develop skills and attitudes that will allow them to achieve goals in pro-social ways, and so reducing offending behaviour. The objectives are directly related to the specific cognitive deficits identified through research. They are to increase self-control strategies and reduce impulsivity, to increase flexible thinking skills, creativity and to reduce reliance on rigid approaches, to develop perspective skills by learning to see and experience other peoples' points of view, to encourage thinking about consequences, to develop strategies for problem solving by exploring and using a problem solving sequence.

Victim Impact Programme – The programme is designed to assist offenders to understand how their criminal behaviour impacts upon their victims and their family in the short and long term. One of the topics discussed is Drunk and Impaired Driving. The primary goal of the programme is to prevent further victimisation by helping offenders become aware of the impact of crime on victims and entire communities.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice to provide a timeline for implementing the Troubles-related incident Victims Payments Scheme.

(AQW 6168/17-22)

Mrs Long: A number of important operational steps need to be advanced to implement the Victims' Payments Scheme. That includes development of an IT system, deployment and training of staff for administrative preparations, development of a medical assessment process and appointment of members to the Victims' Payments Board.

Not all of these fall within the direct control of the Department of Justice. However, subject to funding for the scheme being made available, it is anticipated that the scheme could open for applications by early March 2021.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of whether domestic abuse and the abuse of older people are two separate issues.

(AQW 6180/17-22)

Mrs Long: I am conscious that domestic abuse, in its many forms, affects people of all ages within our society. Older people may be abused by a partner or former partner, or by a family member such as their adult child or grandchild. The abuse can be physical, psychological, financial or sexual.

While recognising the strong links between domestic abuse and the abuse of older people, it is important to note that some older people may be abused by those who they trust who are not family members, intimate partners or former partners. Whilst the new domestic abuse offence being brought forward in the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill will capture patterns of abusive behaviour against older people by family members, intimate partners or former partners, some of those who commit abuse against older people, such as a live-in carer, neighbour or family friend would not fall within the scope of the proposed definition of domestic abuse as set out in the new offence, and as such I would consider that there are instances where these are two separate issues.

You may be also aware that as part of his Review of Hate Crime Legislation, Judge Desmond Marrinan is considering the potential for adding age as an additional category in relation to hate crime.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the number of reported pet thefts in each of the last three years, within each District Council area; (ii) the number of successful prosecutions for these offences; and (iii) the penalties handed out for the offences.

(AQW 6342/17-22)

Mrs Long: There are no specific offences covering the theft of a pet, and police crime recording systems do not contain information that would indicate whether property stolen was considered a pet. This information may be held somewhere on the record, but to determine this would require reading through every record where an animal has been classified as stolen (there are 491 records that meet this criteria). Instead, figures have been provided for offences involving the theft of certain animals which are more likely to have been pets.

Burglary, robbery and theft offences where the property classified as 'stolen' was defined as 'animal' by Local Government District, 2017/18 - 2019/20

Council Area	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Belfast City	10	11	10
Lisburn & Castlereagh City	2	1	4
Ards & North Down	2	0	2
Newry, Mourne & Down	7	7	6
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon	8	5	7
Mid Ulster	3	3	1
Fermanagh & Omagh	2	4	4
Derry City & Strabane	2	3	5
Causeway Coast & Glens	1	3	4
Mid & East Antrim	10	0	5
Antrim & Newtownabbey	5	3	2
Northern Ireland	52	40	50

Note:

- 1 This information is based on data extracted from a live system, and may be subject to change. It is dependent on the information having been input into the system in such a way as to identify those records that are relevant.
- 2 The following animals have been included in the table below: Cats, Dogs, Hamsters, Rabbits, Ferrets, Lizards, Snakes, Tortoises, Birds (e.g. Canaries, Parrots, Pigeons), and Fish (e.g. goldfish).

The information requested in relation to successful prosecutions for offences involving the theft of pets 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 theft of pets. This also limits the ability to provide information on penalties handed out for such offences.

To identify cases which related to theft of pets would require a manual search of case records for theft offences, of which there were 1,492 dealt with at courts in 2019. We estimate that to locate, retrieve and extract any information that might be relevant to your request would involve work of more than the appropriate limit.

The appropriate limit is specified in regulations and for central government is set at £700. It is estimated that to search systems manually for relevant information to identify whether offences for which a conviction was handed down for theft, it will take one member of staff approximately five minutes per case, giving a total of over 124 hours work. At a cost of £25 per hour, this equates to over £3,000 which is higher than the appropriate limit.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice when she anticipates services under her Department's control will be fully operational.

(AQO 565/17-22)

Mrs Long: Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the justice system has not stood still; far from it.

In the face of unprecedented challenges, the system has responded rapidly and innovatively so that confidence in the justice system is maintained and to ensure the safety of our staff, those who use the system and those in our care.

We have introduced new ways of working, for example making better use of technology, which will have long term benefits for the justice system.

I am pleased that jury trials - one of the cornerstones of our justice system - restarted on 19 August after huge efforts by the Courts and Tribunals Service, the judiciary, the legal profession and the wider justice family to enable jury trials to be conducted in a way that keeps everyone safe.

Each part of the justice system - including PSNI, the Public Prosecution Service, Courts, Prison Service, Probation and Youth Justice - has a recovery plan in place and justice organisations have worked in partnership to develop and deliver a coordinated approach to recovering the system.

The timing of all services being fully operational will be dependent on how we progress through the Executive's Recovery Plan and while it is not possible to provide a specific date, the Criminal Justice Board, which I chair, continues to closely monitor progress.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Justice to outline what actions can be taken by courts in cases where an individual denies access under a child contact order.

(AQO 573/17-22)

Mrs Long: The welfare of the child is the paramount consideration in family courts.

The COVID-19 pandemic guidance issued by the Office of the Lord Chief Justice includes advice regarding contact arrangements. The guidance recognises that it is important that children should maintain their usual routine of spending time with each of their parents in compliance with a Contact Order unless to do so would put the child, or others at risk with regards to Government and Public Health Authority guidance.

The decision whether a child is to move between parental homes is for the child's parents to make after a sensible assessment of the circumstances, including the child's present health, the risk of infection and the presence of any recognised vulnerable individuals in one household or the other.

The guidance states that the courts will expect that if direct contact cannot be achieved alternative arrangements should be made to establish and maintain regular contact between the child and the other parent, for example remotely – by Face-Time, Skype or other video connection or, if that is not possible, by telephone.

Where a party to the proceedings feels a matter of contact is urgent they may request a court hearing by lodging the requisite Form. The judge will determine whether the matter is urgent or necessary and if it can be dealt with administratively or will require a hearing.

Breach of Contact Orders made under the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 can be dealt with by way of contempt of court proceedings or initiated under enforcement powers in the Magistrates' Courts (Northern Ireland) Order 1981.

The guidance issued by the Office of the Lord Chief Justice states that if any court-directed contact arrangements are missed or found to be unreasonable, the court may take this into consideration when making further orders, and it may be possible to 'make up' time with the child after the Covid-19 restrictions are lifted.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the 601 attacks on places of worship recorded by the PSNI from 2014-2019, to outline the consideration she has given to introducing a Places of Worship Protection Scheme,

(AQO 575/17-22)

Mrs Long: Places of Worship play an important role in many communities and in many people's lives. As I have stated previously, I recognise the effect that an attack on a place of worship can have in terms of the distress and disruption that it causes to members of a faith community and any damage that is done to buildings as a result of an attack.

My officials continue to explore evidence based information in relation to attacks on places of worship to allow me to fully consider if any similar scheme for Northern Ireland is required. This currently includes assessing criteria for the non-statute Places of Worship Security Fund that operates in England and Wales and the development of a similar scheme in Scotland, both of which focus on religiously motivated hate crime.

Before making a decision, particular issues need to be considered such as: the types of building to be included; security measures that could be covered; administration of the scheme and available funding.

I will consider this further once I have had the opportunity to reflect on the findings which I will receive in the coming weeks.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Justice to outline any engagement her Department has had with the British Government regarding the implementation of the legacy mechanisms as agreed in the Stormont House Agreement.

(AQO 576/17-22)

Mrs Long: There was ongoing engagement between the Department and NIO as NIO developed the draft legislation to implement the Stormont House Agreement. Following the completion last year of the public consultation on the draft Bill, officials and relevant justice bodies participated in a series of meetings with NIO officials to discuss issues arising from the consultation. Officials were there to advise NIO policy leads on the operational implications of these for the proposed Historical Investigations Unit. Officials also kept NIO updated on the planning work being done in preparation for the establishment of the HIU.

However, this work was overtaken by the new proposals published by the Secretary of State in March 2020. We had no engagement with NIO on these proposals until we received briefings on their latest proposals immediately before publication. I have since written to the Secretary of State and spoken to him briefly by telephone. The new proposals remain subject to political agreement and it is not yet clear what role my Department would play in their implementation, given the shift in emphasis from historic investigations to truth recovery and reconciliation.

I remain ready and committed to working with Executive colleagues and the United Kingdom Government to reach agreement on legacy arrangements that meet the needs of families and the requirements of Article 2.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her legislative programme.

(AQO 577/17-22)

Mrs Long: In addition to the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, which is currently at Committee Stage in the Assembly, I intend to bring forward three definite and one possible other separate Bills to the Assembly during the remainder of this mandate.

Upon the completion of pre-Introduction clearances and securing of the necessary Executive approvals, I plan to introduce a Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill to the Assembly in October.

This will be followed by a Protection from Stalking Bill, drafting of which is at an advanced stage, in November / December.

Subject to the analysis of responses to a consultation exercise that concluded on 14 August, this may be followed by a tightly focussed Personal Injury Discount Rate ("Damages") Bill in January 2021.

I then plan to bring forward a Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill in spring 2021 to legislate for a number of discrete policy areas that do not come within scope of the other Bills in the mandate.

Introduction of the Justice Bill in early 2021 will ensure that the Bill can complete its Assembly scrutiny and passage before the House rises in March 2022 for the next local elections.

Department for the Economy

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what actions her Department has taken regarding the devolution of powers to set the minimum wage in Northern Ireland, as set out in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 5035/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): To date my Department has not taken any specific actions regarding the devolution of powers to set the minimum wage in Northern Ireland.

In these difficult times I am prioritising the economic recovery in response to Covid-19. I will, in due course, consider the matter in detail and consult my Executive colleagues as appropriate.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on her plans for the future of the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme.

(AQW 5739/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am currently considering options on the future of the Scheme. There are a series of complex issues under consideration including Value for Money matters, compliance with State aid rules and the impacts on Scheme participants.

I will discuss the options with Executive Colleagues before any final decision is taken.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what progress has been made in securing the long term future of HMS Caroline as a world-class maritime visitor attraction; and (ii) what expense has been incurred in engaging consultants by her Department, in comparison to the cost of reopening the ship.

(AQW 6032/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) Following the agreement to temporarily close HMS Caroline (HMSC) until 31st December 2020, officials have been working to identify the full range of options for the long term future of the attraction and have already commenced a series of discussions with the relevant stakeholders, including the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN). I am cognisant of the need for a prompt decision on the future of HMSC and aim to have a clear plan for its future agreed before the end of the current temporary closure period.
- (ii) The estimated cost of engaging specialist consultants to assist in formulating and informing the future options for the attraction is expected to be approximately £50k.

NMRN provided my officials with estimated costs of temporary closure of the attraction (£193k) and of remaining open (£297k), for the period from 1st July 2020 to 31st December 2020. The costs for remaining open were based on receiving 30% less visitors due to Covid-19 but these numbers could ultimately have been lower and deficits higher.

As I have previously stated, I remain committed to exploring all options to enable this important heritage visitor attraction to remain in Belfast.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy to provide an update on Erasmus programme participation for EU students attending Northern Ireland universities following the end of the transition period.

(AQW 6140/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As it stands, under the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated with the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom (UK) will continue to participate fully in the current Erasmus+ programme (2014-2020). Under this arrangement, Erasmus+ projects successfully bid for during the current programme will continue to receive EU funding for the full duration of the project, even where that funding runs beyond the end of 2020, and therefore beyond the end of the transition period.

This means that participants who study, train, volunteer or spend time abroad through Erasmus+ exchanges that were successfully bid for during the current Erasmus+ programme will still be able to participate fully and for the full duration of their exchange, even where the exchange extends beyond the end of the transition period.

This is equally applicable to UK participants going abroad, as well as to international participants coming to the UK, and as such includes EU students participating in exchanges to Northern Ireland universities.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for the Economy to advise whether local universities will be honouring all conditional offers made to A Level students.

(AQW 6159/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Universities are autonomous institutions and, while the policy responsibility for higher education sits with my Department, we have no remit to intervene in their admissions practices.

Following a decision by the Minister of Education on the regrading of A-Level results, there is now a unique situation whereby applicant students who may have initially been rejected from a conditional offer through failure to meet the grade requirement, may now meet that requirement following the regrading process. As a result, there may be a need for additional places to meet those offers, and I have already secured Executive approval in principle to provide any additional funding required.

We are still in the developing stages of the local universities being able to finalise their offers to students on the back of the revised grades, and this admissions process will be ongoing for the next couple of weeks. As such, I am unable at this stage to advise definitively whether all conditional offers will be honoured.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for the Economy why Northern Ireland is not implementing the Kickstart Scheme, aimed at helping 16-24 year old's gain work placements, given the fact that the rest of the UK is offering the scheme.

(AQW 6160/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is currently developing an equivalent scheme for young people aged 16 to 24 years old.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the replacement of the Energy Efficiency Loan Fund to implement energy saving projects, which closed in 2018.

(AQW 6264/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In June 2018 the Invest NI Energy Efficiency Loan Fund closed to new applications. The Carbon Trust, who delivered the fund on behalf of Invest NI, took the decision not to accept an extension to the contract beyond the initial two year contract period. I understand there had been a significant downturn in the uptake of loans by businesses at that time, despite extra marketing resource that had been allocated to promoting the fund.

As you will appreciate, all programmes require an independent evaluation and economic appraisal to be undertaken to determine the need for any new scheme. This process meant that there was going to be a gap in service and this was communicated to the public at the time.

Invest NI did proceed with an evaluation and economic appraisal of all its energy and resource efficiency supports, including the Energy Efficiency Loan Fund. This was completed in August 2019. A continuation of the Energy Efficiency Loan Fund was not identified as the preferred option within the economic appraisal, instead a new scheme was recommended. As such, a new energy efficiency scheme has to be developed, modelled and created from inception, and is not simply a replacement of the previous scheme. Invest NI subsequently secured the necessary approvals for a new scheme and was able to progress to the procurement stage.

A pre-market engagement exercise in January 2020 was the initial step in the procurement process with CPD. A draft tender specification was developed and advertised on the e-tenders website where Invest NI welcomed feedback from market participants. The feedback received through this pre-market engagement exercise raised a number of key points from market participants that has necessitated further assessment work. Any new scheme is subject to rigorous governance procedures and this additional assessment is required to ensure that a new scheme will be fit for purpose. Any extended timeframe is therefore regrettable but unavoidable.

Despite the challenges in implementing a new energy efficiency scheme, Invest NI is committed to supporting businesses in becoming more productive and competitive through the adoption of energy efficiency initiatives. Invest NI is actively working on an interim support scheme to encourage the uptake of energy efficiency measures within businesses.

To ensure fairness to all relevant businesses, suppliers and other public stakeholders, Invest NI will communicate the launch of any new scheme at the appropriate time, including promotion through a range of marketing channels.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy to provide a breakdown of the £17.2 million allocated for apprenticeships according to courses, entry levels and Further Education Colleges.

(AQW 6265/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: To maximise flexibility and responsiveness to the needs of our economy, the £17.2 million funding will support Apprenticeships at all Levels from Level 2 to Level 6 provided by either the Further Education Colleges, other non-Further

Education Apprenticeship training providers and Universities. The funding will follow the Apprentice and Employer and will not be prescriptive as to Level of Apprenticeship or training provider.

I have supplemented the £17.2 million allocated for apprenticeships by my Executive colleagues with Department funds to create an Apprenticeship Recovery Package.

I have allocated a total of £14.3 million to fund an Apprenticeship Return, Retain and Result initiative to encourage the return to work, retention and qualification of up to 4,500 furloughed apprentices in both the ApprenticeshipsNI and Higher Level Apprenticeship programmes. This initiative will begin on 1 November 2020, when the UK wide Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme ends. It offers up to £3,700 of support, per apprentice, to employers who return an apprentice from furlough and retain them until they have completed their apprenticeship.

I have allocated £12.5 million to fund an Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive initiative that will encourage and support employers to create apprenticeship opportunities for both new apprentices and apprentices who have been made redundant. This initiative offers support of £3,000, to employers, for each new apprenticeship opportunity created between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021.

My Department will also be launching an Apprenticeship Challenge Fund in late September. This fund will support innovative approaches and new collaborations to increase apprenticeship opportunities in Northern Ireland. Successful applicants could receive one off awards of up to £50,000.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 5824/17-22 and AQW 5322/17-22, whether the proposed Longitudinal Education Outcomes database for Northern Ireland will include qualifications obtained at school as well as at further education colleges and higher education institutions.

(AQW 6286/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: It is proposed that the Longitudinal Education Outcomes database for Northern Ireland will include qualifications obtained in school and the Department is negotiating with the Department of Education in the hope of reaching an agreement to incorporate their data in the database. Information on qualifications obtained in school is considered a crucial component of the LEO database.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has any plans to review the annual costs of the fifty awards bodies operating within our regional colleges.

(AQW 6309/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There are 89 awarding organisations offering regulated vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland, many of which are delivered through the six Further Education colleges. Each awarding organisation will have its structure of fees published in advance of qualifications delivered, to allow for colleges and other providers to select and plan commercial arrangements and agreements with the awarding organisations. This is carried out within an open market for provision of qualifications in NI. These arrangements are monitored by CCEA Regulation through annual regulatory processes and targeted compliance activities.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy to specify what ministerial directions have been issued since January 2020.

(AQW 6335/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There have been three Ministerial Directions issued since January 2020.

The first was for the Covid-19 - £10,000 Business Support Grant Scheme.

The second was for the Covid-19 - £25,000 Business Support Grant Scheme for Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure. The third was for the Covid-19 - Hardship Fund for Microbusinesses.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Clarke asked the Assembly Commission what additional costs it has incurred due to COVID-19.

(AQO 617/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): To ask the Assembly Commission what additional costs it has incurred due to COVID-19.

(AQO 617/17-22)

At the outset of the pandemic, the Commission established a COVID-19 Response Group to advise on and oversee the measures required to help ensure that all relevant Regulations and guidance is followed in Parliament Buildings.

These measures have included the provision of additional soap and paper towels, hand sanitiser, gloves and signage. To date, we have spent approximately 7.5 thousand pounds on such items. It is anticipated that the provision of these items will be a continuing requirement for the foreseeable future.

In addition, we have provided hand sanitiser stations at a cost of 7.6 thousand pounds and Perspex screens for areas including the search facility, entrance areas and voting lobbies at an approximate cost of 3 thousand pounds to date. It is anticipated that some additional screening may still need to be provided.

As well as these direct costs incurred to minimise the risk of infection in Parliament Buildings, the low footfall in the building has had a negative impact on the Support Services contract. This contract provides for catering, cleaning and related services in the building. The Commission normally requires that catering services be provided during business hours and for events, functions and public dining. Where the cost of providing these services exceeds the monies taken in, the extra operating cost is incurred by the Commission.

The revenue from events, functions and public dining normally offsets the cost of providing catering services but, naturally, all such activities have been paused. In addition, the dramatic reduction in sales in the catering outlets since April 2020 (for some months this has fallen to just 5% of the expected level of sales) caused by extremely low building occupancy, has meant that additional costs of approximately 90 thousand pounds have been incurred since 1 April 2020.

However, there is a continuing requirement for a strict regime to keep the building clean and especially for contact points such as handrails and door handles. The cost of additional cleaning requirements has remained fixed as per the contractual agreement as it has been assisted by using members of the catering team to assist with the additional cleaning tasks. Therefore, these additional cleaning measures have, to date, not attracted any additional cost for the Commission.

In terms of capital investment to facilitate home working, the Commission purchased additional laptops and tablets at a cost of 37 thousand pounds. It is anticipated that home working will continue to be a feature of Assembly business for the near future. In addition, a small number of low cost Health and Safety-related items have been provided to assist with home working.

In addition, a further 40.9 thousand pounds was invested in the Starleaf video conferencing system to support completely virtual or hybrid Committee meetings while meeting procedural needs. This allowed meetings to continue to be broadcast, live streamed and archived using the existing broadcast infrastructure in Parliament Buildings.

Given the reduction in other activities in this financial year and a reduction in their associated costs, the Commission has not required additional funding to meet the above costs.

Mr Boylan asked the Assembly Commission what consideration has been given to the provision of childcare facilities in Parliament Buildings for Assembly staff and MLAs with young children.
(AQO 618/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): To ask the Assembly Commission what consideration has been given to the provision of childcare facilities in Parliament Buildings for Assembly staff and MLAs with young children.
(AQO 618/17-22)

At its meeting on 5 November 2019, the Assembly Commission was advised that the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance, Sue Gray had liaised with the Clerk/Chief Executive to explore the feasibility of opening a pre-school childcare facility on the Stormont Estate. That facility could be used by Members, Members' staff, Assembly Secretariat staff and Northern Ireland Civil Service staff working on the Estate.

While some exploratory options and designs have been developed, considerable work is still needed to prepare a fully-worked business case. This is being developed by the Department of Finance. Once a detailed proposal is developed, it will be brought to the Assembly Commission for its consideration.

Given the many interruptions to normal work activities since March of this year arising from the Department and the Commission's response to COVID-19, the project has not been progressed further at this stage.

At its meeting on 19 February of this year, the Commission discussed a paper, which outlined the support that is available for Members with families and young children.

Members may wish to note that since 2017, Members and Assembly staff can avail of HMRC's Tax-Free Childcare scheme. This scheme is administered centrally by HMRC and allows the payment for approved childcare (for example, from a childminder or nursery) to be made via an online childcare account. Up to £2,000 per year for each child is available to help with the costs of childcare. As with all schemes set up by HMRC, it has specific rules and regulations that must be met before it can be used.

In addition, some Members who met the relevant conditions were able to purchase childcare vouchers using a salary sacrifice scheme. This arrangement meant that childcare vouchers could be purchased in a tax efficient manner. While the salary sacrifice arrangement ended in 2017, the scheme has remained open to Members who were already included in the scheme.

Mr Gildernew asked the Assembly Commission for an update on the Member Development Programme for 2020/21.
(AQO 620/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): To ask the Assembly Commission for an update on the Member Development Programme for 2021.
(AQO 620/17-22)

The draft Member Development Plan for 2020-21 was developed in conjunction with the party Whips offices, in advance of the Assembly resuming normal business in January 2020.

Following the resumption of normal Assembly business, a number of programmes, particularly for newer Members of the Assembly, were delivered between January and March. These included programmes on the key procedures and processes in relation to conducting plenary, committee, and legislative business. The Institute of Government also provided a programme to Members on EU Exit-related issues.

Unfortunately, due to the current health crisis, it has been difficult to finalise the Plan, primarily due to difficulties in delivering a number of strands remotely. The Clerking and Members' Support Office has undertaken work over this period to identify how Member development can be taken forward in the current circumstances.

Consequently, the revised draft Member Development Plan will be considered by the Assembly Commission next month.

It is envisaged that the revised draft Member Development Plan will consist of both online and in-person programmes to small groups, delivered in accordance with COVID-19 guidelines. Additional staffing resource for Member Development has also been allocated.

Members have also been notified of a virtual US elections-themed programme, being delivered through the American Council of Young Political Leaders at no cost to the Assembly, during October and November.

Mr Easton asked the Assembly Commission whether regular valuations are undertaken of the art held in Parliament Buildings.

(AQO 621/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): To ask the Assembly Commission whether regular valuations are undertaken of the art held in Parliament Buildings.

(AQO 621/17-22)

There are various pieces of art and a number of antiquities displayed throughout Parliament Buildings that have either been donated to the Assembly or purchased by the Assembly Commission.

Often the value of such items is not fully reflected in a financial value derived from price, there may be restrictions on their disposal, and they are often irreplaceable. These works of art are generally referred to as "Heritage Assets".

The Assembly Commission has a responsibility for safeguarding and recording these items correctly for accounting purposes. As such, the Assembly Commission must ensure that these Heritage Assets are valued with sufficient frequency so that their value, as recorded in the Assembly Commission's Annual Report and Resource Accounts, remains current.

The Assembly Commission has appointed an expert valuer. This expert, while based locally in Northern Ireland, is affiliated with the Sotheby's auction house. The expert has advised that valuing such assets once a mandate (that is, once every 5 years) is sufficient frequency to ensure the Assembly Commission meets its financial reporting requirements and that the valuations are accurate and current.

Each year as part of the year-end accounting processes, the expert valuer is consulted regarding prevailing market conditions. If the market conditions have changed significantly, an interim valuation of the Heritage Assets will be undertaken.

The last full valuation of the Heritage Assets was undertaken in March 2017 and will be completed again in March 2022.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 18 September 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Blair asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans she has to implement the gender pay provisions in the Employment Act (NI) 2016.

(AQW 1991/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Policy responsibility for gender matters rests with the Department for Communities following departmental reorganisation in 2016. The timing of the Employment Act did not allow for the allocation of the gender pay provisions to the Department for Communities. Officials are currently working towards bringing forward a Transfer of Functions Order to the Assembly in the Autumn that will transfer responsibility for the gender pay provisions to the Department for Communities.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will publish the records held of their conversation with the Chinese Consulate which led to the claim of understanding for China's legislation in Hong Kong.

(AQW 6068/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We held a courtesy call on 21 July, by video conference, with the Chinese Consul General as part of our regular communications on a range of areas of interest to the Executive.

We have made a statement on the meeting. Notes of discussions with representatives of foreign governments are not generally released.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline (i) any issues recruiting veterinarians in Northern Ireland; and (ii) whether he would support a business case demonstrating the need for a veterinarian school in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6239/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I am aware of recent reports from the local veterinary associations of practices in both the large animal and companion animal sectors encountering difficulties recruiting veterinarians, all across Northern Ireland. It is not possible to establish the precise quantum locally, but BVA data suggests that the vacancy rate UK-wide exceeds 11%.

While, to date, the Department has not encountered significant difficulties in recruiting sufficient Veterinary Inspectors to fully meet its needs, there are increasingly indications that it too may encounter difficulties recruiting further veterinary staff in the near future.

However, while supply may be one issue contributing to veterinary practice's recruitment difficulties, there are a number of other significant issues affecting staff availability, not least the attractiveness of the salary package, job satisfaction and career opportunities available in veterinary jobs compared to the demanding work-life balance and stress levels entailed. Research by the BVA and RCVS has revealed that these are leading to real issues with retention overall, and within the practice sector in particular.

It has been suggested that the creation of a veterinary school in Northern Ireland would help mitigate both recruitment and retention issues, eg by reducing any net "brain drain" of veterinary under-graduates from here to GB; and by substituting some of the over 50% of the new RCVS registrants who are graduates of non-UK universities. However given the breadth of the existing supply base, and that high vacancy rate is UK-wide, it is unlikely that the establishment of a local veterinary college would act as a "silver bullet" against all the causes underlying the present recruitment and retention issues in veterinary practice in Northern Ireland, and beyond.

That said, I understand that both Universities in Northern Ireland have shown various degrees of interest in providing veterinary degree course here in Northern Ireland. This interest has so far failed to progress beyond the reality of the

business case process, assessing the cost / benefit and value for money of the various options proposed. Should a business case in the future demonstrate that such a facility would deliver sufficient benefits to our local industry and economy, as to confirm its long-term viability, then I would indeed be supportive of the proposal.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to provide an update on (i) the framework for rural policy in Northern Ireland which will replace the NI Rural Development Programme; and (ii) a timeframe for this framework moving to public consultation.

(AQW 6266/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) A significant level of engagement and work has been undertaken in developing a draft rural policy framework that will help inform rural needs going forward in the context of the cessation of Priority 6 of the current EU Rural Development Programme. A number of pilot schemes have been launched recently which will help support rural businesses and communities recover from Covid 19 and further inform the framework development going forward.
- (ii) My hope is that the framework will go out for public consultation this Autumn.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) who is responsible for ensuring that Habitats Regulations Assessments (HRA), as required under Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive, are carried out; (ii) how many HRAs have been carried out since 2012; and (iii) how many planning applications have been refused on the basis of a failed HRA.

(AQW 6507/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- i The Competent Authority (CA) or decision maker is the party responsible for undertaking a Habitats Regulations Assessments (HRA), as required under Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive, before deciding to undertake, or give any consent, permission or other authorisation for, a plan or project which (a) is likely to have a significant effect on a European site in Northern Ireland (either alone or in combination with other plans or projects), (b) is not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site. This includes government departments, district councils and statutory undertakers.
- ii. We do not have a record of the number of HRAs carried out in Northern Ireland since 2012, due to the number of Competent Authorities involved.
- iii. Decisions in relation to planning is principally a responsibility of district councils and the Department for Infrastructure. My Department is not routinely informed about final decisions on planning applications.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the potential threat to Northern Ireland's agriculture and agri-food sectors regarding the environment, animal welfare and consumer protection, whether he has made, or will make, representations to the UK Government concerning UK free trade deals with the United States, Brazil, Argentina and New Zealand.

(AQW 6621/17-22)

Mr Poots: The UK is currently in trade negotiations with the United States, Australia and New Zealand and has recently concluded an agreement with Japan. There are no current trade agreement discussions between the UK and Brazil or Argentina. I have been very clear that trade agreements must uphold the current high standards relating to food production in the UK which would include the areas of environment, animal welfare and consumer protection. Furthermore it is also my position that tariff protection for sensitive agricultural goods must be maintained. I have therefore written to the Defra Secretary of State on these matters and will continue to make representations as the negotiations progress.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment on whether producers and processors would be put at a serious disadvantage if they cannot label their product as grass-fed Irish beef.

(AQW 6670/17-22)

Mr Poots: A recent study¹ carried out by the European Commission found that in 2017 the sales value of PGI meat products was on average 1.2 times the sales value for comparable standard products without a GI label. Therefore, if successful, the registration of 'Irish Grass-fed beef' under the EU's PGI scheme has the potential to deliver economic benefits for qualifying businesses.

In 2018, Northern Ireland exported £131m worth of beef and sheep meat to the EU (excluding the UK and Ireland)². I would like the Northern Ireland industry to benefit from the proposed PGI application and have, therefore, asked the new DAFM

1 Study on economic value of EU quality schemes, geographical indications (GIs) and traditional specialities guaranteed (TSGs): <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/a7281794-7ebe-11ea-aea8-01aa75ed71a1>

2 Northern Ireland Food and Drinks Processing Report 2018 (DAERA): <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/size-and-performance-ni-food-and-drinks-processing-sector>

Minister, Charlie McConalogue TD, that we work together to ensure that beef farmers in both jurisdictions can take advantage of the potential value conferred by having this PGI status.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action his Department is taking to stop environmental damage arising from draining of Portavoe Reservoir via opening of the valves.

(AQW 6894/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials have only recently received reports of lowered water levels at Portavoe Reservoir and have not yet visited the site to ascertain any environmental impact or the need for action. They will engage with the site owners to provide advice.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how the public are alerted of sewerage spills around public beaches and bathing areas.

(AQW 6986/17-22)

Mr Poots: Pollution incidents to any watercourse including beaches should be reported through to the 24 hour Water Pollution Hotline, informing the NIEA Emergency Pollution Team. There are agreed mechanisms and protocols in place which quickly inform relevant authorities including the local council who will erect signs to alert the general public at identified bathing waters. There are 26 identified bathing waters around the coast of Northern Ireland.

Department for Communities

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Communities to provide an update on the audio recording pilot as part of the Personal Independent Payment assessment process.

(AQW 6216/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): Following an initial pilot the Department introduced the facility to audio record all clinic-based PIP assessments in November 2019 and 611 assessments have been recorded to date. There have also been 84 audio recordings in customers' homes and it was originally anticipated that this facility would be offered to all customers from Spring 2020.

However audio recording of assessments is currently on hold whilst Face to Face assessments are suspended. This facility is anticipated to resume when Face to Face assessments recommence.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department has any plans to implement Video Relay Service access to telephone services for members of the deaf community.

(AQW 6217/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In October 2019 my Department introduced a Video Relay Service in Personal Independence Payment (PIP) and Disability and Carers Service (covering Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance and Carer's Allowance). My officials are currently exploring other Benefit Areas within DfC, in addition to those mentioned above, can be included in the future.

The Health and Social Care (HSC) Remote Interpreting Service is co-funded by Department for Communities and the Department of Health. The service was launched as part of an urgent response to the COVID-19 emergency to ensure that British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) users have access to potentially life-saving information and services. BSL and ISL users can contact all non-emergency HSC services for information, advice and to arrange appointments and treatment.

I remain committed to ensuring that BSL and ISL users have the same rights and opportunities as those of us in the hearing community.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of opportunities denied to the deaf community due to the lack of access to appropriate telephone services.

(AQW 6219/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: People must have the right to use British Sign Language (BSL) and Irish Sign Language (ISL) to access public services and information. A key part of this is accessibility to Video Relay Services (VRS) to enable sign language users to conduct their business by phone with the same freedom as hearing citizens.

My officials are currently exploring ways of expanding access to existing VRS contracts.

I remain committed to ensuring that the deaf community here have the same rights and opportunities as those in the hearing community. My officials are progressing work on the Sign Language legislation as referenced in New Decade, New Approach, which will ensure that the Deaf community are able to access services in their own language.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities when the business case to use the £30 million allocated for the Arts was presented to the Executive and debated.

(AQW 6226/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department has submitted a bid to the Executive for £33m to secure financial support for culture, language, arts and heritage organisations, local musicians, freelancers and artists at a time when they are struggling to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities why Carrickfergus Castle remains closed; and when it will reopen.

(AQW 6307/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: When the COVID restrictions were implemented in March 2020, State Care Monuments were closed in line with those requirements. Since the restrictions have been eased by the Executive, my Department has taken a risk-based approach to reopening of individual monuments, restoring public access to these important heritage sites as soon as it is safe to do so. Carrickfergus Castle presents particular challenges due to the limitations of space within the castle, including narrow doorways and staircases.

We are now putting appropriate safety measures in place for the Castle to reopen from 1 October 2020 for pre-booked tours only. I issued a press release on 9 September to this effect. Tours can be booked by calling 028 9335 1273. I am very pleased to see this site reopening soon, as it will give many people the opportunity to see the superb new Irish Oak roof which was completed earlier this year.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities what support structures are in place for survivors of the abuse of older people.

(AQW 6333/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Executive's Active Ageing Strategy, which DfC leads on, contains actions which are aimed at supporting older people across a wide spectrum of issues, including the fear of crime amongst older people.

DfC is the sponsor Department for the independent Commissioner for Older People whose principal aim is to safeguard and promote the interests of older persons. The Commissioner has a duty to encourage best practice in the treatment of older persons.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of Compulsory Purchase Orders used by district councils in each of the last five financial years.[R]

(AQW 6358/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In the financial years 2015 to 2020, the Department for Communities has approved one Compulsory Purchase Order upon application by a district council (Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council).

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how many people in North Down are currently on the Housing Executive list to be rehoused.

(AQW 6367/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that the number of applicants on the waiting list at the end of June 2020 (the last quarterly report available) for the North Down Parliamentary Constituency was as follows:

Applicants – 1707

Applicants in Housing Stress – 1229.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities whether she will provide additional funds to local councils who have seen their income drop as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; and whether she will bring a bid to the Executive for such funds.

(AQW 6378/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 19 May 2020 Minister Hargey announced that the Executive was allocating £20.3m to local councils for the period mid-March – 30 June 2020, to assist them with their financial pressures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My Department continues to liaise with the Association of Local Government Finance Officers (ALGFO) and SOLACE NI to assess the cash flow issues faced by councils for the period 1 July – 31 March 2021. As a result of this liaison my Department is working with the Department of Finance in order to seek urgent funding for the second quarter, especially as they have and continue to lead on the community response to COVID-19.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister for Communities what funding her Department has made available for charities supporting survivors of abuse of older people.

(AQW 6399/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I put in place support for charities experiencing financial loss through the Covid-19 Charities Fund which was open for a total of seven weeks to 21 August. The Fund was open to all local charities impacted by the health pandemic, including those supporting survivors of abuse of older people.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what engagement her Department has had with the UK Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to extend legislation for a new homes ombudsman to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6410/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Housing officials first engaged with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) on the issue of a New Homes Ombudsman in June 2019. At that stage my officials agreed to assist MHCLG to engage with the construction sector here on proposals outlined in its published consultation on 'Redress for Purchasers of New Build Homes and the New Homes Ombudsman'. Officials agreed to facilitate this engagement (which took place in August 2019) as the proposals had the potential to impact on DfC stakeholders and because of Housing Division's established links to housing associations and housing developers.

My officials involved colleagues from the Department for Economy in this engagement given the cross cutting nature of the proposals and in recognition that issues relating to the New Homes Ombudsman cover the wider housing market and are primarily trading standards related. In this context you may wish to note that representatives of the Trading Standards Service and the Consumer Council (CCNI), an Arm's Length Body of DfE, were also involved in this engagement process.

My officials, alongside colleagues from DfE, met again with MHCLG in July this year for an update on their proposals and to discuss next steps. At this meeting it was advised that DoF would most likely be co-ordinating activity across the Executive in relation to the draft Building Safety Bill, which encompasses provision for the New Homes Ombudsman. Minister Murphy subsequently established a cross-Departmental Group for this purpose, including representation from DfC Housing. My officials will ensure that DfC issues, including how the establishment of a New Homes Ombudsman might impact on our social and intermediate housing provision, will be brought to the attention of the working group.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities to detail the funding received by each football club in Northern Ireland since 2011, broken down by (i) year; (ii) amount; (iii) funder; and (iv) purpose of funding.

(AQW 6411/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Since the formation of the Department for Communities (DfC) in 2016, the Department has directly funded a large number of football clubs through a range of different funding programmes. Sport NI, an arms-length body of the Department, has also provided substantial levels of funding to football clubs through a range of programmes during the same period. Due to the volume of detail required to answer the question, I have arranged for these details to be placed in the Assembly Library.

Details of funding provided to football clubs before DfC came into operation in 2016 can be accessed through the Government Funding Database at the following link: <https://govfundingpublic.nics.gov.uk/Home.aspx>

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Communities whether she has any plans to offer financial support to Irish League football clubs who may be forced to commence the new season playing games behind closed doors, resulting in loss of admission income.

(AQW 6447/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sports Hardship Fund was put in place to support sports clubs to maintain facilities while restrictions were in place. I can advise that £178K has been paid out so far to football clubs through the fund. In addition, 8 Irish League clubs were signposted from this fund to the Department for the Economy Covid 19 Business Support Grant Scheme and as a result were able to avail of the more substantial financial support through that scheme (up to £25k).

Moving forward, Sport NI is currently developing a range of proposals to help sports organisations improve resilience and increase capability and has just recently allocated £5m of National Lottery funding to take forward its 'Build Back Better' programme of investment during the next eighteen months. Irish league clubs will have the opportunity to apply to this programme.

In addition, £1m recently secured through the June Monitoring Round, will be invested in the procurement of PPE packs to help sports clubs, including football clubs, with the costs associated with maintaining facilities and ensuring a safe return to their sport.

My officials and Sport NI will continue to engage with the IFA and NIFL on the challenges facing local football and I will continue to seek to secure Covid related funding to provide support to the entire sports sector.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities whether she intends to bring forward any further financial support packages to the Executive to support sports clubs and sporting communities.

(AQW 6468/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recently announced that £2m, out of a bid of £4m, had been secured from the June Monitoring Round for sport, £1m of which has been added to the Sports Hardship Fund and £1m will be used to provide essential PPE to help sports clubs to continue to provide safe facilities and activities. I remain committed to continuing to seek to secure further Covid relief funding in future monitoring rounds as the sports sector continues to be hit hard by the ongoing impact of the pandemic.

I can confirm that Sport NI, following extensive engagement with the sports sector over the last 3 months, is developing a range of proposals to help sports organisations improve resilience and increase capability. This will see an allocation of

£5m of National Lottery funding for a 'Build Back Better' programme of investment over the next 18 months. Whilst still in development, 'Build Back Better' is likely to focus on governing bodies and collaborations that demonstrate innovation in promoting participation in sport.

In addition, I have asked officials to review the criteria for applicants to the Sports Hardship Fund so that sports clubs who continue to experience financial hardship due to increased operating costs, costs associated with facility hire or cleaning regimes will be able to access assistance. I intend to announce in the coming weeks how the sector will be able to access this further support and when the Sports Hardship Fund will reopen.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities, in light of the successful Johnson & Others High Court challenge, what plans her Department has to address the Universal Credit discrepancy that penalises claimants who receive multiple payments within one assessment period.

(AQW 6492/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Attributing two payments of one salary in one assessment period is fundamentally incorrect, and places people in a precarious budgeting situation. Officials in my Department are working to resolve this issue. In the interim, if people are unhappy with the outcome of the decision to treat multiple payments as being received in the one assessment period, they can request a mandatory reconsideration of the decision.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities (i) for an update on the review of the condition of cavity wall insulation in Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) properties; and (ii) to detail the budget allocated to cavity wall insulation through NIHE.

(AQW 6521/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Review of the condition of cavity wall insulation in Housing Executive properties

Following an extensive period of consultation with stakeholders on the BBA report on Cavity Wall Insulation here, the Housing Executive has been developing an action plan to address this issue in its housing stock. A Draft Action Plan was presented to the Board of the Housing Executive in August 2020 and this is now being prepared to be issued for public consultation shortly. A final Action Plan will be prepared following this consultation.

(ii) To detail the budget allocated to cavity wall insulation.

This Action Plan will depend on how much funding is able to be allocated to Cavity Wall Insulation, for which there is at present no firm budget. The Housing Executive is currently preparing a new Energy Strategy and reviewing its Asset Management Strategy, and these will set out their investment priorities in light of the significant projected shortfall in funding for investment in their stock. Until these are resolved the Housing Executive will continue to address cavity wall insulation issues on a case-by-case basis as identified through their Response Maintenance service.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities whether she will meet Parkrun representatives to discuss possible recommencement of Parkrun events in Northern Ireland.[R]

(AQW 6525/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: While the recommencement of Parkrun events, in line with the Executive Covid guidance, is a matter for the Parkrun organisers I am happy to meet with the representatives to hear about their plans and protocols for re-starting Parkrun activities safely and in compliance with the Covid Regulations and guidance.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the timeline for recommencement of Parkrun events in Northern Ireland in line with COVID-19 legislation, guidelines, the Parkrun COVID-19 Framework, and in light of recent decision by authorities in England.[R]

(AQW 6527/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can advise that the current Covid Regulations permit sporting and recreational activities to recommence on the basis that the organisers can fully comply with Covid safety guidelines including social distancing, hygiene and the completion of risk assessments.

Event organisers should also ensure that consideration is given to the potential risks events might present to local communities and other facility users and build these into their plans and protocols.

Sport NI continues to provide advice and guidance to the sports sector as the various bodies take steps to ensure a safe return to activities. More details can be found at www.sportni.net/return-to-sport/.

I can also advise that Parkrun Global have developed protocols which were considered by the Return to Sport Expert Group, an advisory body which is chaired by the Department. The Group considered the protocols on 21 August and provided a number of comments.

With regard to a timeline for Parkrun events to recommence that is a matter for Parkrun Global and the local event organisers who will be responsible for ensuring that events are fully compliant with the Covid Regulations and for providing a safe environment for all those involved including administrators, volunteers and participants.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to detail her long-term plans for the future of the Housing Executive.
(AQW 6539/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The future of the Housing Executive is a strategic issue of long-term significance which will require broad political and social consensus.

With this in mind, I am currently considering options which will secure the long term future of social housing stock for generations to come.

I am committed to progressing the commitment within 'New Decade, New Approach' to not only tackle the maintenance backlog for Housing Executive properties but also to pursue the much wider revitalisation programme aimed at securing the long term future of social housing stock.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities (i) whether she has any plans to improve training for support lines and Jobs and Benefit Offices, specifically in relation to (a) Universal Credit (UC); and (b) supplementary payments for bedroom tax; and (ii) whether she has any plans to improve communication of the separate application process for rate rebate for UC applicants.

(AQW 6612/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Our people delivering Universal Credit have undertaken a comprehensive programme of learning and development activities, designed to equip them with the tools, skills and behaviours necessary to provide a high quality, responsive service to all, including the vulnerable and those with complex needs.

As well as technical classroom-based training, and follow up on-the-job consolidation, those delivering Universal Credit also have access to an electronic database of guidance, desk aids and spotlights on specific topics. A Service Improvement Lead in each office supports staff with changes and system upgrades, and local master classes are held on specific issues or topics, identified in our accuracy and quality improvement activities.

Training however is a continuous process, the system is constantly changing and we keep all our learning and development activities under review to take account of system improvements, enhancements or to reflect areas of concern raised in quality checks, from our staff directly as well as issues raised by people claiming Universal Credit and those that represent them.

In respect of the rate rebate process for those claiming Universal Credit, whilst this is administered by Land and Property Service, our respective teams work closely to make sure that people are aware of the need to apply separately for this rebate. Our Make the Call team have also been involved in helping signpost people to claiming rates rebate; if the member has any specific suggestions that may further improve the process, my officials would be happy to hear directly from her.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the dispersal of the remainder of the £33 million of arts funding announced on 6 July 2020.

(AQW 6624/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department has submitted a bid to the Executive for £33m to secure meaningful financial support here to support culture, language, arts and heritage organisations, local musicians, freelancers and artists at a time when they are struggling to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. In these most challenging of times, I will continue to press the case for investment in this sector.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Communities for an updated timescale for the allocation of the sub-regional football stadia funding.

(AQW 6762/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the "New Decade, New Approach" Deal and my Department has begun work to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the current challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels. Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme including proposed timescales.

Department of Education

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Education how many summer scheme places are available this year for children with special educational needs in (i) special schools; and (ii) mainstream settings.

(AQW 6059/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Neither the Department nor the Education Authority (EA) hold information on the number of summer scheme places made available this year for children with SEN in (i) special schools; and (ii) mainstream settings as provision is made under individual school arrangements.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Education, given that the Department of Health advises a two metre social distancing rule, whether his Department has carried out a risk assessment on its guidance, which sets out no requirement for children to follow public transport guidance for social distancing between pupils, on dedicated home to school transport vehicles.

(AQW 6096/17-22)

Mr Weir: As part of the development process for the home to school transport section of the New School Day guidance, I met with the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor in relation to the restart of home to school transport. They were supportive of my plans to state in the guidance that pupils on all buses should always seek to maintain a social distance from other wherever possible, however that the guidance for public transport on social distancing would not apply on dedicated school transport in the new school year. This is based upon the provision of a range of mitigating measures as detailed in the guidance. This approach has therefore been developed in line with the relevant medical and scientific advice.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education (i) how many children fall under the medically vulnerable/shielding category; (ii) how many of those have had a risk assessment carried out by a medical professional; and (iii) whether resources are in place to enable those children a safe return.

(AQW 6272/17-22)

Mr Weir:

(i) & (ii) Neither the Department nor the EA hold this information.

(iii) To help support schools address many of the new pressures arising because of Covid-19, I announced a significant package of funding to help support the safe reopening of schools. The Department will continue to monitor funding requirements as the pandemic progresses.

As set out in the New School Day guidance (13 August) a small minority of children may be designated clinically vulnerable and parents should follow medical advice from their hospital consultant if their child is in this category. Where a child is medically advised not to attend school, parents should consult with their school Principal and, as required, the Education Authority (EA) regarding education provision for these pupils.

The Department's Circular (2020/05) Guidance for Schools on Supporting Remote Learning provides advice and guidance to schools on supporting remote learning. Further information can be accessed on the EA website (<https://www.eani.org.uk/supporting-learning>).

The EA continues to provide a range of services to support parents, schools, children and young people in relation to SEN and disability through an extensive suite of online resources available on the EA Website

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education, for those children who fall under the medically vulnerable/shielding category who are not able to return to school in September (i) what educational provision will be put in place; (ii) who will be responsible for providing this provision; and (iii) whether the Education Authority will employ extra teachers to provide this provision.

(AQW 6273/17-22)

Mr Weir: To help support the safe opening of schools and to address many of the new pressures arising because of Covid-19, I announced a significant package of funding. The Department will continue to monitor funding requirements as the pandemic progresses.

As set out in the New School Day guidance (13 August) a small minority of children may be designated clinically vulnerable and parents should follow medical advice from their hospital consultant if their child is in this category.

My Department's New School Day Guidance (13 August) advises that "Where a child is medically advised not to attend school, parents should consult with their school Principal and, as required, the Education Authority (EA) regarding education provision for these pupils".

Should the School be unable to put appropriate learning in place for those needing to shield, a referral may be made for support to be made by the EA's Exceptional Teaching Arrangements service.

The EA has advised that if a school is unable to facilitate remote learning, it will provide this in line with the medical needs of the child for up to 4.5 hours each week, if a letter is obtained from the child's medical consultant confirming that they must continue to shield and would require home tuition during this period of shielding. The EA has no plans to employ extra teachers to deliver this provision.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education what formula was applied by his Department to allocate the additional funds to schools to assist in the added costs incurred by schools in mitigating against COVID-19.

(AQW 6317/17-22)

Mr Weir: To help support schools address many of the new pressures arising as a result of Covid-19, I outlined a significant package of funding to help support the safe reopening of schools, which included: £17.5m towards the cost of substitute teachers, non-teaching staff and other school expenditure; £6.4m for PPE; £5m for school wellbeing initiatives; £3.1m for home to school transport; and £1.4m to support special educational needs. The funding is for the first term of the new academic year.

A further £19.2m for PPE has recently been agreed by the Executive to assist education settings to continue to provide a safe learning environment for our children and young people.

The additional funding for schools to mitigate the costs incurred in 2020-21 specifically associated with Covid-19 and restarting education; will be allocated to schools as follows:

- Teacher substitution costs, for staff absences specifically as a result of Covid-19, will be centrally managed by the Education Authority (EA), and funding will be allocated to schools based on verified costs; and
- PPE and other Covid-19 related school costs, excluding teacher substitution, will be allocated to schools on a per pupil basis, reflecting the funding provided.

Restart funding for Special schools will also be managed centrally by the EA.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education when hot meal provision will resume in all schools.
(AQW 6348/17-22)

Mr Weir: School meals services resumed on 1 September and it is expected that where possible a hot meal, suitable as the main meal of the day, will be available for free school meals pupils and other pupils who wish to avail of them. This is particularly important for pupils entitled to free school meals for whom this might be their only meal that day.

There may be some flexibility in the delivery of school meals services to ensure Public Health Agency guidance and health and safety requirements are met. Schools may for example stagger break and lunch times and there may be a reduced menu.

It is important however that schools and school caterers work closely to agree localised solutions to deliver school meals safely and in keeping with Public Health Agency guidance.

The Department is aware that some schools are not yet in the position to provide hot meals and is keeping the situation under review.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education what date a site survey was carried out at Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir, Derry, to determine the condition and suitability elements of the most recent capital application process carried out by the Department of Education.
(AQW 6351/17-22)

Mr Weir: A suitability survey was carried out at Gaelscoil Éadain Mhóir on 7 May 2019 and a condition survey was carried out at the school on 9 July 2019. This survey information was used to determine the condition and suitability scoring elements for the latest major capital works call assessment.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether schools are expected to become a new channel for access to Track and Trace.
(AQW 6370/17-22)

Mr Weir: Schools are not expected to become a new channel for access to Track and Trace. Public Health Agency (PHA) are the body responsible for the Contact Tracing Service and are the lead authority in handling positive cases of COVID-19. Schools are advised to support and co-operate with PHA where necessary.

In primary and post-primary schools, where a staff member or pupil tests positive for COVID-19, schools are asked to make efforts to draw up a list of potentially exposed contacts to aid PHA. The PHA Contact Tracing Service are the lead authority in handling positive cases of coronavirus.

The PHA Contact Tracing Service / Health Protection will work with school management to clarify 'close contacts' using an agreed pro-forma and provide advice on self-isolation and next steps. This will facilitate schools in considering implications for staff and pupils at risk and so they can determine what further action is required. Schools will communicate with the school community as soon as is practicable, to reassure them that safety measures are being taken and that the environment is safe.

A close contact is defined as someone who has been in direct contact within 2 metres for more than 15 minutes or sharing a small enclosed space (such as a car) for a shorter period.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether schools are schools expected to register which child has received a COVID-19 test; and, if so, with whom.
(AQW 6371/17-22)

Mr Weir: Schools are asked to inform the Education Authority where a staff member or pupil has tested positive for COVID-19. This is to ensure the EA can respond effectively and provide support as appropriate. EA does not require personal information of those who have tested positive, they merely require detail on the numbers of positive cases to provide appropriate support.

The Public Health Agency is the responsible body for testing and Contact Tracing.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education to outline how principals and schools will be interacting with (i) the Department of Health; and (ii) the Public Health Agency regarding testing.

(AQW 6372/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) Schools will not be interacting with the Department of Health regarding testing.
- (ii) Where a staff member or pupil has COVID-19 symptoms the school / principal should instruct them to comply with Public Health Agency guidance. This includes seeking a test when symptomatic. If a parent / carer is unable to arrange a test through a PHA facility the Principal may provide a COVID-19 home test kit which has been provided as part of the National Testing Initiative.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education what COVID-19 testing is available for schools.

(AQW 6395/17-22)

Mr Weir: Anyone who experiences any COVID-19 symptoms can access a test at a testing site or at home using the online booking portal. This includes all pupils, teachers, and staff.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has developed an initiative to provide COVID-19 home testing kits to all schools in England. I have accepted an offer to include education settings in Northern Ireland in this initiative.

In its discussions with a range of parties to inform the development of guidance for the new school day, the Department of Education received and considered representation from various parties regarding the importance of ensuring that testing arrangements would support children/young people displaying symptoms. This initiative offers a further option which, while only expected to be required as a measure of last resort, is nonetheless an important measure of protection in the interests of children/young people and education staff.

All schools will receive an initial supply of 10 home test kits. It is important to note that these are home test kits which should only be offered to individuals in the exceptional circumstance that you believe an individual may have barriers to accessing testing elsewhere. The default, best and fastest way for children, young people, or staff to access a test is to visit a testing site.

Tests will not be undertaken in any education settings under this initiative, nor will schools be responsible for registering tests. Completed tests should not be returned to the school.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what ministerial directions have been issued since January 2020.

(AQW 6403/17-22)

Mr Weir: On 16 April 2020, under Article 78 (3) of The Education (NI) Order 1998, I directed the Council for the Curriculum Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in relation to the summer 2020 examination series. On 12 May 2020, under Article 101 of the 1986 Education and Libraries (NI) Order and Article 78 (3) of the 1998 Education (NI) Order, I issued a revised direction to the CCEA in relation to alternative awarding arrangements for Summer 2020. On 17 August 2020, under Article 101 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, I directed CCEA in relation to arrangements for awarding GCSEs, AS levels and A levels in Summer 2020.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education how many children are not presenting to school and are being home-schooled as result of COVID-19.

(AQW 6415/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department does not hold pupil level information on attendance.

Based on cumulative weekly reports generated from attendance data input by schools via SIMS (Schools Information Management System); for 7 September 2020 to 11 September 2020 inclusive, there was an overall attendance rate of 91.6% across all schools in Northern Ireland.

This figure is comparable to the overall attendance rate in 2019/20 academic year of 92.3%.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education to explain the differences in approach to A level results here compared to Wales.

(AQW 6416/17-22)

Mr Weir: On 17 August 2020 I announced that A levels in Northern Ireland were to be awarded based upon the higher of either the centre assessed grade (CAG) or the calculated grade. Ministers in England and Wales made a similar announcement in respect of their jurisdictions on the same day. However, the Welsh government autonomously chose to retain an earlier decision to use AS level grades as an additional basis for awarding. I disagree with the approach taken in Wales as I consider it to be an inappropriate use of the AS award.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education (i) what actions the Education Authority is undertaking to support principals, aside from the helpline and COVID-19 link officers; and (ii) when school leaders will receive time budgets from the Education Authority.

(AQW 6419/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The Education Authority (EA) has and continues to support schools in a range of ways, including through the helpline and link officers described.

The EA is taking forward the Restart Wellbeing Project and has launched a wellbeing section for schools on the School Development Service (SDS) online learning portal which focuses on supporting school wellbeing throughout Education Restart. This provides schools with a number of resources as they return following this period of lockdown including support for bereavement and loss, critical incident response, children looked after, nurturing approaches, trauma-informed practices and curriculum ideas.

The EA has provided online virtual learning resources for children going into Year 7 to help with literacy and numeracy skills as pupils return to school and over the next year. It has also loaned digital devices to vulnerable and disadvantaged young people in order to assist with their learning from home. That work is in train with many thousands of digital devices delivered to date.

Some pupils entitled to free school meals (FSM) may not be able to attend school due to COVID-19 restrictions and schools are required to provide food parcels for collection / delivery to families who wish such provision. The Education Authority school meals catering service will make food provision by way of a 5 -10 day food parcels, to the value of a FSM for the required number of days, delivered to FSM pupils in controlled, maintained and special schools.

Schools have been provided with the relevant risk assessments by the EA. The EA has provided a detailed booklet entitled "Guidance on Supporting Staff to Return to School" which is available on the Department's website or the EA website.

The EA have also produced a range of resources related to Youth work. These resources provide organisational guidance; best practice advice to staff on resuming youth services; and support for young people returning to youth work and coping with change.

The above is not an exhaustive list. There are a range of further resources for schools, parents and children and young people available at the EA website.

- (ii) Each teacher is entitled to a Directed Time budget and it is the professional duty of principals in all schools to ensure a Directed Time budget is prepared for, and gives due regard to, the individual responsibilities of each teacher in their school.

The EA has and will continue to provide support and guidance to school principals, teachers and Boards of Governors in developing Directed Time Budgets.

Throughout the month of September the EA is providing principals access to webinars that provide opportunities for further discussion and clarification of the time budget process. All webinar sessions will be recorded and made available via C2K for future reference and for those principals who cannot attend the webinars at the scheduled times.

In addition, the EA is providing bespoke online tutorials for newly appointed principals on a phase specific basis.

The EA has included training on Directed Time budgets for Boards of Governors which will be made available as part of the suite of online programmes for the current academic year.

In addition to the direct support to schools mentioned, the EA has provided training for all Covid-19 Link Officers on how they can support school leaders in developing Directed Time Budgets. This will ensure that every school principal has a nominated officer who will assist them on an individual basis as they work towards reaching an agreement with each member of staff on a teacher's Directed Time budget.

In response to the challenging context that school leaders are currently working in there has been an extension to the date that Directed Time Budgets need to be agreed and implemented. This has been communicated to schools and will enable principals to avail of the EA training, as necessary, in advance of preparing Directed Time Budgets.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education (i) for his assessment of the Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey (YPBAS) 2019, where only 3% of children cycle to and from school; and (ii) what additional resources he will allocate to increase journeys to school by bicycle.

(AQW 6425/17-22)

Mr Weir: I welcome the report published on the Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey 2019, which found that approximately three quarters of pupils do not travel to and from school by private car, but use other modes such as walking, cycling and public transport. While this shows an overall reduction in the proportion of pupils travelling to school by car since the 2016 survey, there is clearly more work to be done.

My Department actively engages with other departments and stakeholders in order to promote sustainable, healthy and active travel choices among school children.

Officials from my Department participate in the Active School Travel Programme which is led by the Department for Infrastructure and includes representatives from the Department of Health and Sustrans. The work of this group is to continually seek ways to encourage Active Travel to and from school by walking and cycling in a safe and appropriate manner.

A further new Walking and Cycling Advisory Group has recently been established, again led by DfI. I am pleased to advise that my Curriculum Team will be represented on this group to determine how the issues of walking and cycling can be incorporated into the school curriculum.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education how many teachers have been unable to return to work due to illness or shielding as a result of COVID-19.
(AQW 6453/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education does not currently hold the details requested regarding teachers who have been unable to return to work due to illness or shielding as a result of COVID-19. Information on absence by teachers is normally notified to the Department for inclusion in payroll in the month following the absence.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether those schools designated as COVID-19 vulnerable will receive extra funding to make adaptations and necessary adjustments.
(AQW 6459/17-22)

Mr Weir: Guidance and support provided by my Department on Education Restart and COVID-19 disruption applies to all schools. There is no designation of "COVID-19 vulnerable" schools.

To help support schools address many of the new pressures arising as a result of COVID-19, I outlined a significant package of funding to help support the safe reopening of schools. This included: £17.5million towards the cost of substitute teachers, non-teaching staff and other school expenditure; £6.4million for personal protective equipment (PPE); £5million for school wellbeing initiatives; £3.1million for home to school transport; and £1.4million to support special educational needs. The funding is for the first term of the new academic year.

A further £19.2million for PPE has recently been agreed by the Executive to assist education settings to continue to provide a safe learning environment for our children and young people.

The Department, in conjunction with the Education Authority, will continue to monitor funding requirements as schools reopen and as the pandemic progresses.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education, in light of his Department's guidance that testing kits for COVID-19 should be stored in ambient rooms, whether principals will be held liable if schools have outdated heating systems and poorly insulated buildings.
(AQW 6460/17-22)

Mr Weir: The guidance issued to schools in relation to the home testing kits provided by the Department of Health and Social Care advises that kits should be stored at ambient room temperature, meaning between 5-22°C. Schools are not expected to encounter difficulties with this requirement.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether parents are able to request a COVID-19 test kit from their school; and, if so, whether the guidance will be updated to reflect this.
(AQW 6461/17-22)

Mr Weir: Guidance issued to schools on Monday 14th September in relation to home test kits. This has also been published on the DE website.

Home test kits should only be offered in the exceptional circumstance where an individual may have barriers to accessing testing elsewhere through normal routes. The default, best and fastest way for children, young people, or staff to access a test is to visit a testing site.

When a pupil or staff member is unable to access testing by the established routes, schools can consider providing one of the home test kits to improve the chances that the individual will get tested.

Tests should be completed at home and it is the responsibility of the parent / carer / staff member to administer and register the test. Completed tests should not be returned to the school.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education (i) whether he has been asked to consider making payments to those contractors who CCEA rely on for the setting and marking of exams; (ii) to detail the costs involved; and (iii) when he expects to make a decision.
(AQW 6469/17-22)

Mr Weir: CCEA, as a public body, must operate within the delegated authority of its sponsoring Department. CCEA has engaged with my Department on a regular basis and will continue to work with my officials to fully assess the range of options within the existing regulatory and governance frameworks.

CCEA typically pays in the region of £5m for direct support for examinations during a summer awarding period. This includes fees for marking, coursework moderation, standardising, awarding, etc. The options being assessed in respect of summer 2020 are within this envelope.

This matter is complex, which could have repercussive implications. It is one which CCEA is considering carefully along with my officials. Due to the complexities, it is not possible to provide a date by which payments might be made at this time. I am, however, content to follow up with the member again once consideration of the issue has been concluded.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Strule Shared Education Campus.
(AQW 6486/17-22)

Mr Weir: I remain fully committed to delivering this educationally and strategically significant Programme.

My officials and I have been working diligently to progress the Strule Shared Education Campus to the next stage in the procurement process. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has touched all aspects of business resulting in the projected go live date being revised. Provisional opening of the Campus is now planned for September 2025 at the earliest.

Treasury officials have confirmed access to Fresh Start Agreement funding for the Programme through to completion. This will be formally notified in the Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) outcome in the autumn.

I intend discussing the Strule Campus with my Executive colleagues in the very near future.

The Department continues to work closely with the six school principals and their teams to build on the culture of sharing in Omagh, albeit within a challenging environment as schools continue to recover and restart following the school closures during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Work on the Programme has continued and the site preparation works are now complete, in preparation for moving to the next stage of construction.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether he will make COVID-19 testing available in schools.
(AQW 6487/17-22)

Mr Weir: COVID-19 testing processes is a matter for the Department of Health (DoH) and the Public Health Agency (PHA). DoH and PHA have put in place a range of options to secure testing including test centres, mobile testing units and home test kits. Booking a free coronavirus (COVID-19) test is done through the online booking portal on the PHA website.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) has developed an initiative to provide COVID-19 home testing kits to all schools in England. I have accepted an offer, extended through the DoH and PHA, to include education settings in Northern Ireland in this initiative. Guidance has been provided to schools on the matter.

In discussions with a range of parties to inform the development of guidance for the new school day, my Department received and considered representation from various parties regarding the importance of ensuring that testing arrangements would support children/young people displaying symptoms. The DHSC initiative offers a further option for testing which, while only expected to be required as a measure of last resort, is nonetheless an important measure of protection in the interests of children/young people and education staff.

Tests should be completed at home and it is the responsibility of the parent / carer / staff member to administer and register the test. Completed tests should not be returned to the school.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Education (i) what further steps his Department has made in finalising proposals for the introduction of mandatory autism training; (ii) whether these include taking full advantage of online autism training options; and (iii) to what extent would this method of delivery be considered a more cost effective and expedient option for implementation and compliance with the cross-party Northern Ireland Assembly call for mandatory autism training for teachers and trainee teachers.

(AQW 6494/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) I will be making an announcement about this shortly.
- (ii) Given the current public health advice in relation to coronavirus (Covid19), all Autism training provided by the Education Authority (EA) and Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) will be provided online for the foreseeable future. The MCA and EA's training compendium can be accessed via their respective websites or through the C2k platform.
- (iii) The provision of online Autism training will increase accessibility and visibility of Autism courses for all teachers based on their own identified professional development needs in line with the principles set out in the Department's Teacher Professional Learning Strategy, Learning Leaders.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to detail the purpose, scale and work of the HR/Payroll project in the Education Authority.

(AQW 6499/17-22)

Mr Weir: The new Education Authority (EA) HR and Payroll solution is part of the EA One Project, the scope of which is to deliver an integrated Finance, Procurement, HR, Payroll and Recruitment solution for the whole organisation. The Project also includes the payroll operated by the Department of Education (DE) to pay teachers.

The scale of the Project is significant, as payroll and HR services are provided for some 60,000 teaching and non-teaching positions. It is also complex due to the issues of consolidating legacy processes and practice across five former organisations into one single solution. It needs to accommodate separate working and employment arrangements across the education sector, as individual employees often have multiple employers.

Significant progress has been made to date, including the following:

- the successful implementation of the Finance and Procurement elements in December 2016;
- the successful implementation of an online recruitment solution for all EA teaching and non-teaching appointments by January 2020;
- the significant progression of the HR and Payroll system build to allow two phases of User Acceptance Testing to take place;
- a future Target Operating Model has been developed for HR, Payroll and System Support;
- approximately 600 schools and many more EA staff across all regions have been engaged through face to face sessions to raise awareness of the EA One Project and to obtain feedback on the proposed solution from schools and EA staff;
- three full rounds of data migration have been completed, extracting 18 months of data for all active payees from the twelve legacy payroll systems and loaded on to a single platform Oracle development system; and
- a detailed training plan and supporting materials have been developed to support the system implementation and operation by core HR and Payroll staff and end users across schools and the EA.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education how many times has the HR/Payroll project in the Education Authority failed User Acceptance Testing.

(AQW 6500/17-22)

Mr Weir: As a result of issues having been identified, the HR and Payroll system has had to be progressed through two forms of User Acceptance Testing (UAT) to date.

UAT 2 took a reduced form during April and May 2020 due to changes in working practices as a result of Covid-19, on the agreement that a further full UAT phase would be required. As a result, a third UAT is scheduled to commence in November 2020.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Education what actions his Department is taking to encourage primary school children to walk and cycle to school as they begin the autumn term.

(AQW 6509/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department actively engages with other departments and stakeholders in order to promote sustainable, healthy and active travel choices among school children.

Officials from my Department participate in the Active School Travel Programme which is led by the Department for Infrastructure and includes representatives from the Department of Health and Sustrans. The work of this group is to continually seek ways to encourage Active Travel to and from school by walking and cycling in a safe and appropriate manner.

A further new Walking and Cycling Advisory Group has recently been established, again led by DfI. I am pleased to advise that my Curriculum Team will be represented on this group to determine how the issues of walking and cycling can be incorporated into the school curriculum.

Finally, I welcome the report published on the Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey 2019, which found that approximately three quarters of pupils do not travel to and from school by car, but use other modes such as walking, cycling and public transport.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Education how many primary schools in the South Antrim constituency accessed (i) the Active School Travel Programme; and (ii) the Cycling Proficiency Scheme.

(AQW 6510/17-22)

Mr Weir: While my Department participates in the Active School Travel Programme, the Department for Infrastructure takes the lead in both this programme and the Cycling Proficiency Scheme.

The Minister for Infrastructure would therefore be in the best position to respond to your questions, as her Department should hold the most up to date data to answer your question.

Apologies that I am unable to provide the information that you have requested.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department is taking to ensure that teachers have access to both mental health support and training.

(AQW 6531/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education (DE) recognises the importance of mental health support for both pupils and school staff and has, for a number of years, been rolling out training programmes to help schools understand and apply concepts such as 'trauma informed practice' and 'building resilience.'

Building on this, we are working collaboratively with Department of Health (DoH), Public Health Agency (PHA), Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), Education Authority (EA) and other stakeholders to develop a Framework for Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education. This will provide a multi-disciplinary approach to emotional health and wellbeing which should provide early and enhanced support for those children and young people at risk or showing signs of needing further help. The Framework, through an agreed Action Plan, will also provide support for school staff as they in turn support the pupils in their care.

In addition, as part of our response to Covid-19, a series of new resources have been prepared to support the mental health and wellbeing of both school staff and their pupils. These resources are already available to all schools via the C2k service, and additional resources will be made available throughout the year as further specific guidance and training needs are identified.

The responsibility for the health and wellbeing of teachers rests with their employers, their Board of Governors, in conjunction with the employing authority where relevant, as DE does not employ teachers.

The employing authorities and the teachers' unions work together through the Teachers' Negotiating Committee (TNC) to tackle issues that impact upon teachers' health and wellbeing. DE is part of that Committee.

The following actions are place to support health and wellbeing issues:

- a policy statement on tackling violence and abuse against teachers;
- a workload agreement;
- a teacher attendance procedure to support teachers on sickness absence, and support Principals to manage teacher absence; it includes provision for recording incidences of work-related stress;
- a job share scheme;
- a career break scheme;
- a temporary variation of contract option;
- a policy statement on planning, preparation and assessment time;
- access to Inspire Workplaces services which provides up to six free counselling sessions.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Education whether his Department has any plans to increase the amount of funding for special educational needs in post-primary schools.
(AQW 6532/17-22)

Mr Weir: I recognise the need to further supplement schools' funds (i.e. Nursery, Primary, Post-Primary and Special schools) to aid the effective implementation of the new SEN Framework; specifically, to ensure schools have a dedicated Learning Support Co-ordinator (the new name for a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator) and for work to begin on ensuring each pupil on the SEN Register in a school has a Personal Learning Plan (PLP).

I will be making an announcement shortly about this.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of funding to post-primary schools for the provision of special educational needs.
(AQW 6533/17-22)

Mr Weir: I recognise the need to further supplement schools' funds (i.e. Nursery, Primary, Post-Primary and Special schools) to aid the effective implementation of the new SEN Framework; specifically, to ensure schools have a dedicated Learning Support Co-ordinator (the new name for a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator) and for work to begin on ensuring each pupil on the SEN Register in a school has a Personal Learning Plan (PLP).

I will be making an announcement shortly about this.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to detail whether his Department has made provision for additional funding to be made available for schools to enable the supply of ICT equipment to pupils should they require to be home schooled for a period of time.
(AQW 6547/17-22)

Mr Weir: I announced plans on 21 May 2020 to provide digital devices to those children who meet certain criteria to assist with their learning from home. The scheme gives priority to children currently in year groups 11, 13, 6 and 3 in that order; and within the following categories: children in receipt of free school meals and one or more of the following: special educational needs, Newcomer target groups, Looked after Children and children who are considered vulnerable.

My Department is continuing to work with the Education Authority to identify strategies that might be applied in the event of any further lockdowns.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) what help and advice the Education Authority provides to schools to aid children with a stammer, or any other form of speech impediment, within the South Eastern Area; and (ii) the cost of this financially per academic year between 2015 – 2020.

(AQW 6563/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The EA Language and Communication Service liaise with Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) speech and language therapists, if the child is known to this service, but do not work specifically on supporting speech disorders as this is the remit of a clinician (Speech & Language Therapist).

Parents seeking advice for speech disorders will be signposted towards their local HSCT, GP or speech and language therapy department.

Information regarding speech and language disorders is also available on the Language and Communication Service area of the EA Website, where links can be found to the Regional Integrated Support for Education in Northern Ireland (RISE NI) and local Health and Social Care Trust websites. There are also links to many other bodies who have information on a wide range of speech and language disorders.

- (ii) This information is not held by the Education Authority nor the Department of Education

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education whether he will review the criteria for the provision of lollipop men and women.

(AQW 6564/17-22)

Mr Weir: The provision of a school crossing patrol (SCP) is a non-statutory function. The Education Authority's provision of a SCP is determined by an assessment which is conducted in accordance with Road Safety GB guidelines.

An assessment will primarily focus on the volume of pupils walking to and from school and the number of vehicles at the location under assessment however may include other factors such as include speed/visibility, carriageway width, road markings, junctions, accident history, street lighting and signage.

I am content that this provides an appropriate mechanism for assessing the need for SCP.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education for a copy of all reports confirming the outcomes achieved by Shared Education published or presented to his Ministerial Office over the past 5 years.

(AQW 6649/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Shared Education Act (NI) 2016 requires the Department of Education to lay a report before the Assembly every two years on the operation of the Act and section 2(3) of the Education Act (NI) 2014. The report must include statements on the extent to which the purpose of Shared Education has been achieved.

To date, two reports have been laid:

- Advancing Shared Education - Report to the Northern Ireland Assembly May 2018; and
- Advancing Shared Education – Report to the Northern Ireland Assembly June 2020

A copy of both reports can be accessed via the link <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/what-shared-education>

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education what plans he has to increase educational psychologist capacity to deal with the backlog of children awaiting assessment to provide assistance where needed for children and young people whose mental health and wellbeing has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 6650/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority's (EA) Psychology Service completed a recruitment exercise in July 2020, successfully recruiting eight educational psychologists who have now joined the Service.

To address any future shortfall of suitably qualified educational psychologists within the EA's workforce, I have recently approved a business case to increase the number of students on the Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology course provided by Queen's University, Belfast from six in 2018 to ten for the 2020/21 and 2021/22 academic years.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education (i) who determines the criteria for home to school transport; and (ii) to provide a copy of this set criteria.

(AQW 6657/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education are responsible for the setting of the home to school transport policy and the Education Authority are responsible for its operational implementation.

A copy of the home to school transport policy circular can be found on the Department's website at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/circular-199641-home-school-transport>.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education whether the schools recently approved to receive the 20mph speed limits will have their lollipop men and women removed.

(AQW 6658/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority's non-statutory provision of a School Crossing Patrol (SCP) is initially determined by an assessment which is conducted in accordance with Road Safety GB guidelines. The speed limit in the area is only one of many factors taken account of in such an assessment. Therefore the EA does not currently intend to pro-actively remove SCPs at the schools who have recently had their speed limits reduced to 20mph.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education whether extra educational psychologists will be employed to assist with the waiting lists due to COVID-19 to assess young people who may need extra support in schools.

(AQW 6663/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority's (EA) Psychology Service completed a recruitment exercise in July 2020, successfully recruiting eight educational psychologists who have now joined the Service.

To address any future shortfall of suitably qualified educational psychologists within the EA's workforce, I have recently approved a business case to increase the number of students on the Doctorate in Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology course provided by Queen's University, Belfast from six in 2018 to ten for the 2020/21 and 2021/22 academic years.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of whether there is any conflict in Mr Justin Edwards's position as Chief Executive of CCEA and membership of the Republic of Ireland's Independent Steering Committee on Calculated Grades.

(AQW 6695/17-22)

Mr Weir: No, there is no conflict of interest.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education whether he was informed of Mr Justin Edwards' position on the Republic of Ireland's Independent Steering Committee on Calculated Grades; and whether he approved Mr Edwards' decision to take up the post.

(AQW 6696/17-22)

Mr Weir: Yes.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) primary school; and (ii) post-primary school attendance rates since August 2020.

(AQW 6781/17-22)

Mr Weir: Since the start of the new academic year pupil attendance is currently monitored by a cumulative weekly report run from the School Information Management System (SIMS). This report collects pupil attendance data for the entire school week and combines the information into a single report for primary and post primary schools. The reports run automatically and therefore place no further burden on schools. The data requested can be found in the table below.

Pupil attendance by school type w/c 24th August to w/c 7th September

	w/c 24th August	w/c 31st August	w/c 7th September
(i) Primary schools	94.3%	93.8%	91.3%
(ii) Post primary schools	96.1%	95.7%	92.0%

Source: SIMS DE

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education when the next round of capital allocations will take place for voluntary youth organisations.

(AQW 6880/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has announced three tranches totalling 30 schemes to advance in planning from the 2016/17 Voluntary Youth Capital Scheme. The list remains live and there are no immediate plans for a further announcement

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education whether the youth sector will receive any allocation of personal protection equipment from the £19.2 million which the Department received recently.

(AQW 6882/17-22)

Mr Weir: In August, an allocation of £369,000 was made to the Education Authority (EA) Youth Service for the provision of personal protection equipment (PPE), with an additional £38,000 allocated for water cleansing in youth clubs.

As of 15 September 2020 a further allocation of £1,012,000 has been made to the EA for PPE for youth services.

The EA is in the process of implementing a mechanism to distribute this funding.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to outline his position in making CPR compulsory on school curriculums.
(AQW 6939/17-22)

Mr Weir: Within the Northern Ireland curriculum, there are opportunities to cover first aid, including CPR skills, through the 'Personal Development and Mutual Understanding' area of learning at primary level and the 'Learning for Life and Work' area of learning at post-primary level. This could be reinforced further through, for example, concurrent study in subjects such as Citizenship Education, Physical Education and Science.

The curriculum is not designed to prescribe detailed lists of compulsory subject content; rather it allows schools appropriate autonomy to meet the needs of their pupils. This flexibility encourages more innovative and customised approaches to ensuring our young people are both safe and well-informed about all of the issues they face in modern society.

To complement the curriculum, through the C2K managed service, schools also have access to a high quality range of resources that cover curriculum-related issues which can include first aid topics such as CPR.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on progressing the Children and Young People's Strategy.
(AQW 6940/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Children and Young People's Strategy was scheduled to be sent to the Committee for Education in March 2020, following which I had intended to bring it to the Executive for consideration; unfortunately its progress was paused due to the pandemic.

The strategy has been updated over the summer to reflect the impact of the pandemic and will be referred to the Committee for Education shortly. An oral briefing session with officials is scheduled for 14 October, following which I will bring the Strategy to the Executive for consideration in accordance with procedure. Once the strategy is adopted by the Executive, I will arrange for it to be laid in the Assembly and published.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether his Department or CCEA will conduct an investigation into the provision of A-level and AS-level results in 2020.
(AQW 6942/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have asked officials to take forward work to establish a review of the CCEA awarding arrangements for GCSEs, AS and A levels and will provide further information in due course.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education whether he will commission a review on how A level, AS level and GCSE grades were awarded in 2020.
(AQW 6978/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have asked officials to take forward work to establish a review of the CCEA awarding arrangements for GCSEs, AS and A levels and will provide further information in due course.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Education to outline the next steps in progressing Tandragee Junior High School's major capital works project.
(AQO 656/17-22)

Mr Weir: The major capital works project for this controlled school will be progressed by the Education Authority.

The first step will be agreeing the Schedule of Accommodation for the school, based on the approved enrolment number. A site search to identify potential suitable sites for a new school build will also be commissioned from Land and Property Services. A Design Team will also be procured, who will undertake a Technical Feasibility Study, which will identify feasible options to be explored in a Business Case. The Business Case will identify the preferred option to be progressed.

Following Business Case approval the project will progress through the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) design and construction stages.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for an update on the post-primary transfer tests, admissions and appeals process.
(AQO 657/17-22)

Mr Weir: On 2 September, both AQE Ltd and the Post-Primary Transfer Consortium announced that the entrance tests for Transfer 2021 would take place in January 2021.

My priority is to ensure that post-primary transfer is delivered in a timely fashion for every pupil in Northern Ireland. This means ensuring that the parent of every child transferring can nominate their preferred schools; that schools can select children for admission; that, if they wish, parents can appeal the decision of a school to refuse their child admission; and that every child can secure a school place by the start of term.

As a result of the decision of the test providers, my Department is working with the Education Authority to ensure a successful admissions process operates in 2021. My Department will shortly be publishing a timetable that sets out the key points in the admissions process.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Education for an update on the proposed new build for King's Park Primary School, Lurgan. (AQO 658/17-22)

Mr Weir: The major capital investment project to provide suitable accommodation for a 23 class base primary school and triple nursery unit for King's Park Primary School in Lurgan is progressing.

An Integrated Consultant Team, Doran Consulting Ltd, was appointed in October 2019. The Team have prepared a draft technical Feasibility Study on all options including refurbishment and new build proposals.

Following advice from planning officials, the report is currently being updated for submission to the Department. On approval, the report will form the basis of the development of a robust business case by the Education Authority to determine the preferred project option.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education what action his Department is taking to ensure that the education of pupils not sitting the transfer test is not being disrupted or undermined by tests being moved to January 2021. (AQO 659/17-22)

Mr Weir: Schools will be expected to continue to deliver the Key Stage 2 curriculum for all their pupils regardless of whether or not they are sitting the transfer tests, and regardless of the timings of these tests. That has always been the case. As the member knows, literacy and numeracy are cross curricular skills at each Key Stage and these are also assessed in the tests. The change of dates, which is a matter for the test providers, should not be allowed to impinge on normal teaching. In 2016 my Department issued guidance to schools about preparation for the tests including the use of classroom time; however, it is up to schools to decide how and to what extent they implement that guidance.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education for an update on proposed new school builds in North Down. (AQO 660/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are 3 new school build projects in the North Down area and 5 projects under the School Enhancement Programme.

Crawfordsburn Primary School was announced to advance in planning in March 2016 to deliver a new 8 class base primary school. An Integrated Consultancy Team (Isherwood & Ellis LLP) was appointed in October 2019 and are progressing the design of the new school.

The Education Authority is currently progressing the business case.

The following two major capital investment projects in the North Down area are being funded through the Fresh Start funding:

Priory Integrated College has been selected for a major capital investment project to improve or replace its existing accommodation. The project will cater for the school's current approved enrolment of 600 pupils.

In February 2020 the EA appointed an Integrated Consultant Team to design the proposed Priory Integrated College and it is now working on the early stages of the design process.

Bangor Central Integrated Primary School has been selected for a major capital investment project to improve or replace its existing accommodation. The project will cater for the school's current approved enrolment of 618 pupils.

The Education Authority appointed an Integrated Consultant Team to design the proposed Bangor Central Integrated Primary School in July 2020 and it is now working on the early stages of the design process.

There are five schools in the North Down constituency advancing in design under the School Enhancement Programme Second Call (SEP2).

In January 2019 St Columbanus' College was announced under the second tranche.

In January 2020, I announced three North Down schools under the third tranche of projects:

- Glenraig Controlled Integrated Primary School
- Kilcooley Primary School
- Sullivan Upper School, Holywood

The fourth and final tranche of projects was announced in May 2020; this saw the announcement of Clifton School, Bangor.

Officials are working with all the announced schools to agree the scope of the projects. Detailed plans for each school will be developed throughout the planning and design process. It is therefore not possible to be definitive about the timescale or likely spend on any individual project until the scoping/feasibility work is complete. However, SEP projects typically result in investment of between £2.5 and £4 million.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Education how many examiners are employed by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment to mark A level and GCSE examination papers.

(AQO 662/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am advised that the number of CCEA examiners contracted for GCE for summer 2019 was 1,490. The number of CCEA examiners contracted for GCSE for summer 2019 was 2,638. The total number of CCEA examiners contracted for summer 2019 for both GCE and GCSE was 4,128.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education what extra support will be provided to schools during the current academic year now that pupils have returned.

(AQO 664/17-22)

Mr Weir: Given the impact of the disruption on education it is essential that schools receive financial support to alleviate the new pressures they face and also support to improve the educational and well-being outcomes of our children and young people. Schools leaders and staff also need pastoral support during this stressful and uncertain time.

I have already outlined a significant package of funding to help support the safe reopening of schools. The package includes: £17.5million towards the cost of substitute teachers, non-teaching staff and other school expenditure; £6.4million for PPE; £5million for school wellbeing initiatives; £3.1million for home to school transport; and £1.4million to support special educational needs. The funding is for the first term of the new academic year.

Furthermore, the 'Engage' programme will help address lost learning. Around £11.2m has been set aside during this financial year to enable all primary and post primary schools to provide additional teaching support for pupils, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Another challenge will be pupil well-being. My Department is working with relevant partners to develop a Framework for Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education. This work is progressing well and we are working to complete it by December 2020. £5m recurrent funding has been made available to support mental health and wellbeing within the education sector, and the Health Minister has agreed to provide an additional £1.5m.

Finally, it is essential that we provide pastoral support and care for our Principals and school staff, who are working on the front line of education delivery. I admit we can always do more on this. Link Officers have been in place for every school since April and are trained to provide support, guidance and advice as needed. EA have also put in place dedicated phone lines where urgent support is required.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Education for an update on the progress of the Expert Panel to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background.

(AQO 665/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Expert Panel has been appointed and commenced work in September. An online call for evidence will be launched in the next few weeks. Oral evidence sessions are being organised from September to January 2021 and will include engagement with a wide range of stakeholders. The Expert Panel has been invited to update the Education Committee at its meeting on Wednesday 30 September 2020.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Education to outline his plans to provide further funding for the Major Capital Works Programme.

(AQO 661/17-22)

Mr Weir: There is a budget of £40 million for the Major Capital Works Programme and the School Enhancement Programme in the current financial year, with a further budget of Fresh Start funding of £19.1 million for the Strule Shared Education Campus and agreed shared and integrated school projects.

The Department's capital budget is not known beyond this year but, given the lead in time to construction on major capital projects, it is important that there is a continual flow of projects into the Programme to utilise capital funds as budget becomes available in future years. It is therefore my intention to make another major capital call in 2021.

Department of Finance

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Finance to provide an update on how he intends to use the Barnett Consequential revenues from the Chancellor's summer statement to support industry in Northern Ireland and whether he will match the Chancellor's approach on Apprenticeships.

(AQW 6139/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Following the Chancellor's Summer Economic Update, the Executive agreed a number of urgent allocations, including the provision of £17.2 million to the Department for the Economy for Apprenticeships.

This recognised the key role that apprenticeships will play in our economic recovery, particularly with younger people likely to be most severely affected. It is anticipated that this will be used to launch schemes needed urgently as employers make decisions about apprentice's returning from furlough and recruiting new apprenticeships linked to exam results.

The Executive will consider the allocation of the remaining funding as part of its response to recovery.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance whether there are civil servants working from home during COVID-19 who, for logistical or other reasons, have been unable to do substantial work; and, if so, how extensive is this.

(AQW 6189/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department of Finance does not hold this information for the NICS. Individual departments are responsible for managing working from home arrangements and any associated data in relation to this.

For the Department of Finance, based on the most recent information collated at 10 September, there were 4 people out of a total headcount of 3,496 who were available for work but unable to their job.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Finance whether his Department has engaged with representatives of local councils or other Executive Departments to discuss the financial pressures imposed on councils as a result of COVID-19.

(AQW 6293/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The established protocol is for local councils to engage directly with Department for Communities, who after consideration with present the case to my Department for inclusion in financial papers that are submitted to the Executive for decision.

However, my Permanent Secretary and I have both been involved in a number of engagements involving local council representatives as part of the Covid-19 response.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance what his Department is considering by way of a support package for coach and bus operators who have experienced huge pressures during the pandemic.

(AQW 6549/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am pleased that following legal advice, the Minister for Infrastructure has agreed to oversee the development of a scheme to support the taxi and coach industries. If she feels that additional funding is required for this purpose, then I would welcome a bid from her which can then be considered by the Executive.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Finance when he will make funding available for extra places in Queen's University Medical School for students anticipating starting in September 2020.

(AQW 6569/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have publicly stated my support for additional student places at this time across all disciplines including Medical, nursing and midwifery and Allied Health Professionals.

Given the need for universities to confirm places to students this is not a matter that can be deferred and the Executive has agreed to allocate £3.73 million this purpose now.

The £3.73 million breakdown includes £3.2 million to the Department for the Economy subject to final confirmation of costs from the universities and £530,000 will be provided to the Department of Health for additional medical, nursing, midwifery and allied health professional places as part of future COVID-19 allocations.

Future year funding for the additional medical, nursing, midwifery and allied health professional places will be ring-fenced for this as part of the upcoming Budget process. For clarity, this does not imply a permanent increase in the number of places which should only be agreed through the normal processes; rather it is an acceptance of the difficulties caused by the handling of A-Level results and reflects funding for the durations of courses for those students affected.

Whilst the university admissions process is still ongoing, the Executive nevertheless wants to provide as much clarity and certainty as possible to both our universities and students. I trust that this provides the certainty which the universities and students require.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the implementation of the Legal Complaints and Regulation Act (NI) 2016, in particular with regards to the establishment of complaints committees to deal with issues of, and provide compensation for, professional negligence.

(AQW 6615/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Legal Complaints and Regulation Act (NI) 2016 (the 'Act') provided for the establishment of the post of Legal Services Oversight Commissioner. Ms Marian Cree was appointed to this role for a three year term on 3rd April 2017 and I extended that appointment for a second term in April 2020. Ms Cree continues to work, whilst also performing the role of Lay Observer, with my Department, the Law Society and Bar Council towards the full implementation of the Act's provisions, the legislation for which will be subject to Assembly scrutiny, including the establishment of complaints committees.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance for an update on (i) whether the Northern Ireland Civil Service will accommodate all staff who want to work remotely; (ii) the possibility of regional hubs for staff; and (iii) the New Business as Usual document. (AQW 6686/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The approach of the Executive to date has been that office based staff that can work from home should continue to do so. The Executive's 5 Step Plan strongly encourages remote working even when it may be possible for staff to return to their workplace. Hence the focus in the NICS remains on minimising the risk of transmission, ensuring that key public services continue to be delivered without interruption while helping to protect and not overburden the NHS.

It is the case that due to operational requirements, some roles are not suited to be carried out remotely. These will continue to be carried out in office locations that have been risk assessed and are safe for staff to work in. Therefore it may not be possible to accommodate all staff who may want to work remotely. The level of remote working possible will vary in each department based on the functions and services they provide.

My department is also committed to establishing regional hubs where staff can work near to where they live. Work to identify locations for possible Regional Hubs is underway.

The NICS Recovery Group continues to meet on a regular basis, and continues to work on a cross departmental basis on developing the future vision for how the NICS will operate post Covid-19.

A working from home policy is currently being drafted that will take into consideration how Information Technology and accommodation provision can be utilised to allow staff to work remotely, both safely and productively. TUS are being consulted about the policy as it develops.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to provide (i) a breakdown of the funding received from Barnett consequential for COVID-19-related funds; and (ii) allocations to date. (AQW 6715/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive has received £2.2 billion of funding from the Treasury as part of its COVID-19 response.

The table provided in AQW 6334/17-22 details the breakdown of the funding received from Barnett consequential.

Details of the COVID-19 allocations to date can be accessed via the link below:

<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-funding-allocations>

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance how much rate relief was offered to businesses operating in Lagan Valley as a result of COVID-19. (AQW 6720/17-22)

Mr Murphy: A total of £12,168,544 of rates holiday support (both 4 month and 12 month holidays) has been awarded in 2020-21 financial year to non-domestic properties in the Lagan Valley constituency as part of emergency support measures agreed by the Executive in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance what consideration has been given to providing full rates relief for (i) private dental practices; and (ii) dental practices providing NHS treatments to help mitigate the serious financial impact of COVID-19 on the sector. (AQW 6764/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As part of the response to Covid-19, I took the decision to support all businesses here, including dental practices, with a 4-month rates holiday from 1 April. Rate relief was then targeted from 1 August to those sectors identified as having the greatest need. That identification and targeting did not include either private dental practices or dental practices providing NHS treatments. This approach is also consistent with targeted schemes implemented in Britain, although dental premises there have not received relief for any part of the year. The total cost of this additional business rates package of up to £313 million demonstrates the Executive's commitment to supporting businesses at this difficult time. Regrettably, funds are not available to extend this relief to include other businesses.

Businesses which do not qualify for the 12 months rate relief may consider the Hardship Rate Relief scheme, which provides support for businesses and organisations that are in crisis because of an exceptional circumstance and supports by alleviating the business from payment of business rates for a period of time. In order to qualify for this relief, businesses are required to provide Land & Property Services with evidence of a significant loss of trade caused by the exceptional circumstance. Further information on this scheme can be found at the following link:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/hardship-rate-relief>.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Finance what correspondence or communications he has had with Her Majesty's Treasury following the Chancellor's announcement of the Kickstart Scheme for 16-24 year olds in July. (AQW 6775/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Chancellor's announced at his Summer Economic Update the Kickstart Scheme for 16-24 year olds, with England receiving £215.0 million for 2020-21.

The Executive received a Barnett share of £6.0 million for 2020-21.

Barnett consequentials are not hypothecated, meaning they do not have to be used for the purpose which gave rise to the consequential.

There has been no further engagement with Treasury as job creation is a devolved policy area. It is for the Economy Minister to take forward the initiatives in this area.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance for a breakdown by (i) age; (ii) demographic information; and (iii) community background, of applicants to the recent Northern Ireland Civil Service Administrative Officer recruitment campaign.

(AQW 6860/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The breakdown held by my Department is as follows:

(i) **Age**

	Number	%
16-34	10116	66.9
35+	5012	33.1
Invalid Date of Birth	2	0.0
Total	15130	100.0

(ii) **Demographic information**

Gender

	Number	%
Female	8142	53.8
Male	6988	46.2
Total	15130	100.0

Disability

	Number	%
No	14034	92.8
Yes	1095	7.2
Missing	1	0.0
Total	15130	100.0

Ethnic Origin

	Number	%
White	14793	97.8
Other (including Traveller)	336	2.2
Missing	1	0.0
Total	15130	100.0

(iii) **Community Background**

	Number	%
Protestant	6429	42.5
Roman Catholic	7182	47.5
Neither Protestant nor Roman Catholic	1519	10.0
Total	15130	100.0

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 6357/17-22, whether his Department has received any bids from any other Department for additional support for those who have not been eligible for any other government assistance for (i) the self-employed; (ii) micro-businesses; and (iii) sole traders.

(AQW 6889/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My department has received bids from DfC, DoJ, DfI and DoH for the following groups which can include a combination of self-employed, micro-businesses and sole traders:-

- Arts sector – a bid for the arts sector to protect jobs and services in the arts, culture, museums, libraries, language and heritage sectors that have been impacted by Covid-19.
- Legal professionals – a bid for cover for estimated losses associated with making Legal Aid interim payments to barristers and solicitors in early lockdown and to maintain the stability of the justice system during Covid-19.
- Coach and taxi drivers – a waiving of license fees for coaches and taxis.
- Private dentists – a one off grant payment to dental practices in respect of earnings from private activities.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Finance for an update on what progress has been made on multi-year budgeting.
(AQO 668/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive's funding envelope will be determined by the outcome of Treasury's Spending Review which is expected to be announced in the autumn. The period for which the Executive can agree a budget will be restricted by the period covered by the Spending Review.

I am pleased to say that Treasury has listened to our concerns and announced on 21 July 2020 there will be a multi-year Spending Review settlement for three years from 2021-22 for Resource and for four years from 2021-22 for Capital.

Within this context it is for the Executive to make local decisions on multi-year budgets, however my intention is to mirror these timeframes so we can provide much needed certainty for planning for the future.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Finance to outline the projected cost of the rates exemption for ATMs in rural areas.
(AQO 674/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The financial cost of the rates exemption for 2020/21 will be in the region of £170,000 in terms of revenue foregone. The average relief awarded this year under the scheme is in the region of £2,000 per annum of business rates.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Finance whether consideration is being given to further in-year financial support for hospices.
(AQO 675/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I was pleased to announce a £6.75 million support package to help hospices with the challenges they are facing with the loss of donations and income from retail outlets.

During my recent visits to the NI Hospice and Daisy Lodge I saw at first hand the key services hospices provide to patients and their families and their wider role in the community.

The Executive's number one priority is protecting lives and livelihoods and we are continuing to work with the hospices to understand their funding pressures to enable Executive consideration in the overall funding context.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he has had any discussions with the Minister of Health on providing funding for uplifting nurses pay by 12.5 per cent.
(AQO 676/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I would like to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of nurses and all staff across the Health and Social Care sector in these difficult times.

I recently published public sector pay policy for 2020-21. I will consider how we approach public sector pay for 2021-22 and beyond as part of the broader budgetary process. It will then be for the Health Minister to consider any further pay award in line with that policy.

I have had no engagement with the Minister of Health on this issue to date but will be discussing wider Department of Health funding with Minister of Health as part of budgetary process following the Spending Review.

It is for the Minister of Health to bring forward proposals in respect of nurses pay taking cognizance of Public Sector Pay policy. The allocation of funding to make such an award is a decision for the Executive.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Finance whether he has received any bids for financial support for sectors of the economy affected by COVID-19, that have not yet received government support.
(AQO 677/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive are considering a number of bids that will support economic recovery and the details of allocations will be announced in due course. This will include sectors that have been unable to access existing support measures.

I am pleased that the Minister for Infrastructure has agreed to oversee the development of a scheme for taxis and coaches under the Financial Assistance Act (NI) 2009.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Finance what discussions he has had with the UK Treasury regarding who will be responsible for providing funding for the Troubles-related incident Victims Payment Scheme.

(AQO 678/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have not taken forward discussions with Treasury, rather my engagement has been with the Northern Ireland Office, as it is for the department which has constructed the policy to deal with funding in the first instance. This approach reflects Treasury's Statement of Funding Policy which states that 'the body whose decision leads to the additional cost will meet that cost' (paragraphs 1.17 (10) and 6.8 (2) refer).

Department of Health

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health when his Department will be issuing updated guidance for people whose 12 week shielding period ends in June.

(AQW 4962/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I recognise that this has been a difficult and uncertain time for many people in our community and particularly those who were initially shielding from March onwards. The Chief Medical Officer wrote in June to advise that people no longer need to shield and should instead follow the same guidance and precautions as those considered to be generally vulnerable. The letter included advice and information on a range of issues and signposted to sources of support which are available in this new phase.

It is important to note that those who were shielding still need to be careful because they remain more vulnerable than the general population.

There is always a degree of risk in contacts with the outside world but remaining indoors indefinitely is detrimental to physical and mental health. It is therefore important that individuals can make their own informed choices and this can be supported by applying the following principles to help minimise risk:

- adhere to social distancing guidelines as much as possible;
- the more 'bubbles' an individual inhabits, the higher the risk of contracting Covid-19, although the risk will depend on how each bubble behaves;
- continue to stay at home as much as possible;
- maintain good hand hygiene;
- avoid touching your face;
- use of a face covering is also strongly advised (and is mandatory in shops and other enclosed spaces and on public transport);
- encourage others to wear face coverings;
- try to maintain good ventilation when engaging with other people;
- try to meet people outdoors rather than indoors.

All of the items mentioned above can change depending on the presence of Covid-19 in the community. In terms of what is best for an individual, they should assess the risk using principles such as above and taking advice from their GP, clinician/ specialist Consultant.

The need for further advice for those who were shielding is being kept under continuous review. If it is decided that current advice needs to be updated further, this will reflect improved understanding of who is at most risk from the virus and the level of transmission of the virus in the community. It will be influenced by the R value (the number of individuals who, on average, will be infected by a single person with the infection) but more importantly by the number of cases present in the community. Where it is necessary to do so, updated advice will be issued.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of the bids he made in the June Monitoring Round for mental health.

(AQW 5444/17-22)

Mr Swann: In June monitoring round my Department bid and received £1.5m for the Mental Health Action Plan and £0.3m for mental health recovery and co-production. The Department also bid for £0.5m for Protect Life 2 and received £0.24m.

Further to this, an additional bid of £2m was made in relation to Primary Care Multi-Disciplinary Teams, of which practice based mental health practitioners are a key component. Following this bid, an allocation of £0.54m was received.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact that cancelled appointments and surgery, as a result of measures taken by the Health and Social Trust due to its response to COVID-19, has had on patients.

(AQW 6019/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am clear that the impact of COVID-19 on health and social care has been devastating. While the pausing of some services to allow reprioritisation of resources and to ensure patient safety was necessary during the first wave of the pandemic, I recognise the severe impact this has had on many of those waiting on appointments and procedures. That is why I have moved quickly to establish the Rebuilding Services Management Board tasked with increasing HSC service capacity as quickly as possible across all programmes of care, within the prevailing COVID-19 conditions. To that end, HSC Trusts have produced Rebuilding Plans for June–September, with further plans in development.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health to outline (i) what plans there are to move ICU, hepatobiliary, theatre services and outpatients from the Mater Hospital to the City Hospital; (ii) when it is intended to return them to the Mater Hospital; and (iii) the rationale for the move.

(AQW 6119/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- i Mater Infirmorum Hospital ICU beds were temporarily transferred to the Nightingale Hospital, Belfast City Hospital (BCH) Intensive Care Unit (ICU), on 1 April 2020 in response to the surge in patients with COVID-19 requiring critical care support. Hepatobiliary elective theatre sessions have been provided in BCH with the required number of Critical Care beds and support since 14 July 2020. There was a downturn of all speciality elective theatre services in response to COVID-19. All emergency surgery was undertaken in the Royal Victoria Hospital.
- ii. Belfast Health and Social Care Trust continues to review service delivery in line with the COVID-19 response and the potential for any further surge in patients with COVID-19. The Mater Hospital will be the designated COVID-19 surge hospital site as the second step in the Trust's COVID-19 escalation plan.
- iii. The Mater Hospital managed patients with COVID-19 in the wards and Critical Care Unit. Staff from a number of areas, including theatres, were relocated to Critical Care. Elective surgery was not carried out in the Mater's theatres due to the COVID-19 response. Following the initial COVID-19 surge, BCH is the designated protected elective hospital site and has facilitated hepatobiliary theatre sessions with Critical Care support in BCH from 14 July 2020 to ensure patients are managed through an elective care pathway. The BCH site can be protected as a COVID-19 minimal site in the interim, as it does not have an emergency department which facilitates unscheduled care pathways for patients.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of (i) hospital beds set aside for COVID-19 patients, broken down by each Health and Social Care Trust; and (ii) patients with COVID-19 who are currently in hospital.

(AQW 6130/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) HSC Trusts do not set aside beds for COVID-19 patients. The number of patients with COVID-19 fluctuates and hospital bed stock is managed dynamically in line with best practice in infection control, and the number of ICU, acute and stepdown beds needed based on the stage of surge as experienced by any Trust or hospital.
- (ii) Information on the number of patients with COVID-19 who are currently in hospital is published daily on the Department's COVID-19 Dashboard, all information is available to view or download from the link below:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates>

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether provision is being made for young children to be given a COVID-19 test, if their parents are unable to successfully administer the test.

(AQW 6152/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recognise that for young children, including those under 5, testing may be an unpleasant and uncomfortable experience. Parents may find it easier to apply the swab in the home environment using a home testing kit which can be ordered through the digital portal or by calling the 119 helpline. A video is available on the Public Health Agency website to show parents how to take the swab.

I am advised that HSC colleagues will work together to explore options for how best to support COVID swab taking on occasions where parents or carers have not been able to obtain a sample.

There are no current plans to offer testing for children in the primary care COVID centres.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether there are plans to review and change the current COVID-19 testing system for under-5s.

(AQW 6153/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recognise that for young children, including those under 5, testing may be an unpleasant and uncomfortable experience. Parents may find it easier to apply the swab in the home environment using a home testing kit which can be ordered through the digital portal or by calling the 119 helpline. A video is available on the Public Health Agency website to show parents how to take the swab.

I am advised that HSC colleagues will work together to explore options for how best to support COVID swab taking on occasions where parents or carers have not been able to obtain a sample.

There are no current plans to offer testing for children in the primary care COVID centres.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what plans are in place to assist parents of children who are having difficulty administering the COVID-19 test.

(AQW 6154/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recognise that for young children, including those under 5, testing may be an unpleasant and uncomfortable experience. Parents may find it easier to apply the swab in the home environment using a home testing kit which can be ordered through the digital portal or by calling the 119 helpline. A video is available on the Public Health Agency website to show parents how to take the swab.

I am advised that HSC colleagues will work together to explore options for how best to support COVID swab taking on occasions where parents or carers have not been able to obtain a sample.

There are no current plans to offer testing for children in the primary care COVID centres.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether there are any plans to test under-5s at COVID-19 Health Centres.

(AQW 6155/17-22)

Mr Swann: I recognise that for young children, including those under 5, testing may be an unpleasant and uncomfortable experience. Parents may find it easier to apply the swab in the home environment using a home testing kit which can be ordered through the digital portal or by calling the 119 helpline. A video is available on the Public Health Agency website to show parents how to take the swab.

I am advised that HSC colleagues will work together to explore options for how best to support COVID swab taking on occasions where parents or carers have not been able to obtain a sample.

There are no current plans to offer testing for children in the primary care COVID centres.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what plans are in place to provide neurologist staff cover in hospitals in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 6177/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT) and the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSCT) are working to fill a number of joint NHSCT/BHSCT consultant neurologist posts, the first of which is due to take up post in February 2021. In the interim NHSCT continue to have cover from consultant neurologists from the BHSCT.

In addition the NHSCT are seeking to obtain dedicated consultant cover for Antrim Area Hospital from an independent provider to be contracted until the end of March 2021, in the first instance.

The Regional Review of Neurology Services which commenced in December 2018 has been tasked with identifying future workforce requirements for the next 10-15 years, this will include both the Consultant workforce and the potential role of a Specialist Neurology Nursing workforce.

The Review incorporates six workstreams, including one on workforce which is well placed to consider all of the aspects required to underpin the design of future neurology services.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister of Health whether there are plans to expand the existing testing programmes for COVID-19 at all current locations.

(AQW 6196/17-22)

Mr Swann: Testing in Northern Ireland is underpinned by an Interim Protocol, an operational tool which sets out the priority groups for testing. The protocol is subject to regular review by the Expert Advisory Group on Testing (EAGT) and priority groups for testing are extended in line with emerging scientific and medical evidence.

Testing capacity in Northern Ireland has increased significantly since the beginning of the pandemic and is delivered through two routes. Firstly, in HSC Trust laboratories and through local testing partners as part of our NI Scientific Advisory Consortium. This is known as Pillar 1 testing. Secondly, through participation in the National Testing Programme managed by the Department of Health and Social care in London. This is known as Pillar 2 testing and currently includes four drive-through fixed testing sites, six operational Mobile Testing Units which are deployed in towns and villages across Northern Ireland in response to local need, and also Home and Satellite Test kit options.

Overall testing capacity is continually reviewed by the EAGT and plans to further enhance capacity are kept under active consideration.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, in relation to current testing, whether it is testing for Coronavirus or COVID-19; and, if Coronavirus, which virus within that range.

(AQW 6258/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) swab test kit is for the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the disease it causes is COVID-19.

Other circulating Coronaviruses would not cause a positive COVID-19 result.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health what plans are in place to increase the provision of needle exchange services in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 6288/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are currently 20 community pharmacy based needle and syringe exchanges in Northern Ireland, funded by the Public Health Agency (PHA) and Health & Social Care Board (HSCB). PHA continues to work with HSCB colleagues in identifying demand and need for these services across Northern Ireland.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the guidance his Department considered when deciding fallow times for dental practices; and whether he plans to reduce fallow times for dental practices.

(AQW 6289/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current guidelines regarding fallow time in all UK countries is the 4 nation COVID-19: Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) guidance. This is issued jointly by the leading public health organisations of all four nations including Northern Ireland's Public Health Agency and was developed in collaboration with experts from New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG). The 4 nation COVID-19 IPC guidance is not specific to dentistry but rather intended for all health and social care workers who may be involved in caring for patients during the pandemic.

Aerosol Generating Procedures (AGPs), routinely used in dental treatment, can produce airborne particles less than 5 micrometres in size which can remain suspended in the air, travel over a distance and can cause infection if inhaled. Therefore, AGPs create the potential for airborne transmission of infections that may otherwise only be transmissible by the droplet route.

The fallow time is the period after an AGP during which the aerosol is settling and patients cannot be treated. A single air change is estimated to remove 63% of airborne contaminants, after 5 air changes less than 1% of airborne contamination is thought to remain. Clearance of infectious particles after an AGP is dependent on the ventilation and air change within the room. In a single room with neutral air pressure, 6 air changes per hour (ACH) results in a fallow time of approximately one hour. In an isolation room with 10-12 ACH, a minimum of 20 minutes fallow time is considered pragmatic.

A Rapid Review of AGPs in Dentistry is being undertaken by the Scottish Dental Clinical Effectiveness Programme (SDCEP) with Northern Ireland represented in the Working Group. It is expected that this review will be published by the end of the month and provide updated advice in relation to fallow times following dental AGPs. The NI Dental Operational Guidance will be updated following the publication of the SDCEP review.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for an update on the independent review into allegations of widespread inappropriate behaviour in the Northern Ireland Fire Service, as agreed by the interim Chief Fire Officer in October 2019.

(AQW 6290/17-22)

Mr Swann: In July 2019, the Interim Chief Fire and Rescue Officer commissioned an independent review into Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service's (NIFRS) response to allegations of inappropriate behaviour.

This review concluded in May 2020. NIFRS is currently progressing the recommendations of this review. NIFRS anticipate that all recommendations will be implemented by the end of March 2021.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health whether patients who have tested negative for COVID-19 continue to be admitted to Ward 3 South (Medical) in Craigavon Area Hospital.

(AQW 6319/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust has confirmed that Ward 3 South (Medical) in Craigavon Area Hospital has been closed to all admissions since the current COVID-19 outbreak was detected.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has expressed an interest in securing additional flu vaccination via the EU Joint procurement process, including via (i) London's Department of Health and Social Care; and (ii) Dublin's Department of Health.

(AQW 6345/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has not secured additional flu vaccine via the EU Joint procurement process either through London or Dublin. Public Health England procure the childhood vaccine (Fluenz Tetra) on behalf of my Department as part of a UK-wide procurement. Adult vaccines are procured by the Public Health Agency.

This year, Public Health England and the Department of Health and Social Care have procured additional vaccine doses, a proportion of which has been allocated to Northern Ireland. This has enabled my Department to extend the flu programme to additional population groups and will support increased uptake amongst existing eligible groups.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health what plans each Health and Social Care Trust has to address the growing backlog in cancer referrals and treatments.
(AQW 6363/17-22)

Mr Swann: The COVID-19 pandemic has had an adverse impact on waiting times for cancer referrals and treatment, and this has led to an increased backlog. Cancer is identified as a priority workstream within the Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Services which I published in June. In order to clear the backlog of patients in their cancer pathways, Northern Ireland's six Health and Social Care Trusts published plans which set out the work being done in their various areas. The Framework and associated Trust plans are available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/rebuilding-hsc-services>

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health whether any of the personal protection equipment purchased since 1 March 2020 has since been sold.
(AQW 6383/17-22)

Mr Swann: A relatively small number of PPE items including Aprons, Eye Protection/Visors, Gloves and Type 11R masks have been sold to wider health and social care partners across Northern Ireland since 01 March 2020. This was of no detriment to the protection of staff within the HSC.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the former Omagh Hospital site.
(AQW 6389/17-22)

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. A previously agreed sale did not complete and the property was re-advertised in June 2020. It is anticipated that a new sale will complete in 2020.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what ministerial directions have been issued since January 2020.
(AQW 6402/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have issued one Ministerial Direction since January 2020.

Direction issued: August 2020.

Direction: Northern Ireland Infected Blood Payment Scheme - Permanent uplift to payments to infected beneficiaries of the scheme in line with rates paid in England.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 4713/17-22, to list the current dual diagnosis services for addictions and mental health, broken down by catchment area.
(AQW 6438/17-22)

Mr Swann: Patients with a dual diagnosis of mental health and addiction have access to the same mental health and addictions services as those with a single diagnosis. In both mental health and addiction services the level and kind of care and treatment are professional decisions based on the clinical needs of the patient.

It is therefore not possible to list specific dual diagnosis services, as this is provided in line with all mental health and addiction services.

To ensure that those with dual diagnosis get the best care and treatment available, both the upcoming substance misuse strategy and mental health strategy will consider the issue of dual diagnosis.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to legislate on Adult Safeguarding in the current mandate.
(AQW 6520/17-22)

Mr Swann: I announced my intention to bring forward an Adult Safeguarding Bill on Thursday 10 September. I am committed to making lasting improvements in adult safeguarding and I intend to consult on a range of legislative options before Christmas.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 5517/17-22, when patients, who are waiting the recommencement of their fertility treatment before their current medication expires, can expect the Royal Fertility Centre to reopen.
(AQW 6618/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer you to my answer to AQW 5517/17-22 confirming that the Regional Fertility Centre reopened on 10 August 2020.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 5942/17-22, and further to the recent announcement from the Department of Health in Great Britain that 250,000 clear face masks have been procured for use in NHS Hospitals and that an allocation will be provided to Northern Ireland, to detail (i) when Northern Ireland will receive its allocation; (ii) how many masks will be received; (iii) and; (iv) which Health and Social Care services will have access to these masks.

(AQW 6653/17-22)

Mr Swann: An initial allocation of 1,728 clear face masks have been received as part of the United Kingdom purchase and are currently undergoing final technical assessment. A further consignment is due shortly bringing the total to 8,640 masks. Work is being undertaken with physical and sensory disability teams across the HSC in NI and part of this work will be to ensure there is appropriate PPE provision for these priority areas going forward.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the future of the Community Crisis Intervention Service in Derry.
(AQW 6673/17-22)

Mr Swann: Londonderry's Crisis Intervention Service is commissioned by Derry and Strabane District Council and is delivered solely by Extern. Decisions on its future reside with the Council.

I have agreed to provide £60k in addition to the previous £32.4k to enable the service to continue until the end of March 2021. A separate funding arrangement is being explored for the service thereafter by the Council and Extern.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust will allow fathers to attend scan and ante-natal outpatient appointments with their partners.

(AQW 6818/17-22)

Mr Swann: On 30 June 2020, my Department published updated guidance which applied from 6 July 2020 for all Health and Social Care (HSC) Trust inpatient services, including maternity services, for the duration of the COVID-19 response. This revised guidance set out the position in respect of pregnant women in that, so long as the surge level and the Northern Ireland Executive five step approach permits, aligned to the pandemic surge levels/R value based on the best scientific advice available at any given time:

Birth partners will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to dating scan, early pregnancy clinic, anomaly scan, and Fetal Medicine Department, for induction of labour, duration of labour and birth and, to visit in antenatal and postnatal wards as appropriate

As a result of the Executive's decision announced on Thursday 10 September to invoke limited restrictions in specific areas across Northern Ireland, visiting arrangements in any Health and Social Care setting within the selected areas, do, unfortunately have to be further limited.

With effect from Monday 14 September 2020, in respect of updated measures in relation to maternity services within South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust facilities, birth partners can only be facilitated to accompany pregnant women to the dating scan, anomaly scan and for active labour and birth. However, exceptional circumstances will be considered.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of current health and social care workforce capacity within the Southern Health and Social Care Trust in light of recent COVID-19 outbreaks at Daisy Hill Hospital and Craigavon Area Hospital.

(AQW 6925/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Officials have been in contact with the Southern Health and Social Care Trust, who have reassured my Department that any absences, due to staff being ill or needing to self-isolate, are monitored daily and that staffing levels in wards are being supplemented through a variety of means including use of bank staff, agency workers, where necessary, and with core staff working additional hours / overtime to ensure minimum safe staffing levels.

Staffing levels are also being supplemented by staff from other Directorates, and other wards in the hospitals. Some specialist nurses / nursing leads are currently providing additional cover in wards.

Department for Infrastructure

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Infrastructure what traffic calming work is due to take place in the Colin area of West Belfast in (i) 2020/21; (ii) 2021/22; and (iii) 2022/23.

(AQW 6103/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I can advise the Member that my Department currently has no plans to implement traffic calming measures in the Colin area of West Belfast however traffic calming assessments are reviewed regularly to take account of any changes in local circumstances and the situation will be kept under review.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the current policy regarding grass cutting and gully cleaning, broken down by section office.

(AQW 6108/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Grass cutting and gully cleaning are key to road safety and form an integral part of my Department's routine maintenance work programme. Under normal circumstances my Department would aim for two grass cuts per year in rural areas and five cuts in urban areas and to inspect and clean, where necessary, all gullies in urban areas twice each year and gullies in rural areas once per year.

However, since 2015 resource budget pressures within the Department have created a significant impact on the delivery of routine maintenance services. As a result, my Department has had to reduce its routine road maintenance activities to a limited service, which prioritises delivery of only essential services for maintaining public safety and protecting the transport network.

In 2020/21, as in the previous year, my Department aims to cut all roadside verges and sightline areas twice between April and October, with sightlines at bends and junctions being cut more frequently as required to ensure public safety is not compromised. However, within the funding envelope available, it is not possible to reinstate the number of urban area cuts to five per year.

Similarly, in 2020/21 as in the previous year, my Department currently aims to maintain the level of service and inspect and clean, where necessary, all gullies once annually.

These policies are applied consistently across all of the Section Offices within the four Roads Divisions.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the procedure laid down by the Department with regard to the (i) cleaning; and (ii) maintenance of roads signs for safety purposes.

(AQW 6109/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department carries out regular inspections of all public roads and footways to ensure that essential response maintenance is identified and completed as necessary. During these inspections all defects are noted, including for example defective signs and signs requiring cleaning to improve their visibility.

The frequency of these inspections and the subsequent response time depends on the type of road and the volume of vehicular or pedestrian traffic. Defective, damaged or missing signs will be categorised as urgent or non-urgent work with the priority given to mandatory and warning signs.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister for Infrastructure what work has been carried out on the upgrade to junctions to provide a continuous barrier along the A1 from Hillsborough to Banbridge during the current financial year.

(AQW 6124/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A Public Inquiry was held at the Belmont Hotel, Banbridge from 11 -13 March 2020. The Inspector subsequently undertook a number of site meetings in conjunction with Departmental officials to ensure that he gives full consideration to all the issues raised. Whilst these site meetings were delayed by the COVID-19 restrictions, they have now been completed and the Inspector has confirmed that he intends to issue his report to the Department in October 2020.

I am keen to progress to the next stage as quickly as possible, whilst of course completing all of the necessary statutory processes. Without pre-judging the findings of the Inspectors Report, preparatory work for the subsequent stages of development work on the scheme is ongoing where appropriate. This work includes the planning and preparation for on-site geotechnical investigation works and continuing environmental surveys, which are planned to be complete during this financial year.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the current policy concerning the erection of banners on street lighting columns is suspended due to a judicial review.[R]

(AQW 6134/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware that my Department has in the past granted permission to local Councils to erect suitable banners, such as those advertising civic events or displaying artwork, on its equipment. While I appreciate the positive impact these banners can have in city and town centres, the issue of signs on Departmental property has been the subject of legal proceedings and as a result I am unable to grant formal authorisation for the erection of banners on street lighting columns.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to review the legal position concerning party bicycles used by groups of cyclists

(AQW 6135/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware that these party bicycles have been in operation in Belfast and other jurisdictions for some time. However, as these vehicles are not motorised and are deemed to be bicycles, my Department does not have the powers to legislate for them. As the vehicle is controlled and steered by a person who is not drinking alcohol, there is no breach of the rules about drinking and being in control of a cycle, as defined in The Road Traffic (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. Additionally my Department does not have any vires in relation to drinking in public places.

I am therefore not in a position to review the legal position around these vehicles.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's legislative program relevant to Brexit.
(AQW 6144/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In the Department for Infrastructure's EU Exit legislative programme there are currently 8 EU Exit related Statutory Rules (SRs) at various stages of development. The SRs being developed cover the following policy areas: electric vehicle infrastructure at new domestic dwellings; rail safety; ports services; public service vehicles; carriage of goods by road; and land use planning.

The main purpose of the Department's EU Exit legislative programme is to correct 'inoperables' as a result of EU Exit and ensure alignment with the EU. There are also regulations in the programme that are required in order to meet the requirements of retained EU law, accommodate the outcome of UK-EU negotiations on future arrangements, as well as transposing EU directives as part of our on-going commitments to the EU during the transition period.

The Department keeps the EU Exit legislative programme under review to ensure it addresses any emerging need for legislation.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a timetable of legislation she is intending to bring forward.
(AQW 6145/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department for Infrastructure's EU Exit legislative programme consists of 8 EU Exit related Statutory Rules (SRs). I refer to my answer to AQW 6144/17-22 which provides more detail on the content of the EU Exit legislative programme.

The current timetable the Department is working towards is to bring forward 2 EU Exit SRs in September, a further 4 SRs in October, with 1 SR in November and a further SR in early December.

This timetable is provisional and remains under review as the Department seeks to ensure it addresses any emerging need for legislation, particularly in relation to developments in the UK-EU negotiations on future arrangements, as well as identifying opportunities to minimise the number of SRs required to fix 'inoperables' as a result of leaving the EU.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the annual funding made available for issues arising from flooding, in each year from 2015 to 2020.
(AQW 6146/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department funds a range of flooding related issues including flood risk management, flooding preventative measures, flood protection grants for home owners, provision of drainage infrastructure and road drainage improvement works to remove surface water from carriageways and footways, which could potentially cause flooding. The table below provides the annual expenditure from 2015-16 to 2019-20 and current funding available in 2020-21.

Table 1 – Departmental Spend on Flooding Measures

	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21 Budget
Rivers	£6.73m	£7.72m	£7.78m	£7.85m	£7.06m	£8.0m
Roads	£4.45m	£5.56m	£6.57m	£6.59m	£5.57m	£5.03m
NI Water	£1.92m	£1.47m	£3.96m	£5.37m	£3.11m	£4.49m
Total	£13.1m	£14.75m	£18.31m	£19.81m	£15.74m	£17.52m

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of each type of MOT test that has been completed for each of the past six weeks; and (ii) the number that would have been completed during the equivalent period in 2019.
(AQW 6156/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The number of vehicle tests conducted is a National Statistic and as such must be released in accordance with the UK Official Statistics Code of Practice. To comply with this code, the Department cannot publically release figures that are within the scope of National Statistics reporting beyond the latest published statistics.

The 'DfI Driver, Vehicle, Operator and Enforcement National Statistics' report is published on a quarterly basis with the latest edition covering the period from 1 April to 30 June 2020. Vehicle testing statistics are presented in quarterly or monthly schedules, dependent on the volumes in question.

Given recent public interest in these statistics, the Department is working to publish provisional testing statistics on a monthly reporting cycle, which will be made available on the Department's website. The first monthly report will relate to the month of September and will be published during October.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of each type of driving test that have been completed for each of the past six weeks; and (ii) the number that would have been completed during the equivalent period in 2019.
(AQW 6158/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The number of driving tests conducted is a National Statistic and as such must be released in accordance with the UK Official Statistics Code of Practice. To comply with this code, the Department cannot publicly release figures that are within the scope of National Statistics reporting beyond the latest published statistics.

The 'DfI Driver, Vehicle, Operator and Enforcement National Statistics' report is published on a quarterly basis with the latest edition covering the period from 1 April to 30 June 2020. Driving test statistics are presented in quarterly or monthly schedules, dependent on the volumes in question.

Given recent public interest in these statistics, the Department is working to publish provisional testing statistics on a monthly reporting cycle, which will be made available on the Department's website. The first monthly report will relate to the month of September and will be published during October.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the A5 Western Transport Corridor scheme.
(AQW 6167/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As you are aware I am fully committed to the delivery of this important project for the North West. Following the Public Inquiry of earlier this year, my Department received an 'Interim Report' from the Inspector on 2 September 2020. I will now give careful consideration to all of the issues raised and recommendations made in this Report before deciding on the next steps for the scheme.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail timescales for when a decision will be made concerning the inclusion of a bypass for Moira village within future plans.
(AQW 6201/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Moira is situated within Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area and its future transport needs will be considered as part of the new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) being developed by the Department. The BMTP will take account of the growth ambitions of the Councils in Belfast's catchment area.

The BMTP will consider a range of future options to meet local and regional objectives; these will include improved public transport and improvements to local roads, such as the A3 through Moira. The possibility of a Moira Bypass will therefore be considered in that Plan. However, as it will be integrated with the formal Local Development Plan processes, the timescales for the completion of the Draft Plan and its release for public consultation are still being reviewed.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure why the new land owners of Portavoe Reservoir were allowed to block the only private access road to a residents home before the site was sold by Northern Ireland Water.
(AQW 6208/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Northern Ireland Water (NI Water) has advised me that it was not aware that the blockage impacted on the access to a resident's home. The sale of Portavoe Reservoir does not affect any of the rights benefitted by residents over the land sold by NI Water.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure why her Department and NI Water will not reveal how much Portavoe Reservoir was sold for.
(AQW 6209/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Northern Ireland Water (NI Water) has advised me that the purchase price for the various plots would be deemed "commercial in confidence" until such times as the registration process for the transaction is completed and Land Registry make the information publicly available. The timescale for registration of the sale is a matter for the solicitors acting on behalf of the purchasers and Land Registry.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department retains any rights to access Portavoe Reservoir to maintain equipment on the site.
(AQW 6210/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Northern Ireland Water (NI Water) has advised me that it no longer has equipment on the land sold at Portavoe Reservoir and it does not retain any rights to access the site.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure why the new land owners of Portavoe Reservoir were allowed to erect fencing before the site was sold.
(AQW 6211/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Northern Ireland Water (NI Water) has advised me that it was not asked to give, and did not give, any consent for the erection of fencing to any of the purchasers before the reservoir was sold.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the new owners of Portavoe Reservoir have the right to turn on the water valve infrastructure to empty Portavoe Reservoir.

(AQW 6212/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Northern Ireland Water (NI Water) has advised me that the sale of Portavoe Reservoir did not contain any conditions regarding the water valve infrastructure and therefore the new owners do have the right, subject to obtaining any necessary approvals or consents that may be required by legislation, to turn on the water valve infrastructure.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of each type of PSV test that has been completed for each of the past six weeks; and (ii) the number that would have been completed during the equivalent period in 2019.

(AQW 6221/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The number of PSV (Heavy Goods Vehicle) tests conducted is a National Statistic and as such must be released in accordance with the UK Official Statistics Code of Practice. To comply with this code, the Department cannot publically release figures that are within the scope of National Statistics reporting beyond the latest published statistics.

The 'Dfl Driver, Vehicle, Operator and Enforcement National Statistics' report is published on a quarterly basis with the latest edition covering the period from 1 April to 30 June 2020. Vehicle testing statistics are presented in quarterly or monthly schedules, dependent on the volumes in question.

Given recent public interest in these statistics, the Department is working to publish provisional testing statistics on a monthly reporting cycle, which will be made available on the Department's website. The first monthly report will relate to the month of September and will be published during October.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has any plans to review the requirement to provide medical proof for renewing a Blue Badge during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 6228/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Blue Badge Unit in Northern Ireland has managed to maintain its service throughout the COVID-19 pandemic with little or no interruption. Applications, both online and postal are being processed as normal with no delays being experienced. While local authorities in GB had to suspend their Blue Badge services, the Department for Infrastructure was able to adapt some new working practices to meet the new challenges of working during the ongoing pandemic to ensure the service continued with as little effect on our applicants as possible.

The Blue Badge Unit will continue to request that, where applicable, medical evidence is submitted which will help expedite the Blue Badge application process but it is not essential as a medical questionnaire can be forwarded to the applicants nominated GP. It should also be noted that depending on the application history it may not be necessary to seek further medical evidence. We are not currently experiencing any major delays in getting responses from GP Practices to our requests for the completion of medical questionnaires.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to provide a list of schools that have had a 20 mph speed limit enacted outside their school since January 2020.

(AQW 6236/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

While no part-time 20 mph speed limits at schools have been enacted since January 2020, there are currently part-time 20mph speed limits at 16 of our schools. I have also committed funding in this year's capital budget towards the introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 further schools across Northern Ireland and I have recently announced the 100 schools in this programme. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools, ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

- Ardmore Road, Londonderry adjacent to Glendermott Primary School;
- Ballougry Hill Road and Mullenan Road, Londonderry adjacent to Ballougry Primary School;
- Carrickmannon Road, Ballygowan adjacent to Carrickmannon Primary School;
- Finvoy Road, Ballymoney adjacent to Carrowreagh Primary School;
- Ballynaskeagh Road, Banbridge adjacent to Bronte Primary School;
- Belfast Road, Carrickfergus adjacent to the Model Primary School;
- Curragh Road, Coleraine adjacent to Culcrow Primary School;
- Ballyhay Road and Ballyvester Road, Donaghadee adjacent to Ballyvester Primary School;
- Derrymore Road, Lurgan adjacent to St. Marys Primary School, Gawleys Gate, Lurgan;
- Ballyronan Road and Oaklea Road, Magherafelt adjacent to Woods Primary School;
- Benvardin Road, Ballymoney adjacent to Kilmoyle Primary School;

- College Lands Road, Charlemont adjacent to St. Peter's Primary School, Charlemont;
- Concession Road, Clonalig adjacent to Clonalig Primary School;
- Ballywoolen Road and Mussenden Road, Articlave, Coleraine adjacent to Hezlett Primary School;
- Moyallan Road, Portadown adjacent to Moyallon Primary School; and
- Lylehill Road, Templepatrick adjacent to Templepatrick Primary School.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on repairing the footbridge in Kesh, Co Fermanagh.
(AQW 6237/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I fully appreciate the importance of this footbridge to the local community and visitors to the village of Kesh. My officials are continuing to work in collaboration with Fermanagh & Omagh District Council to progress a solution that will resolve the issues at this footbridge.

My Department has commissioned a study aimed at identifying options for the repair works and this is expected to be finalised shortly. Following the selection of a preferred solution, detailed design work will then be taken forward. Delivery thereafter will depend on the necessary funding being secured from the range of partners involved.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) what plans her Department has to decarbonise the transport sector, including approximately 18,000 Heavy Goods Vehicles in Northern Ireland; (ii) whether her Department has researched compressed natural gas as a means to decarbonise the transport sector unable to be powered by electricity; and (iii) what infrastructure would be required across Northern Ireland to enable compressed natural gas as fuel for Heavy Goods Vehicles.
(AQW 6243/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to decarbonising transport as part of my Department's climate change action. My officials are working closely with the Office for Low Emission Vehicles on the development of UK wide transport decarbonisation plans and with the Department for the Economy on the transport elements of the proposed new Energy Strategy to inform how best this can be achieved for the North. This will include input from experts and stakeholders in relation to alternative fuels and supporting infrastructure.

I look forward to considering the outcomes from this work and to understanding the role that compressed natural gas, liquid natural gas and other alternative fuels can play in decarbonising the freight sector and addressing the challenges faced by this sector in meeting zero emission targets.

I also announced earlier this year the first hydrogen buses in Belfast. This demonstrates my commitment to reducing energy demand and emissions arising from heavy transport.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure what schools in the South Antrim constituency are to be included in the pilot 20 mph speed limit scheme.
(AQW 6244/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools in Northern Ireland. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

I can confirm that the following schools in the South Antrim constituency area are included within the list of 100 schools where we intend to introduce part-time 20mph speed limits by the end of this financial year: Ballyclare High School, Ballyclare; Duneane Primary School, Toome; Moneynick Primary School, Randalstown; Groggan Primary School, Randalstown; Loanends Primary School, Crumlin; and Mallusk Primary School, Newtownabbey.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has made any further consideration for developing a rail link for Belfast International Airport.
(AQW 6245/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is currently developing the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which is one of four draft Transport Plans intended to set out the framework for transport policy and investment decisions until 2035. It is concerned with strategic roads, the buses which run on them and the rail network across the North. Whilst the RSTNTP will primarily consider capital investment for the road and rail networks, it will also consider resource costs for improved bus and rail services in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has made any recent assessments of the potential economic benefit to having a rail link from Belfast International Airport.
(AQW 6246/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has not undertaken any recent economic assessments for a rail link to Belfast International Airport.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline current arrangements for notifying local businesses of footway works, such as those carried out on the Stranmillis Road between 4-7 August.

(AQW 6253/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department installed a new lighting scheme on Stranmillis Road, Belfast as part of the ongoing street lighting replacement programme. The planned works were carried out on Stranmillis Road, Belfast between 25 June 2020 and 24 August 2020, and consisted of the replacement of street lighting columns and the underground cable network which had reached the end of its service life.

Temporary traffic management was in place for the duration of the works and from Monday 3 August 2020 to Thursday 6 August 2020, a one way traffic system was required to facilitate the works.

The current arrangement for notifying local businesses and homeowners of future street works is included in the contract documentation and for this scheme consisted of a works notification letter to be issued by the contractor working on behalf of the Department. I am advised that the contractor carried out this letter drop on 23 June 2020 in advance of the commencement of works on 25 June 2020.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the assessments of local council's performance or decision-making that her Department has ever conducted as per Part 10 of the 2011 Planning Act.

(AQW 6281/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Part 10 of the Planning (NI) Act 2011 enables the Department to conduct an assessment of a Council's performance or decision making, including an assessment of how a council deals with applications for planning permission and the basis on which determinations have been made.

Since the transfer of the Planning function to Councils in 2015 my Department has not carried out any assessments under Part 10 of the 2011 Act. However, Officials are as part of the Department's monitoring and oversight role currently considering how best to review specific aspects of the planning system, including the potential use of this part of the Act.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the locations of operational rapid electric chargepoints in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6282/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The e-car public charge point network is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). As such, my department does not hold data in respect of either the e-car charge point public network or other rapid charge point data of a commercial nature.

For information in relation to the e-car public network, including rapid charge points, please see the following link: <https://www.ecarni.com/charge-point-map>. Alternatively, ESB can be contacted at ecars@esb.ie or enquiries can be sent directly to ESB, Two Gateway, East Wall Road, DUBLIN 3, D03 A995.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the Public Service Vehicles Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1985 make it illegal to consume alcohol on a privately hired coach.[R]

(AQW 6283/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Regulation 51 of the Public Service Vehicles Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1985, as amended, provides that a passenger shall not consume alcohol while a vehicle is standing, plying or carrying passengers for hire. A vehicle is defined in those Regulations as a public service vehicle. "Public Service Vehicle" is in turn defined in Article 2 of the Road Traffic (NI) Order 1981 and includes vehicles used to carry passengers for hire.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) what action her Department will take if it transpires that contractors for small-scale work, such as installing speed cushions, do not carry out the work as agreed; and (ii) for her assessment of whether the contractor for the installation of speed cushions along Brae Head Road, Derry, have fulfilled the terms of their contract for this work.

(AQW 6287/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Under the terms of the contract for small scale work such as installing speed cushions, if the work as instructed is not completed within a reasonable time the contractor will be formally notified and if they refuse to complete the work, the Engineer to the Contract can instruct another contractor to complete the work.

I understand that there has been a delay in carrying out the requested works at Braehead Road and have asked that the Engineer for this contract reviews and addresses the contractor's performance with the aim of having the matter resolved as soon as practicable.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will produce temporary driving test centre arrangements for Craigavon and the surrounding area.

(AQW 6298/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The grounds of the Craigavon Test Centre are currently being used by the Department of Health to conduct COVID-19 testing. As a result, while it is possible to conduct vehicle testing in the test centre, the DVA cannot safely conduct driving tests from the test centre at this time.

I have asked officials to urgently work with driving instructors, examiners and the Department of Health to find an accommodation locally that will allow the resumption of driving tests in Craigavon and local covid testing. I understand that good progress is being made by the Department of Health to identify and approve an alternative site for COVID 19 testing in the Craigavon area and that a full transition of the existing testing site back to the DVA should be possible within the next few weeks. Temporary interim solutions are also being explored.

Work is ongoing with all involved and once a date to resume driver testing services has been confirmed, the DVA will ensure this is immediately communicated to Approved Driving Instructors and commercial trainers.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure when options were first officially explored to find ways to expand driving test capacity.

(AQW 6300/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) has reinstated driver testing services where testing can be done safely in line with PHA advice and guidance on social-distancing. This includes motorbike driving testing from 6 July and tests for drivers of buses and tractors and module 4 CPC tests for lorry, bus and coach drivers from 20 July. Practical driving tests for cars and lorries resumed from 1 September, with the DVA initially prioritising requests from key workers, followed by customers whose tests were cancelled due to lockdown.

The DVA has directly contacted around 200 high priority workers and offered them a driving test. Officials are continuing to process requests for high priority workers and these customers will also be offered driving test appointments. The process of contacting customers who had their driving test cancelled between March and June to arrange driving test appointments has also commenced.

The DVA estimates that it will take between 6 and 8 weeks to clear this backlog, after which the driving test booking system will be open to the general public to book a test. The DVA will continue to work with staff and trade unions in the coming weeks to ensure that testing is conducted in line with public health advice and guidance to ensure the safety of all.

As part of the process of planning for the restoration of services, the DVA has considered a number of options to expand driving test capacity, such as resuming driver testing in the Craigavon area, extending opening hours and recruiting temporary staff. Additionally, they have a number of dual role vehicle examiners who are also trained to conduct driving tests and they will utilise these staff throughout their network of centres to help address the demand for services.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) why driving instructors and students are unable to use facilities at test centres; (ii) whether she plans to reduce testing fees due to limiting this service; (iii) whether she will provide other shelter given that many test centres are out of town; and (iii) whether she would consider social distancing and other COVID-19-related measures to enable safe reopening of these services.

(AQW 6321/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) has carried out an extensive review of its risk assessments to ensure that all relevant control measures relating to Covid-19 have been incorporated into its driver and vehicle testing processes. These have enabled MOT centres to safely reopen from 20 July, and practical car driver testing to recommence from 1 September. The DVA is providing the full practical driving test service and there are no plans to reduce testing fees at this time.

To mitigate against the risk of spreading Covid-19 and to meet PHA guidelines in relation to social distancing, it has been necessary for the DVA to take steps to reduce the number of people in its test halls and reception areas. Unfortunately, at this time it is not possible for the DVA to accommodate customers in its buildings during driving tests. This information was provided in the stakeholder information pack provided to Approved Driving Instructors. However, all customers will have access to toilet facilities at each site and the DVA is urgently exploring options to provide shelter that is safe and in line with risk assessments and public health advice.

I fully appreciate and accept this is far from an ideal situation. I would, however, stress that these temporary measures have been put in place to ensure the safety of customers and staff, which remains my priority at this time. I do, however, recognise that for driving instructors in particular, many of whom will regularly visit the DVA test centres, that a review of this position is required and DVA officials are urgently exploring options to identify practical solutions to this issue.

I am very conscious of the disruption and inconvenience being experienced by many of our customers at this time, I can assure you that the DVA is working to safely restore normal services as soon as possible. This includes considering any practical alternatives to keeping customers safe whilst tests are ongoing and updating their risk assessments and advising customers should current procedures be able to be changed.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that MOT centres have been closed since February due to the structural issues regarding ramps and COVID-19, what consideration she has given to financially assisting those garages which have lost significant business and income due to the automatic issuing of exemption certificates.

(AQW 6339/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There has been a gradual resumption of MOT services from 1 June 2020, when the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed Individual Vehicle Approval testing.

From 20 July, the Driver and Vehicle Agency resumed MOT testing for priority vehicle groups, including those vehicles that are not able to avail of a Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC). This includes taxis and buses due a first time test, vehicles not previously registered in Northern Ireland, vehicles whose MOTs have expired by more than 12 months that includes vehicles previously declared SORN and those sold by car dealerships.

From 1 September, MOT testing for four year old cars and motorbikes and three year old light goods vehicles also resumed and for those vehicles in this category that currently have a 6 month TEC, they will be called for test when their TEC expires. In addition, the DVA recommenced testing of heavy goods vehicles, trailers and buses. MOTs are being carried out in all test centres with the exception of Belfast which is being used as a key covid testing centre.

The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) is responsible for delivering MOT testing through its network of 15 test centres but my Department has no role in the regulation of mechanics or private garages or indeed providing financial assistance to them. Any advice for financial assistance must be made through the Department for the Economy.

The purpose of the MOT test is to ensure that vehicles are kept in a safe and environmentally acceptable condition during their use. However, in all my correspondence and public statements since vehicle testing was suspended, I have made it clear that it remains the legal responsibility of motorists, and the expectation of the PSNI and insurers, to make sure their vehicle is in a roadworthy condition to be used on a public road. They should continue to service their vehicle and carry out basic checks such as regularly checking tyre pressures and tread depths, looking out for brake wear and ensuring that all lights are working

I appreciate the frustrations felt by mechanics during these uncertain times, however, hopefully the phased resumption of vehicle testing as outlined above will help ease some of their concerns.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a timeframe for the removal of weeds and moss from pavements within the Bogside area of Derry.

(AQW 6347/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials have instructed the Department's Environmental Maintenance Contractor to undertake remedial weed spraying to various areas throughout the City including the Bogside. Spraying was undertaken earlier in the year and subsequent regrowth is now being attended to.

As a result of significant resource constraints, my Department has had to introduce a "Limited Service" policy in respect to routine repairs and maintenance to roads and footways. The removal of moss is not as high a priority as other maintenance works and is undertaken if and when resources are available. My Department is currently dealing with a significant backlog of work that accrued during the COVID19 lockdown therefore it is unlikely that, in the short term, resources will be available to address the removal of moss. I will continue to make representations to the Finance Minister and Executive Colleagues for additional funding for DfI services.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans are being put in place to implement 20 mph zones on roads adjacent to schools in North Down.

(AQW 6458/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools in Northern Ireland. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

All schools in the North Down area have been assessed using the assessment framework contained within the Department's current road safety at schools policy document. Unfortunately the schools in the North Down area are not ranked as highly as other schools included within this year's programme; however it is my intention that this programme is rolled out over the coming years and other schools will be considered for inclusion in future programmes.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure, whilst the current DVA site is used as a COVID-19 testing site, whether she will explore the option of using one of the many commercial sites in Craigavon for lorry licence testing.

(AQW 6515/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The grounds of the Craigavon Test Centre are currently being used by the Department of Health to conduct COVID-19 testing. As a result, while it is possible to conduct vehicle testing in the test centre, the DVA cannot safely conduct driving tests from the test centre at this time.

I have asked officials to urgently work with driving instructors, examiners and the Department of Health to find an accommodation locally that will allow the resumption of driving tests in Craigavon and local covid testing. I understand that good progress is being made by the Department of Health to identify and approve an alternative site for COVID 19 testing in the Craigavon area and that a full transition of the existing testing site back to the DVA should be possible within the next few weeks.

Work with all involved to find a solution is ongoing and once a date to resume driver testing services has been confirmed, the DVA will ensure this is immediately communicated to Approved Driving Instructors and commercial trainers.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how her Department is addressing the HGV and trailer testing backlogs affecting the haulage sector.

(AQW 6544/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There has been a gradual resumption of MOT services from 1 June 2020, when the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed Individual Vehicle Approval testing.

From 20 July, the Driver and Vehicle Agency resumed MOT testing for priority vehicle groups, including those vehicles that are not able to avail of a Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC). This includes taxis and buses due a first time test, vehicles not previously registered in Northern Ireland, vehicles whose MOTs have expired by more than 12 months that includes vehicles previously declared SORN and those sold by car dealerships.

From 1 September, MOT testing for four year old cars and motorbikes and three year old light goods vehicles also resumed and for those vehicles in this category that currently have a 6 month TEC, they will be called for test when their TEC expires. In addition, the DVA recommenced testing of heavy goods vehicles, trailers and buses.

It is my priority to ensure that our staff and customers remain safe. The DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health advice to ensure that necessary and proportionate control measures relating to Covid-19 are incorporated into its risk assessments for safe vehicle testing. Like many other public facing services, vehicle testing capacity will increase as restrictions ease and as risk assessments are updated and this is being kept under constant review. In the interim period, the DVA is continuing to carefully manage the TEC process to prevent customers from being disadvantaged and to ensure all eligible vehicles can legally remain on the road.

My officials in DVA assure me that they are working closely with the commercial vehicle industry and that local arrangements are in place at test centres to ensure the availability of testing slots for HGV's and trailers. If your constituents are having issues please contact DVA Customer Services at DVA.Customerservices@infrastructure-ni.gov.uk

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many road deaths there have been this year to date; and (ii) how many road deaths have there been in each of the last three years.

(AQW 6553/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Sadly 43 people have died on Northern Ireland's roads to date in 2020.

In each of the last three years, 56 people were killed on our roads in 2019, 55 people in 2018 and 63 people in 2017.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans to roll out MOT exemptions for classic vehicles over 40 years old.

(AQW 6631/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since I announced my decision on 2 July 2020 to introduce the exemption from periodic roadworthiness testing for Vehicles of Historic Interest in Northern Ireland, my officials have worked to progress the legislation as quickly as possible.

I can advise that the regulations received legal clearance and were laid in the Assembly on 18 September 2020. They are subject to the Assembly's statutory period that applies within the negative resolution procedure. It is anticipated they will come into force on 12 October.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure when we can expect the publication of the inspectors reports following the A5 public inquiry.

(AQW 6716/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's officials received an Interim Report on the Public Inquiry from the PAC Commissioner on 2 September 2020. Officials are considering the issues raised and recommendations made in this Report and taking legal advice. Officials will then prepare a submission for my consideration, after which I will be in a position to consider the timing of the publication of the Report.

Department of Justice

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Justice how many prosecutions have occurred under Section 40 of the Justice NI (2011) Act, covering alcohol on large motor vehicles.[R]

(AQW 6280/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): For the period from the introduction of the Act in 2011 through to the end of 2019, the most recent year for which information is available, there have been no prosecutions at courts for offences under Section 40 of the Justice (NI) Act 2011.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Justice what funding her Department has made available for charities supporting survivors of the abuse of older people.

(AQW 6398/17-22)

Mrs Long: The core Department of Justice does not provide any direct funding to charities that support survivors of the abuse of older people.

Strong links have been identified between domestic abuse and the abuse of older people and the new domestic abuse offence being brought forward in the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill will capture patterns of abusive behaviour against older people by family members, intimate partners or former partners.

The Department is also the core funder for Victim Support NI whose services are available to older people who suffer from domestic or sexual abuse or are victims of crime more generally. Together with the Departments of Health and Communities, the Department of Justice also provides funding to the charity Nexus NI to deliver the 24/7 domestic and sexual abuse helpline where the support service is available to all victims of such abuse including the elderly. This funding is, however, provided under a service provision contract agreement, and as such the precise detail would be commercially sensitive.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice (i) when; and (ii) how the necessary procedures or mechanisms to administer the Northern Ireland Troubles-related incident victims payments scheme will be in place.

(AQW 6405/17-22)

Mrs Long: A project team has been established within my Department to progress development of delivery structures for the Victims' Payment Scheme on behalf of the Victims' Payments Board. Officials are working closely with all stakeholders to ensure the Scheme is implemented at the earliest date possible. However, a number of important operational steps need to be advanced before the scheme can open for applications and payments can commence. This includes development of an IT system, deployment and training of staff for administrative preparations, development of a medical assessment process and appointment of members to the Victims' Payments Board.

Not all of those issues are within the control of the Department of Justice. However, subject to funding for the Scheme being made available, it is anticipated that it could open for applications by early March 2021.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice to detail plans and process in respect of identification of suitable premises to administer the Northern Ireland Troubles-related incident victims payments scheme.

(AQW 6406/17-22)

Mrs Long: A project team has recently been established within my Department to progress development of the delivery structures of the Victims' Payment Scheme on behalf of the Victims' Payments Board. One of the tasks for the project team is to identify and secure suitable accommodation for the Victims' Payment Board and its administrative staff. That work has already commenced.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the number of staff required to administer the Northern Ireland Troubles-related incident victims payments scheme; and (ii) the process and timescale for recruitment of additional staff to resolve any capacity issues regarding the administration of the scheme.

(AQW 6407/17-22)

Mrs Long: A project team has recently been established within my Department to progress the development of the delivery structures for the Victims' Payment Scheme on behalf of the Victims' Payments Board. One of the tasks for the project team is to estimate the number of administrative staff that will be required to support delivery of the Scheme, which will be informed by the approach adopted by the Board to assess applications. Any additional staff required to support administration of the scheme will be recruited in line with NICS recruitment policies and procedures.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 5269/17-22, how long did each prisoner survive after release.
(AQW 6412/17-22)

Mrs Long: Of the three prisoners released on compassionate grounds following a terminal diagnosis (my answer to AQW 5269/17-22 refers), one individual survived for one day, another for two days and the third for 32 days.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice how many young people under the age of 18 are in custodial facilities in Northern Ireland, broken down by (i) age; and (ii) constituency.

(AQW 6424/17-22)

Mrs Long: Woodlands, Juvenile Justice Centre, is Northern Ireland's only custodial facility for young people under the age of 18.

On 10 September 2020, 8 young people were resident in Woodlands broken down as follows:

Age	Number of young people	Constituency
13	1	Newry and Armagh
15	1	Foyle
16	2	1- Belfast North 1- Belfast South
17	4	1-Foyle 1- Fermanagh and South Tyrone 1- Belfast North 1-Belfast West

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice when the Appeals Service will recommence Physical Benefit Tribunal hearings.

(AQW 6454/17-22)

Mrs Long: I understand that a substantive response has been sent to you by the Department for Communities which is statutorily responsible for the Appeals Service.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice when courts will recommence services to allow court orders for repossession of rented homes to be passed.

(AQW 6476/17-22)

Mrs Long: Recognising the severity of the COVID-19 situation, the Assembly passed emergency legislation to protect renters here during the COVID-19 outbreak. The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) (Northern Ireland) Act 2020 means that, until this emergency passes, most private rented landlords will not be able to start possession proceedings unless they have given their tenants twelve weeks' notice. Further information is available at <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-private-rented-sector-guidance-covid19.pdf>

Where a party to the proceedings feels a matter is urgent they may request a court hearing by lodging the requisite Form. The judge will determine whether the matter is urgent or necessary and if it can be dealt with administratively or will require a hearing.

Guidance issued by the Office of the Lord Chief Justice highlights that when dealing with possession proceedings, judges shall take into account all circumstances, including the guidelines issued by the Department for Communities during this period of public health emergency. Hearings, including possession proceedings, recommenced with effect from 31 August 2020.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to outline how many landlords have been convicted of (i) interference with the peace or comfort of a tenant or anyone living with them; (ii) withdrawing or withholding services for which the tenant has a reasonable need to live in the premises as a home; and (iii) illegally evicting a tenant without receiving a court order to do so, within the last 3 years.

(AQW 6477/17-22)

Mrs Long: The information requested is provided in the following table.

Convictions at courts for housing offences relating to landlords, 2017 - 2019

Offence	2017	2018	2019
Interference with the peace or comfort of a tenant or anyone living with them	#	#	0
Withdrawing or withholding services for which the tenant has a reasonable need to live in the premises as a home	#	#	#
Illegally evicting a tenant without receiving a court order to do so	4	4	0

Notes:

1 Figures relate to initial disposals at court. Outcomes of appeals are not included.

- 2 Figures relate to number of cases where there was an offence description closely matching the offence specified.
 - 3 Figures for numbers of convictions are not mutually exclusive within individual years.
 - 4 Figures for illegally evicting a tenant also include offences relating to 'unlawfully depriving tenant of dwelling' and 'failing to facilitate access to property'.
 - 5 Figures relating to fewer than 3 have been treated under rules of disclosure.
- # relates to fewer than three cases.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice how many motorists have been given speeding tickets for increased speed within the 20mph school zones.

(AQW 6478/17-22)

Mrs Long: There is no unique marker on the Fixed Penalty Notice system to identify those 20mph zones which are outside schools. However, information on the number speeding offences recorded where the speed limit was 20mph is available.

Figures sourced from the Police Service of Northern Ireland record that, from 1st January 2017 to 30th June 2020, there were 14 Fixed Penalty Notices issued for speeding offences where the speed limit was 20mph. Of these, 2 were in the Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Council area, 3 were in the Ards & North Down Council area and 9 were in the Causeway Coast & Glens Council area.

Please note:

- 1 Figures include detections where driver completed a speed awareness course.
- 2 Figures are provisional and subject to change.
- 3 Figures are based on data extracted on 10th September 2020.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice whether she has any plans to bring the Northern Ireland Prison Service, who work a 39 hour week, in to line with the Northern Ireland Civil Service and prison services in England, Wales and Scotland, who work a 37 hour week.

(AQW 6479/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service has no plans to change the weekly conditioned hours of staff.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether a separated system has been set up in Hydebank Wood College for female prisoners; (ii) how much it has cost to set up this separated facility; and (iii) what are the expected running costs per year over and above that of normal female prisoners.

(AQW 6480/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service has undertaken extensive security upgrades, structural, electrical and mechanical work at a cost of approximately £482,000 on Landing 4, Fern House, Hydebank Wood Secure College and Women's Prison.

The additional annual resource costs are estimated to be £355,000.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice what ministerial directions have been issued since January 2020.

(AQW 6497/17-22)

Mrs Long: I can confirm that I have not issued any Ministerial Directions since taking up office in January 2020.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice whether she has received responses from her Executive colleagues on proposals for raising the Minimum Age of Criminal Responsibility.

(AQW 6608/17-22)

Mrs Long: I can confirm that I wrote to my Executive colleagues on 10 August 2020, seeking their views on the current minimum age of criminal responsibility within Northern Ireland, which is 10 years of age. The accompanying discussion paper provided relevant background and statistical information in order to inform their consideration.

To date, responses have been received from the Ministers for Communities, Finance and Infrastructure.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her Department's review of sentencing.

(AQW 6754/17-22)

Mrs Long: A public consultation entitled "Sentencing Review Northern Ireland" was launched on 28 October 2019. The Review considered a wide range of sentencing issues and closed on 3 February with over 200 responses received. A summary of responses has been prepared and will be published later this month.

Department for the Economy

Mr Butler asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how many young people who are care-experienced received offers of places for undergraduate study in (a) Queens University Belfast; (b) Ulster University; (c) St Mary's Teacher Training College; and (d) Stranmillis Teacher Training college for the academic year 2020/21; (ii) how many of these offers were unconditional; and (iii) how many of these offers have been withdrawn due to the potential students not receiving the necessary grades.

(AQW 6184/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):

- (i) Number of young people with care experience that received offers for undergraduate study for academic year 20/21:
 - (a) Queen's University Belfast: 59 applicants
 - (b) Ulster University: 44 applicants
- (ii) Number of young people with care experience that received unconditional offers for academic year 20/21:
 - (a) Queen's University Belfast: 13 applicants
 - (b) Ulster University: 29 applicants
- (iii) Number of young people with care experience who had their offers withdrawn due to not meeting the grade requirements for academic year 20/21:
 - (a) Queen's University Belfast: 3 unsuccessful applicants
 - (b) Ulster University: 3 unsuccessful applicants

Source: Admissions Departments for Queens University Belfast and Ulster University

The number of care experienced students registered at St Mary's University College and Stranmillis University College cannot be provided. This is due to disclosure issues given the small number of care experienced students applying to study at each of these institutions.

Care experienced student numbers relate to those students who have self-declared as being in care for three months or more. There is no requirement for a student to declare that they are from a care experienced background. This is a sensitive issue for those affected and the choice to declare this information is a personal one. Additionally, any markers for students in education which highlight their background in care, ends upon completion of post-primary education.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister for the Economy what plans are in place to make the necessary funding available to Queens University to facilitate an enlarged student intake this year for medicine, in line with other UK regions.

(AQW 6198/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On Friday 11 September 2020, following confirmation of the necessary funding from the Department of Finance, I announced approval of up to 80 additional medicine undergraduate places at Queen's University Belfast. These additional places will be spread across the university's 2020 and 2021 intakes and will enable offers to be honoured to students in the exceptional circumstances created by recent A-level re-grading decisions.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will consider extending maternity leave to mothers who have had babies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 6233/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I recognise that the restrictions introduced by the Executive to limit the spread of COVID-19 will have had a considerable impact on mothers who have been pregnant and had babies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Whilst regrettable, it has been necessary to introduce these measures in order to safeguard the health of everyone, including new mothers and their babies.

Maternity leave and pay is provided in order to enable employed women to take time off work in the later stages of their pregnancy and after they have given birth. Maternity leave in Northern Ireland is already amongst the most generous in the world, with up to 52 weeks leave available and 39 weeks of pay.

With our attention still firmly focused upon addressing the impact that COVID-19 has had on society and the wider economy, there are presently no plans to extend maternity leave in Northern Ireland.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for the Economy what plans she has to ensure the retention of HMS Caroline in Belfast as an important part of the Northern Ireland tourism package.

(AQW 6296/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I remain committed to exploring all options that will enable HMS Caroline (HMSC), which is an important tourism and heritage visitor attraction, to remain in Belfast.

Due to the Covid-19 crisis the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) closed HMSC to the public on 17th March 2020. After consultation with NMRN, I extended this period of temporary closure to 31st December 2020. There were several reasons for extending the closure and these included the effects of the Covid-19 crisis on the local tourism sector, disappointing visitor numbers, substantial deficits being accumulated by the attraction and refusal of NMRN to sign a new operating agreement without a new financial model being put into place.

Following the agreement to temporarily close HMSC, my officials have been working to identify the full range of options for the long term future of the attraction. Consultants have now been appointed who have been tasked with identifying all potential delivery models and options that support the retention of the Ship in Belfast and to make value for money recommendations on these. They have already undertaken an extensive series of discussions with the relevant stakeholders and have begun to shortlist potential options.

I am cognisant of the need for a prompt decision on the future of HMSC in Belfast and aim to have a clear plan for its future agreed before the end of the temporary closure period. I recognise the cultural and heritage significance of HMSC and the contribution it makes to the wider tourism offering in Belfast.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the reasons the delay in the small business grants programme. (AQW 6302/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Small Business Support Grant Scheme was announced on 18 March 2020 as part of an unprecedented package of support for local businesses to help protect jobs, prevent business closures and promote economic recovery.

On 26 March 2020, an online portal for applications went live on nibusinessinfo.co.uk. On the same day, payments to 6,775 businesses were able to be issued automatically without application as Land and Property Services held the necessary bank details of the businesses for ratings purposes.

The processing of online applications was undertaken as quickly as possible. Initial payments for those businesses that made applications were issued on 31 March 2020.

An application portal for businesses who have occupy a rental property or who have a Total Net Annual Value of £1,590 or below went live on 30 April 2020. This portal was launched at a later date as resources were focused on developing the £25,000 Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Grant. This was prioritised in order to maximise the number of businesses that would be able to access assistance.

All applications received under the scheme have been processed as quickly as possible, however a small volume of residual appeal cases and late applications remain.

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic were unprecedented and an immediate response was required by the Executive. Under normal circumstances, business support schemes would take considerable time to design, develop and implement. I believe my Department met the challenge of allocating grants to local businesses facing hardship as a result of the pandemic in as quick a timeframe as was possible. I welcome that over £245million in support was able to be provided through this scheme providing support to over 24,500 businesses.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy to confirm that, as per her interview on BBC Good Morning Ulster on 4 September, in June she sought to have unallocated funds from the Business Support Grants redistributed by the Executive to support those areas of our economy in financial need such as bus and coach operators, soft play centres, pubs and that it is now up to the Minister of Finance to fund such packages. (AQW 6380/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I provided a paper in June to the Executive on options to utilise available funds for our economic response and recovery. Allocations of funding have been deferred and will be considered as part of the overall funding package for the Executive's economic recovery strategy. I, and my Executive Colleagues, remain committed to collectively agreeing further support measures as soon as possible.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy whether Project Stratum will apply to all rural areas regardless of population density. (AQW 6393/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Project Stratum aims to utilise funding of £165m, to increase access to 30 Mbps broadband services or greater for those, primarily rural, premises currently unable to access such services, regardless of population density. The project's target intervention area consists of just under 79,000 premises and some 97% of these are rural, defined as NISRA Band H – settlements of fewer than 1,000 and open countryside.

Until the contract has been awarded and detailed planning has been completed by the successful bidder, it will not be possible to say exactly which premises/areas will be upgraded. However, the overarching aspiration of the project continues to be to maximise broadband coverage across the target intervention area.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy whether the small business grants will be eligible for payment of retrospective items to support changes to businesses that have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 6451/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Small Business Support Grant Scheme was provided to support businesses that were experiencing financial hardship, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The scheme closed for applications on 20 May 2020.

The grant was a one-off payment made to businesses to help protect jobs, prevent business closures and promote economic recovery. There was no stipulation in how the money was to be used.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy what engagement her Department is undertaking on behalf of the aerospace industry locally to secure further investment.

(AQW 6452/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Aerospace is a high-value sector, driven by innovation and is a priority for the Northern Ireland Executive. It is also one of the industries most challenged by the impact of COVID-19. Analysts are predicting that the sector will not recover internationally for a number of years. Businesses are being encouraged to take opportunities to re-skill employees by investing in supported training programmes and to use their skilled engineering resource to undertake R&D projects focused on emerging future market requirements, particularly in green technology.

I remain closely engaged with Northern Ireland Aerospace, trade unions and wider business, and will continue to meet these groups so that I can understand the issues that confront the sector. I am also working with my Scottish, Welsh

and Whitehall counterparts, and with sector organisations such as ADS and the Aerospace Growth Partnership, to look at the needs of the sector during this difficult time.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on progress in developing (i) an industrial strategy; and (ii) an investment strategy, as set out in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 6463/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: New Decade, New Approach contained a commitment to develop a new strategic level Programme for Government (PfG) from April 2021 with a supporting Economic Strategy aligned to these timescales.

Development of a new Economic Strategy and PfG was put on hold with the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Executive's focus on delivering a response to the crisis.

In July 2020, the Executive revisited its PfG commitment and agreed to undertake a twin approach to delivery:

- Development of a one year activity-based Recovery Framework/Plan which acts as the WA 179de facto PfG for 2020 to 2021; and
- Development of a new strategic PfG, reflecting agreed longer-term priorities of the Executive and aligned to a multi-year budget and legislative programme from April 2021.

In June, My Department published our medium term recovery plan 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy' which sets out a framework for the next 12-18 months to build a more competitive, inclusive and greener economy, by addressing the key structural weaknesses in our economy and focusing on sectors where there is potential for growth in higher paying jobs.

My Department has also commenced work on the development of the new Economic Strategy for Northern Ireland which will set out the strategic framework and ambition required to achieve the Executive's long-term vision for the Northern Ireland economy.

The Economic Strategy will set out the long term economic policy objectives that demonstrate how we will seek to drive economic growth and prosperity for the benefit of all people across Northern Ireland.

Work on the Investment Strategy is led by The Executive Office.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for an update on the Regional Air Connectivity Review; (ii) what stakeholders her Department consulted with regarding the terms of reference for the review; and (iii) for a timescale of the review.

(AQW 6518/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Civil aviation is a reserved matter, and therefore led by the UK Department for Transport (DfT). In January 2020, in response to the collapse of Flybe, DfT announced a Regional Air Connectivity Review. Unfortunately, this has been delayed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

DfT is considering next steps for the Regional Air Connectivity Review, in the context of COVID-19, and we are awaiting an update from them. My officials will be engaging fully with DfT in respect of their Review, as required.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the conversations she has had with the Minister for Infrastructure regarding financial hardship facing the local haulage industry as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 6523/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Minister Mallon and I represented the NI Executive in a series of Devolved Administration meetings with Ministers and officials from Department for Transport (DfT). These meetings addressed a wide range of transport and connectivity issues, and included discussions on the impact of COVID-19 on the haulage industry across the UK.

At those meetings we expressed our concerns to DfT around the resilience of the haulage industry, and emphasised our reliance on the haulage of critical goods across the Irish Sea to the DfT Minister on numerous occasions. For Northern Ireland, these are not just economic corridors, but lifelines that connect us with the rest of the UK.

We were very supportive of DfT's efforts to come up with a UK wide package for the haulage sector, but ultimately DfT were unable to navigate the high bar required for financial support set by Treasury.

On the question of lead responsibility for the sector in Northern Ireland, I have written to Minister Mallon in response to a number of correspondence including letters and Executive Papers on the issues facing taxis, hauliers and ferry operators. I informed her that I was of the view that as the Department for Infrastructure has responsibility for the transport industry, it would be best placed to lead on taking forward any agreed support for those areas.

The Executive subsequently sought advice on which Department was best placed to provide support to the haulage, coach and tour, and taxi industries, taking cognisance of statutory responsibilities. Following the outcome of this the First and deputy First Ministers have written concluding that, on balance, DfI should take the lead responsibility.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy what help her Department can give to assist local travel agents who have had their businesses adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 6540/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I appreciate the difficulty and stress that the Covid-19 public health crisis has placed upon local businesses and our economy at large and I am fully aware that the travel industry has been impacted particularly hard, both locally and on a global scale.

To date, Travel Agencies operating in retail premises would have been eligible to apply for either of the £10,000 and £25,000 Business Support Grant Schemes administered by my Department if they met the eligibility criteria including the Total Net Annual Value of the premises. They would also have been able to avail of the NI Microbusiness Hardship Fund subject to qualifying criteria.

Travel Agencies operating in retail premises have also benefitted from 100% rates holiday for 12 months in 2020/2021. Businesses employing staff would also have been able to claim for 80% of workers' wage costs via the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. Any self-employed Travel Agents would also have been able to claim for 80% of profits via the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme.

The Northern Ireland economy has been hit hard by the pandemic and significant investment will be required to rebuild and renew the economy. In considering further interventions, it will be for the Executive to collectively determine how future funding will be allocated to support economic recovery moving forward.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how many students given conditional offers for September 2020 at Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast have lost their place due to incorrect grading; and (ii) whether she has approved additional finance to address lost places.

(AQW 6570/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Higher education institutions are autonomous bodies, and are responsible for their own admissions practices. The Department does not therefore hold the information requested on conditional offers and acceptances. You may wish to contact the universities directly to seek the information requested.

I am pleased to confirm that my Executive colleagues share my belief that we have a responsibility to our young people, and have agreed to provide any additional funding which may be required for additional places.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the social distancing guidelines in further education colleges across Northern Ireland; and (ii) any concerns regarding capacity at colleges due to social distancing and other measures.

(AQW 6571/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The social distancing guidelines in place for the Further Education (FE) colleges are based on clear and unequivocal advice from the Public Health Agency (PHA). That advice is that two metres is the optimum distance required in FE colleges to protect staff, learners and public health. PHA also advised that for the purposes of occupational training, FE colleges should follow relevant government issued industry and workplace guidance for those specific situations and that standards for training in these situations should be at the same rigorous level as the standards maintained in the professional setting.

- (ii) Adherence to these social distancing requirements does reduce capacity in some FE college classes. Where this is the case, the colleges have agreed to use a blended learning model. Colleges have extensive expertise in delivering quality blended learning solutions and are well placed to provide quality online delivery and relevant support through their virtual learning environments. Colleges are also committed to making every effort to assist learners and staff to settle into the new way of working including through the use of comprehensive induction programmes to prepare students and staff for new delivery models.

I am aware of challenges which some schools have reported regarding the capacity of school partnership programmes operating in FE colleges under the FE college social distancing requirements. My officials have already met with representatives from the FE Sector, and officials in the Department of Education, and we are in the process of identifying all of the issues involved in order to seek a resolution to them as quickly as possible.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will take action with her counterpart in the Irish Government to prevent the exporting of smoky coal from Northern Ireland into the Republic of Ireland; and whether she will initiate action to ban the sale and distribution of smoky coal within Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6622/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within the remit of my Department to respond.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will consider increasing and extending the Student Hardship Fund for the incoming financial year.

(AQW 6789/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As you are aware my Department has put in place measures to assist students who experience financial hardship due to Covid-19. This financial year, I have secured an additional £1.4m from the Executive and a further £1.4m from my own Department's budget, making available a total of £5.6m to support students facing genuine financial hardship. To date the universities have drawn down approximately £1.5m of funding, meaning that a further £4.1m is available this financial year. Any increase in funding for the financial year 2021/22 is subject to additional budget being available and also the ongoing demand for the funds.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has finalised programmes for the previously announced £17.2m of funding for apprenticeships.

(AQO 636/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On Friday 4th September I announced further detail of The Apprenticeship Recovery Package.

I have allocated over £14m to fund an Apprenticeship Return, Retain and Result initiative, over £12m to fund an Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive initiative and £0.5m to fund an Apprenticeship Challenge Fund.

It is planned that payments will commence in November.

The Apprenticeship Return, Retain and Result scheme will begin on 1 November 2020, when the UK Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme ends. It offers up to £3,700 of support, per apprentice, to employers who return an apprentice from furlough and retain them until they have completed their apprenticeship.

The Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive initiative has been developed to encourage and support employers to create apprenticeship opportunities for both new apprentices and apprentices who have been made redundant. This scheme offers support of £3,000, to employers, for each new apprenticeship opportunity created between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021.

The Apprenticeship Challenge Fund will launch in late September. This fund will support innovative approaches and new collaborations to increase apprenticeship opportunities in Northern Ireland. Successful applicants could receive one off awards of up to £50,000.

An advertising campaign is underway and details of the exact support available and how to apply is available on the NI Business Info Website.

I remain committed to doing everything within my power to ensure continued development of an effective skills pipeline to support the needs of employers and our economy whilst providing valuable employment for our young people.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for the Economy in order to facilitate students unable to secure a place as a result of the delay in receiving their final A level results, to outline any discussions her Department has had with Queen's University Belfast and the British Medical Council to lift the cap on this year's intake to study medicine.

(AQO 639/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have had no discussions with Queen's University or the British Medical Council on the intake to study medicine, as this is the responsibility for the Department of Health.

However, I understand that the Department of Health have held discussions with Queen's University in relation to the proposed increases in medical student enrolments in 2020 and the Finance Minister in relation to payment thereof.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy to provide an explanation for the commissioning of research into the economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and production in Northern Ireland. (AQW 6827/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has commissioned research into the economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum production as part of an ongoing review of petroleum licensing policy in Northern Ireland.

In 2019, the Department began a wide ranging review of petroleum licensing policy, aimed at ensuring that the petroleum licensing policy continues to contribute to the delivery of objectives one and two of the December 2019 Outcomes Delivery Plan and future Programme for Government commitments; including that we prosper through a strong, competitive, regionally balanced economy and that we live and work sustainably – protecting the environment.

An initial high level review identified that, although a large amount of research is already available into the impacts of petroleum production, especially unconventional oil and gas production (including fracking), the information is not directly applicable to our unique position in Northern Ireland.

Similar, regionally specific, research has shaped petroleum licensing policy in Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland; albeit this work was largely focused on unconventional petroleum development and, we, in Northern Ireland need to consider the evidence base for both conventional and unconventional petroleum development.

The findings of the research will be used to enable my Department to develop robust, evidence based policy options and to inform meaningful public consultation on a proposed way forward in terms of policy outcomes.

Following the policy development and consultation process, it is my intension to bring recommendations for a future petroleum policy to the Executive. It is, therefore, vitally important that my Executive colleagues and I are able to rely upon high quality, regionally specific research when deciding on future petroleum licensing policy in Northern Ireland.

You will be aware that my Department is also currently considering two Petroleum Licence applications. The consultation on the two applications received over 5700 responses; highlighting a large number of potential impacts of petroleum development. The research will help ensure that the Executive and I are as fully informed as possible, before final decisions are made on whether or not these applications should be granted.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the number of students who have had University Places withdrawn following initial A level results; (ii) the number of students who have been placed in this academic year; and (iii) the number of students who have had to defer University placements until 2021 due to changing A level results, whose results have now met their initial offer. (AQW 6920/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Higher education institutions are autonomous bodies, and are responsible for their own admissions practices. The Department does not therefore hold the information requested on the withdrawal of places and the deferral of places. You may wish to contact the universities directly to seek the information requested.

Regarding the numbers of students who have been placed in this academic year, as the admissions process is not considered completed until students have matriculated and actually begun their course of study, the numbers of students for this academic year have not yet been finalised.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for the Economy what measures she will put in place to mitigate rising unemployment figures and assist 16-24 year olds in Northern Ireland. (AQW 6935/17-22)

- Mrs Dodds: Whilst the policy interventions for addressing unemployment rest with the Minister for Communities, my Department has developed an Apprenticeship Recovery Package designed to encourage the uptake of apprenticeships to impact upon rising youth unemployment.
- I have allocated over £14m to fund an Apprenticeship Return, Retain and Result initiative, over £12m to fund an Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive initiative and £0.5m to fund an Apprenticeship Challenge Fund.
- The Apprenticeship Return, Retain and Result scheme will begin on 1 November 2020, when the UK Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme ends. It offers up to £3,700 of support, per apprentice, to employers who return an apprentice from furlough and retain them until they have completed their apprenticeship.
- The Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive initiative has been developed to encourage and support employers to create apprenticeship opportunities for both new apprentices and apprentices who have been made redundant. This scheme offers support of £3,000, to employers, for each new apprenticeship opportunity created between 1 April 2020 and 31 March 2021.
- The Apprenticeship Challenge Fund will launch in late September. This fund will support innovative approaches and new collaborations to increase apprenticeship opportunities in Northern Ireland. Successful applicants could receive one off awards of up to £50,000.
- In addition my Department provides a Youth Training Programme (Training for Success) for all 16-17 year olds (with extended eligibility for young people with a disability up to 22 years of age and for those from an in-care background up to 24 years of age), offering the opportunity to develop their vocational and employability skills as well as structured work placements. Trainees also receive a £40 per week Training Allowance.

- My Department is also the Northern Ireland Accountable Department for the cross-border Peace4Youth programme. This programme aims to engage young people aged 14-24 years who are disadvantaged, marginalised and who, as a rule do not readily engage or sustain engagement in other programmes. The Peace4Youth Programme has supported young people since late 2017 to develop their social and emotional skills which will provide a platform for their active engagement in peacebuilding and positive contribution to community relations. These important social and emotional skills will contribute significantly to improved life chances over the longer term, ultimately helping young people access, engage with, progress and achieve in other areas including further education, training and employment.
- My Department is also working collaboratively with the Department for Communities to develop a coherent wider package of measures which utilises all of the support, advice and provision both Departments currently offer, including access to the Department's Careers Service; ensuring young people are supported through this difficult period.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy whether she is minded to support the will of the Assembly when it supported a moratorium on the granting of petroleum licences in 2011.

(AQW 6981/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I fully recognise the views and concerns of the Assembly in passing the motion on 6 December 2011. Indeed, in recognition of the controversial and crosscutting nature of petroleum licensing I have already committed to bringing all decisions in relation to onshore petroleum licensing policy and the award, or otherwise, of petroleum licences to the Executive.

I also welcome this opportunity to update you on the actions my Department is taking to develop a sound evidence based policy in regards onshore petroleum licensing.

In 2019, the Department began a wide ranging review of petroleum licensing policy. An initial, high level, review identified that, although a large amount of research is already available into the impacts of petroleum production, especially unconventional oil and gas production (including fracking), the information is not directly applicable to our unique position in Northern Ireland.

The findings of the research will enable my Department to develop robust, evidence based policy options and to inform meaningful public consultation on a proposed way forward in terms of policy outcomes.

You will be aware that my Department is currently considering two Petroleum Licence applications. The consultation on the two applications received over 5700 responses; highlighting a large number of potential impacts of petroleum development. The research will help ensure that the Executive and I are as fully informed as possible, before final decisions are made on whether or not these applications should be granted.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for the Economy whether she plans to introduce a voucher scheme to support the tourism sector.

(AQO 650/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In April 2020, in recognition of the significant impact of the global pandemic on the tourism and hospitality sector, I established a Tourism Recovery Taskforce. I chair the Steering Group supported by a high level Working Group, chaired by John McGrillen, CEO, Tourism Northern Ireland.

Through these Groups, we have delivered a number of key priorities such as reopening timelines, operational guidelines, an industry chartermark and targeted marketing activity.

The Steering Group tasked the Working Group with developing a draft Tourism Recovery Action Plan. A draft Plan was presented to the Steering Group on 2 September.

The plan is draft at this stage and extensive, having been developed with many sectors of the tourism industry. It will now be subject to due diligence by my Department, in consultation with other relevant Departments, to consider deliverability, affordability and value for money.

Many of the actions listed in the draft Plan, including the vouchers scheme, are dependent on decisions by the Executive on the allocation of Covid-19 resources. I continue to stress the need for urgent decisions on funding.

Two voucher schemes are under consideration: one for £50 accommodation vouchers to stimulate demand for short breaks, and a second, offering discounts with visitor attractions and tourism experience providers.

Voucher schemes are a tried and tested method of stimulating demand. The proposal is that a certain allocation of vouchers would be given to media outlets and retailers to distribute to Northern Ireland residents.

This proposal will be carefully considered alongside a significant number of other requests contained within the action plan.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for the Economy in light of a recent report by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control on clusters and outbreaks in occupational settings, whether she plans to amend the COVID-19: Working Through This Together, A Practical Guide to Making Workplaces Safer guidance.

(AQO 649/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The ECDC paper documents the numbers and range of outbreaks across European countries looking at factors such as sector, location, contributing factors et cetera.

It does not make specific recommendations regarding controls. The contributing factors identified are not significantly different from those already in place in Northern Ireland .

The general approach of the Northern Ireland document was predicated on risk assessment which remains the main stay of the approach with advice on how to reduce the risk of transmission.

At a more general level, some areas relating to Covid 19 have naturally developed and new guidance has issued from various sources on a number of areas.

Issues relating to how an outbreak should be managed would be more specifically for the PHA to address and I understand they have recently issued guidance on this.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for the Economy, given the impact home working is having on the local economy, to outline any discussions she has had with both her Executive colleagues and businesses in relation to getting people back into offices.

(AQO 648/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Clearly for those able to, 'working from home', and the use of video conferencing has allowed many people to continue working throughout this pandemic, and has been an invaluable tool in keeping parts of the economy going when others were effectively shut down. For certain sectors in the digital economy this has had little impact on productivity, with some reporting an increase, and has demonstrated the resilience of the sector.

One of the impacts of remote working could include the wider regional redistribution of some office worker spend by moving expenditure away from the area around the office place to the areas around workers residences.

However sudden moves of large scale economic activity from one place to another will bring benefits to some and hardship to others which is why any such changes will usually be based upon extensive planning and gradual implementation.

Some commentators believe that these changing work practices are here to stay, with greater levels of flexibility for many people on when and where they work. One should be cautious about predicting these things though and many of the businesses I speak to are already planning on returning to the office for a range of reasons including the social side of work, the ability to enhance team working and the informal engagement within workplaces which all contribute to the way businesses operate.

Where this trend has had a dramatic impact however is in Belfast City Centre where footfall has dropped dramatically, which in turn is having a severe impact on local cafes, coffee shops, restaurants and the wider retail sector as well as on the number of people using public transport to move around the City.

Whilst I am on record as saying that I would like to see people return to their offices as soon as it is safe to do so, this will ultimately be a decision for each business to make themselves.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy, in relation to the research process for Petroleum Licence Application PLA2/16, for her assessment of whether the research will be able to prove that there are no adverse impacts on public health in Fermanagh.

(AQO 647/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The planned research project is intended to provide the Department with a detailed assessment of the economic, environmental and social impacts of onshore oil and gas exploration and development in Northern Ireland. This will be a detailed piece of work, covering a wide range of complex issues and it is not possible at this stage to pre-empt its findings.

As part of the project, the independent contractor will analyse research on the impacts of unconventional oil and gas exploration, previously completed in Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland and report on its applicability to Northern Ireland.

It should be noted that the research being undertaken by my Department, will be broader in scope; covering both conventional and unconventional oil and gas exploration. I anticipate, that public health will be one of a number of important issues covered in the final Report which will be used to inform my recommendation to the Executive on Petroleum Licence application PLA2/16.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy to outline her plans to support public houses not serving food that have been unable to trade since the start of the COVID-19 crisis.

(AQO 646/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The UK Government schemes including the Job Retention Scheme, have been critical to the survival of many businesses within the hospitality sector.

The decision by the Executive to introduce a 12 month business rates holiday has also been critical in the survival of many hospitality businesses.

The Executive also delivered three grant schemes aimed at supporting SME's. My Department has provided over £338million in support to businesses to date through these schemes.

Despite this range of support, the Executive is aware of the further pressures being experienced by different sectors, including non-food pubs, and is finalising how best to address these pressures as part of a wider economic recovery package.

My Department has worked closely with the tourism and hospitality industry on re-opening most of the industry. While much of our tourism and hospitality industry has had the opportunity to generate much needed revenue over the summer, I recognise that this has not been possible for non-food pubs.

An indicative date of September 21 for the opening of wet pubs, providing circumstances permit and with strict adherence to guidance, regulation and appropriate enforcement has been set by the Executive.

The industry has put forward additional restrictions to facilitate the re-opening. These include restrictions on noise levels for music and sport broadcasts, restrictions on dancing, additional mandatory hygiene measures and mandatory recording of customer details for contact tracing.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the recently announced apprenticeship recovery package. (AQO 645/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On Friday 4th September I announced further detail of The Apprenticeship Recovery Package.

I have allocated over £14m to fund an Apprenticeship Return, Retain and Result initiative, over £12m to fund an Apprenticeship Recruitment Incentive initiative and £0.5m to fund an Apprenticeship Challenge Fund.

It is planned that payments will commence in November.

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The Apprenticeship Challenge Fund will launch in late September. This fund will support innovative approaches and new collaborations to increase apprenticeship opportunities in Northern Ireland. Successful applicants could receive one off awards of up to £50,000.

An advertising campaign is being developed and details of how to apply for support will soon be posted on the NI Direct website.

I remain committed to doing everything within my power to ensure continued development of an effective skills pipeline to support the needs of employers and our economy whilst providing valuable employment for our young people.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the steps she has taken to deliver her Rebuilding a Stronger Economy strategy. (AQO 643/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Rebuilding a Stronger Economy is a framework for the next 12-18 months to build a more competitive, inclusive and greener economy.

To drive forward this agenda, I secured £24.8 million through the June Monitoring process to deliver a range of measures which will help businesses adapt to the combined challenges of COVID-19 and EU Exit. These included support for digital and online selling; improvements to operational processes and supply chain resilience, the use of new technologies; business planning; and the provision of loans and equity investment.

The Rebuilding a Stronger Economy document recognises that developing the skills base of our young people and workforce is central to our economic success. Therefore in June I also reallocated £13.6 million from within my departmental budget to address pressures in skills and education, including focussing resources on apprenticeship and training programmes.

Following the Chancellor's Summer Economic Update, I submitted a suite of bids to the Department of Finance for a comprehensive programme of interventions to further the rebuilding agenda.

While the Executive is still considering the allocation of the majority of this funding, a number of urgent allocations were made in August. This included £17.2 million to deliver schemes which include supporting the return, retention and achievement of apprentices.

I do not underestimate the challenge ahead of us, and I will continue to work with stakeholders and delivery partners as we respond to this economic crisis.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for the Economy what action her Department will take to support those sectors, such as childrens' soft play and public houses with no restaurant facilities, with no current reopening date. (AQO 642/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The sectors with no current reopening date are defined in The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020.

Businesses required to remain closed are:

- bars, including bars in hotels;
- public houses;
- clubs registered in accordance with the Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order 1996;
- theatres;
- nightclubs;
- conference halls and conference facilities, including those in hotels;
- concert halls; and
- soft play areas.

The Executive have provided an indicative date for soft play areas to reopen of 14 September 2020.

There are no schemes that I am progressing to specifically target businesses such as children's soft play areas and wet bars. Outside of the recent grant schemes, these are not sectors traditionally supported by the department.

The Executive is aware of the further pressures being experienced by different sectors, has considered these in depth, and is finalising how best to address these pressures as part of a wider economic recovery package.

To this end the Minister of Finance has written on behalf of the Executive to the UK Government on 4 September urging the extension of the Job Retention Scheme.

To facilitate the re-opening of all sectors of the economy, it is incumbent on the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency to set out under what conditions they could operate safely and work with the industry to put in place the right conditions.

Officials continue to engage regularly with other departments and agencies in support of the reopening of the economy in line with public health requirements.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the uptake of her Department's short-term online courses aimed at improving skills.

(AQO 644/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As the economic impact of Covid-19 began to emerge, I allocated £1.7 million to support the provision of free, flexible, on-line training, aimed at helping up to 2,000 individuals improve their skills, and thus employment opportunities. These courses have been endorsed by employers and have been delivered through our Further and Higher Education institutions. The courses range from entry level to masters, in Digital skills, Employability skills, Leadership and Management, and Health and Social care.

As of 7 September, 1031 individuals have commenced their training, with a further 940 due to start in the coming weeks, with all courses due to complete by 30 November.

Following the success of the initial phase of this programme, officials have worked with providers and employer bodies to create further opportunities. To support this, a bid for Covid-related funding has been submitted to the Department of Finance, to support a further 3,000 training opportunities for individuals who's employment has been disrupted by Covid. These courses will complete by March 31st.

I would like to commend the colleges and universities for bringing forward these proposals in a short period of time.

Developing the skills of our people across Northern Ireland is a key priority for me as we begin the process of rebuilding our economy. These initiatives represent a good start however, we need to take a long term strategic view of our investment in skills. My Department is currently developing a new Skills Strategy, which will be published next year and I will continue to make the case for a significant increase in funding allocated to skills when we come to consider future Budgets.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 25 September 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what work has their Department carried out in conjunction with the Department of Education to tackle racist bullying in schools.
(AQW 5175/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): The Executive's Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 contains a commitment to work with the Department of Education to identify ways to tackle racist bullying.

The Racial Equality Unit in TEO has worked with the Racial Equality subgroup and the Department of Education Racial Equality Champion on tackling racist bullying. All schools have now introduced anti-bullying policies and the Subgroup and Champions have been in discussion on how to improve the accountability of schools in implementing these policies.

Through the Urban Villages programme, TEO has also helped to produce the film "Time to Stand" highlighting how racist bullying in schools can blight young lives.

In addition, TEO has partnered with the Education Authority and schools in Urban Village areas to promote good relations and appreciation of cultural diversity through the "Schools of Sanctuary" and "Buddy Up" schemes. Currently, 42 schools have achieved the School of Sanctuary award.

As part of Anti-Bullying Week 2019, the NI Anti-Bullying Forum organised the Anti-Bullying Young People's Forum in Parliament Buildings on 7 February 2020, during which a group of 15-19 year olds, representing over 30 schools, took part in committee sessions chaired by MLAs. One of the committees focused on tackling bullying motivated by race, faith or culture.

Ms Anderson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide (i) a timeline when an Irish Language Commissioner will be appointed; and (ii) a timeline for the introduction of legislation in respect of the Irish language, in line with commitments in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 5832/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Our officials continue with preparatory work, to legislate for core elements of the Rights, Language and Identity proposals contained in New Decade, New Approach.

We will progress the legislation during 2020/21 and the creation of the relevant bodies thereafter.

We will keep the Assembly updated on progress.

Mr O'Toole asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how much their Department has spent on marketing material and information campaigns to raise awareness and encourage uptake of the EU Settlement Scheme in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 6008/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The EU Settlement Scheme is a UK Government scheme and the Home Office has been leading on the public information campaign.

In order to facilitate this, the Executive office spent just over £34k on a series of roadshows and promotional material to raise awareness and encourage uptake here.

Last year, the NICS also ran a public information campaign that aimed to encourage people living here to prepare for the UK leaving the EU. It included a leaflet that was sent to every household as well as television, radio, social media and out-of-home advertising. Along with other issues, the campaign raised awareness and encouraged uptake of the EU Settlement Scheme, but as this was part of a wider campaign, it is not possible to specify spend specifically on EUSS.

Mrs D Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what urgent action they will take to address the comments made by Mr Justice McAlinden in Belfast's High Court that elements within the Executive Office have deliberately

chosen to ignore the requirement to comply with the rule of law to express political advantage over the needs of victims and survivors

(AQW 6099/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Department of Justice was designated to exercise the administrative functions of the Victims' Payments Board on the Board's behalf under para 2(1) of Schedule 1 to the Victims' Payments Regulations 2020 on 24th August 2020.

Mr Dickson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the process of appointing the new Victims and Survivors Commissioner commenced.

(AQW 6111/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We are currently considering the next steps, but have ensured that interim arrangements are in place within the Commission to provide continued support for victims and survivors.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will consider re-opening Lough Erne for commercial eel fishing.

(AQW 6046/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Whilst we have seen a small surplus of eels in Lough Erne recently relative to established conservation target, it shall be prudent to see if this is sustained before considering re-opening a commercial eel fishery.

The European eel is considered Critically Endangered by the European Commission with juvenile eel recruitment at only 1% of the levels pre-1984. It is encouraging that Lough Erne is achieving the 40% escapement target required under the 2007 EU Eel Regulation due to the implementation of the North West International River Basin District Eel Management Plan. Unfortunately, projections for beyond 2018-19 are that adult eel numbers and thus escapement to sea to spawn will fall away rapidly again due to low numbers of juveniles recruiting into the Lough.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what environmental work is due to take place in the Colin area of West Belfast in (i) 2020/21; (ii) 2021/22; and (iii) 2022/23.

(AQW 6104/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Belfast Hills Partnership (BHP) received funding during 2020/21 from my Department's Environment Fund (alongside other funding sources) to carry out a range of environmental projects throughout the Belfast Hills.

Examples of BHP's work include the creation of a tree nursery (at its site in West Belfast) and species monitoring and habitat management for priority species around the hills.

BHP also undertakes a number of environmental initiatives which promote health and well-being and which promote educational, social and personal development through exploration of wild places and involvement in conservation, and working with local and young people to tackle topics such as wildfires and waste. BHP also monitors and maintains pathways promoting safe outdoor recreation.

Environment Fund budgets have not been allocated beyond 2020/21 but BHP has received indicative levels of funding from the Department for 2021/22 and 2022/23 subject to caveats such as budget availability.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has made a decision on providing a hardship payment to farmers impacted by flooding in August 2017.

(AQW 6171/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have not yet come to a decision on the provision of direct financial assistance to those farmers affected by the flooding that took place in August 2017.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, my strong focus has been to help address the impact on the farming industry. I have secured £25 million additional funding to help those farm businesses that have been hardest hit financially as a direct result of the pandemic, and it is now a priority for my Department to work toward having this funding distributed as quickly as possible so that farmers impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic can address cash flow issues.

I will continue to consider very carefully all the relevant issues surrounding the matter of the flooding in 2017 before reaching a balanced decision in due course.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) how many anaerobic digestors in Northern Ireland utilise bio-methane as a resource for the natural gas market; and (ii) for his assessment of the utilisation of bio-methane from anaerobic digestors as a means to reduce Northern Ireland's carbon emissions.

(AQW 6240/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) There are approximately 70 anaerobic digestors in Northern Ireland currently operating and generating biogas. The biogas produced is usually fed to engines for microgeneration on-site to produce electricity which is either used onsite or fed to the grid. The rural locations of most of these anaerobic digestors are remote from the gas network. Therefore, the number currently producing bio-methane as a resource for the natural gas market is likely to be low. A Committee for Climate Change (CCC) report in 2019 stated the less-developed gas network in Northern Ireland means that bio-methane injection to the grid may be more difficult, and anaerobic digestion may be limited to space and process heating or Combined Heat and Power (CHP) microgeneration on-site in locations without easy access to grid injection points.
- (ii) Bio-methane from anaerobic digestors is already reducing Northern Ireland's carbon emissions by offsetting the use of fossil fuels (coal and oil) to produce electricity and heat, although this is likely a modest offset compared to other types of renewable energy generation. Biogas from anaerobic digestors is generally of a lower quality than imported natural gas and needs to be processed/purified to upgrade it to bio-methane.

There is potential to utilise bio-methane to displace natural gas for heat production and to potentially expand the anaerobic digester industry in Northern Ireland to increase supply. This would have a positive impact on reducing carbon emissions but is likely to require an incentivised scheme for electricity or heat production to make it economically viable due to the high capital expenditure associated with plant construction.

Environmental impacts of expanding the anaerobic digester sector on water quality, air quality and potentially on sensitive habitats would also have to be considered.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he has any plans to (i) introduce right to roam legislation in Northern Ireland; and (ii) improve policy to effectively assert a right-of-way.

(AQW 6242/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is currently reviewing legislation related to access to the countryside, with a focus on optimising the benefits and opportunities for outdoor recreation. In relation to right to roam legislation, I have no plans to introduce specific regulations in Northern Ireland.

The current review will consider the suitability of the current Access to the Countryside (Northern Ireland) Order 1983 which includes the policies associated with the assertion of Public Rights of Way.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to specify what ministerial directions have been issued since January 2020.

(AQW 6337/17-22)

Mr Poots: There have been no ministerial directions issued to my Department since January 2020.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what proposals his Department has to upgrade Crawfordsburn Country Park to improve safety for visitors.

(AQW 6457/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Officials in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) are committed to the provision and maintenance of safe public access in order to ensure the ongoing safety and enjoyment of all visitors to Crawfordsburn Country Park.

The site is subject to daily patrols which include the regular inspection of all designated pathways, fencing and safety equipment. Where issues are identified these are reported to ensure repairs and maintenance works or where necessary replacement of infrastructure or safety equipment is undertaken in an expedient manner.

A range of health and safety signage is maintained on site to advise the public of natural hazards that may be encountered within the environment. Where necessary risk assessments for the site are also undertaken to support and underpin the ongoing safety of both staff and visitors alike.

The park is subject to independent inspection and audit by Departmental Health and Safety advisors, and is also subject to advice from independent subject matter experts where necessary which include matters of tree safety, water safety and structural integrity. Furthermore site management regularly liaises with other authorities and local stakeholders in respect of wider issues relating to public safety including anti-social behaviour.

At this current time my Department has no plans for particular upgrade measures to Crawfordsburn Country Park that are specific to visitor safety. Should you happen to be aware of specific concerns which have been raised, I know that my Officials would welcome the details of this in order that they can be considered and actioned, where necessary and appropriate.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) how many notices have been issued under the Noxious Weeds (NI) Order 1977; and (ii) how many convictions there have been under the said Order, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6498/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Noxious Weeds (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 requires landowners to control Thistles, Ragwort, Docks and Wild oats that could infest agricultural land.

The Department investigates all reports of weeds listed under the Order. A notice to comply with control requirements is issued by this Department where these weeds are found to be growing on agricultural land, or likely to spread to agricultural land.

The number of notices to control weeds, issued under the Noxious Weeds (NI) Order 1997, in the period 2015-2019 were five, nine, eleven, eight and six in the respective calendar years. No prosecutions were taken forward by the Department under the Order in the period.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) when he will publish (a) the findings of Stage 1 of the report on the Fishing and Seafood Development Programme; and (b) an associated work plan; and (ii) to detail timescales and costings for the implementation of the findings.

(AQW 6593/17-22)

Mr Poots: The report from Stage 1 of the Fishing and Seafood Development Programme (FSDP) is ready to be published and will (shortly be available) / (be made available on 18th September).

I have considered the report's recommendations and will publish at the same time both my response to this report and a provisional work plan setting out the immediate next steps in the process, as per the table below.

Next Steps	Completion date
FSDP Stage 2 and final report	End December 2020
Assessment of impacts of EU/UK Fisheries Agreement and NI Protocol on NI fishing and seafood sector.	December 2020 to January 2021
Strategic Outline Case for fishery harbour investment	November 2020 to March 2021
Publish response to final FSDP report addressing strategic investment in fisheries.	April 2021

The key step is a Strategic Outline Case in order to justify potential investment in harbours and moving to environmental and technical studies for harbour development options.

Completion of the Strategic Outline Case will require not only the outputs from the FSDP, but also an assessment of the impacts on our fishing and seafood sectors of the outcome of on-going negotiations with the EU on a future fisheries agreement and the NI Protocol. Whilst I am working to ensure the best possible outcome for the fishing and seafood sector we will not know all the implications and opportunities until these negotiations conclude.

Harbour development is complex and expensive and further business, environmental, marine licensing and planning approvals will have to be obtained before final decisions can be taken on construction. This is likely to be a lengthy process and as the process advances and options for development become more refined further information on timescales and projected costs will be made available.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update regarding the introduction of an animal cruelty register.

(AQW 6737/17-22)

Mr Poots: I remain open to the possibility of creating a register of those convicted of animal welfare offences. The creation of such a register, however, raises complex data protection, human rights and cost issues. As conviction data is strictly controlled and managed by the Department of Justice, my officials have been exploring these issues with their counterparts in that Department. I now intend to write to the Minister of Justice to seek her views on the matter.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when the draft peatland strategy will be released for consultation.

(AQW 6824/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am currently developing a Peatland Strategy for Northern Ireland which will provide a framework for conserving our intact semi-natural peatlands and restoring degraded semi-natural peatlands.

The Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy is being taken forward under the auspices of the UK Peatland Strategy and it is envisaged that it will be subject to public consultation in early 2021.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) when will the new environment strategy be published; and (ii) when it will be out for public consultation.

(AQW 6825/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is committed to the continued protection and improvement of the environment as we move into this new decade. An Environment Strategy will establish an over-arching framework for the environment for many years to come.

The 2,500 responses received to the public discussion exercise on a proposed Environment Strategy for NI (ESNI), which closed in February 2020, reflect the views of a wide range of citizens and stakeholders from across Northern Ireland and demonstrate the public's interest in our environment and desire to protect it. The responses received are broadly supportive, for example over 90% of responses received via the CitizenSpace portal indicated support for ESNI to be an Executive endorsed strategy (as opposed to DAERA only).

Analysis of the responses to the questions outlined in the public discussion document is nearing completion. NISRA is currently assisting with the finalisation of this work and my officials are in the process of completing a draft summary report for my consideration.

The findings in the summary report will provide key inputs to the draft Strategy which my Department hopes to publish for consultation early in 2021.

In developing the draft Strategy my Department will wish to work closely with other departments and key stakeholders in the coming months.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will ensure that farmers receive full Basic Payment Scheme payments from October 2020.

(AQW 6839/17-22)

Mr Poots: On 20 May 2020 I announced that my Department would make full Basic Payment Scheme payments to farmers commencing in October 2020; a first for Northern Ireland farmers, and ahead of every other part of the UK and of the EU. For the past number of years Northern Ireland has had the best payment performance in the United Kingdom. I am committed to taking advantage of the benefits of leaving the European Union to deliver for our farmers.

2020 payments will be issued from 16 October 2020 onwards. My Department is making every effort to maximise the number of payments issued from that date.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of whether the infrastructure he is providing for an Irish Sea border is compatible with Article Six of the Act of Union.

(AQO 586/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Act of the Union 1800 remains in place. There has not been any physical infrastructure put in place to implement the Protocol as these matters are still a subject of discussion and negotiation. I continue to work with the HMG on the principle that any interpretation and implementation of the Protocol should be fully compliant with the Act of Union and the protection of the internal UK market.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what discussions he has had with the British and Irish Governments on new export health certificates for exports from Great Britain to Northern Ireland, in preparation for the end of the transition period.

(AQO 732/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials have been working closely with Defra colleagues on the certification required for movements such as live animals, products of animal origin and plants from GB to NI from 1 January 2021.

You will be aware that Cabinet Office published guidance in early August on the movement of goods from GB to NI which includes some advice in relation to such movements. Further information will be published later this year on the export health certificate requirements for export from GB to EU.

DAERA has not had any discussions with its Irish counterparts as additional export health certification will not be required for movements from NI to the ROI.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what discussions he has had with his Executive colleagues on measures to support and incentivise businesses to improve their levels of environmental responsibility.

(AQO 729/17-22)

Mr Poots: While I have had no direct discussions with Executive colleagues on this matter to date, planning is underway for an Inter-Ministerial Group to oversee the development of the Green Growth Strategy and Delivery Framework. The overall aim of this programme of work is to help transform our society to net zero, protect and enhance our environment and sustainably grow our economy. Achieving this will require a shared vision across government and a collaborative inter-departmental approach.

Co-design will be central to the success of Green Growth and will no doubt produce a range of recommendations, which may include incentivisation of business, that can deliver improved environmental responsibility. The programme governance structures being put in place will ensure that Executive colleagues and I have the opportunity to discuss and consider all such proposals.

It will be through the Green Growth Inter Ministerial Group that I envisage most future discussions on such matters with Executive colleagues taking place.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what engagement he has had with Bord Bia and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine in Dublin to ensure that local beef is included in the Protected Geographical Indications application by Bord Bia for Irish grass-fed beef.

(AQO 731/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am aware that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) recently held a national consultation about Bord Bia's proposal for an application to register 'Irish Grass-fed Beef' under the European Commission's PGI scheme. As currently envisaged, the application might only extend to cattle born, raised, finished, slaughtered, chilled and quartered in the Republic of Ireland.

I have raised the matter both verbally and in writing with the new DAFM Minister, Charlie McConalogue TD, asking that we work together to ensure that beef farmers in Northern Ireland as well as in the Republic of Ireland can take advantage of the potential value conveyed by having the proposed PGI status. My Departmental officials, as well as the Livestock & Meat Commission, have also engaged with both Bord Bia and DAFM officials on the matter.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department will be free from 1 January 2021 to decide what herbicides and pesticides can be used in Northern Ireland.

(AQO 733/17-22)

Mr Poots: At present, all pesticide approvals in the UK are determined under EU law, in particular Regulation 1107/2009 concerning the placing of plant protection products on the market. A plant protection product (or pesticide) can only be sold and used in the UK if its active substance or substances have been approved by the European Commission and the product containing that active substance has been authorised for sale and use in the UK.

Under regulation 3 of the Plant Protection Products Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 the Department is the designated Competent Authority for Northern Ireland responsible for carrying out the obligations laid down in EU Regulation, including the authorisation of pesticide products for marketing in Northern Ireland.

Given the complex and scientific nature of pesticide authorisations, the Chemicals Regulation Division of the Health and Safety Executive in Great Britain (CRD) is, by way of an Agency Agreement, authorised to take these decisions on the Department's behalf. It carries out a similar role for the English, Welsh and Scottish administrations. However, the Department can exercise any of the functions as the Competent Authority, having given notice in writing to the CRD. This includes the authorisation of pesticide products.

Under the EU Withdrawal Agreement's Ireland / Northern Ireland Protocol, Regulation 1107/2009, and therefore the EU system for regulating pesticides, will continue to apply directly to Northern Ireland following the end of the transition period. Specifically, this means that after 1 January 2021 the regulatory regime for pesticide products will not change and the Department will remain the Competent Authority for the authorisation of pesticide products for marketing in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the steps being taken to avoid or mitigate the requirement for an EU-style pet passport for those travelling with pets between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK following the end of the transition period.

(AQO 734/17-22)

Mr Poots: The documentary and health requirements for pet travel from Great Britain (GB) to Northern Ireland (NI) following the end of the transition period depend on the status the EU allocates to the UK in respect of pet travel. The UK Government is awaiting a decision on its application to the EU for listed pet travel status which, if approved, would negate all, or most, additional requirements for travel from GB to NI.

In the meantime, my officials continue to work closely with their UK counterparts on this matter as well as arrangements for pet travel from NI to GB, with a view to ensuring that it continues with minimal disruption.

I am extremely mindful of the potentially wide reaching societal impact of any barriers to pet travel between here and the rest of the UK. I have, therefore, raised this matter directly with ministerial colleagues across the UK and will continue to work with them with the aim of securing a satisfactory resolution to this matter.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what actions his Department is taking to ensure angling permit holders can access Portavoe Reservoir.

(AQO 735/17-22)

Mr Poots: Bord Bia Quality Assurance Schemes: Post-Brexit

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how he will address the concerns of food producers and processors who may no longer be eligible to participate in Bord Bia quality assurance schemes after the end of the transition period.

(AQO 736/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am aware that a number of local producers and processors across a range of sectors benefit from participation in a range of Bord Bia quality assurance schemes for agricultural products including the Meat Processor Quality Assurance Scheme. I also appreciate that a number of businesses in the Republic of Ireland source high quality animals and produce here, which in turn qualify for Bord Bia accreditation.

I understand the concerns of Northern Ireland producers and processors that they may no longer be eligible to participate in these quality schemes after the end of the Transition Period. Therefore, my officials have contacted Bord Bia's parent Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), seeking clarification on any potential issues with NI businesses continued participation in these schemes.

I have also raised the matter with my counterpart in Dublin, former Minister Calleary.

As you may be aware, the Bord Bia schemes are due for renewal under the EU State Aid regime later this year. I am pleased to say that this issue is very much on DAFM's radar and they are engaging with the Commission on renewal of the state aid approval, including clarifying the position as regards NI's future participation in the schemes.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how he will address the findings of the Northern Ireland Water Framework Directive Lake Quality Update 2020, which revealed that only 1 of the 21 lake water bodies in Northern Ireland is classified as good or better status.

(AQO 738/17-22)

Mr Poots: The findings of the 2020 Lake Quality Update are a significant cause for concern and show that collectively we need to do more to reverse the pressures on all of our water bodies.

This latest evidence reflects issues already raised in my Department's consultation on the Significant Water Management Issues, which closed on 22 June this year. This identified the key pressures on water quality, included agriculture and the impact of waste water from sewage infrastructure.

My Department will be using all of this information, along with the consultation responses, to inform the development of the next cycle of draft River Basin Management Plans. These will include a Programme of Measures to tackle the key sources of pollution, and to help to develop future plans and strategies to protect all of the water environment, including our lakes. I expect the draft River Basin Management Plan to be published for consultation within this reporting period.

Department for Communities

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what steps her Department is taking to address social and affordable housing need in East Belfast.

(AQW 6070/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): New Decade, New Approach made a commitment to enhanced investment in new social home starts, and I recently tasked my officials and the Housing Executive to bring forward plans to increase new social housing provision across all areas in housing need.

The table below summarises the total new build social housing completions in the Belfast East Parliamentary constituency between 2018/19 and 2020/21 (to date). The details of these schemes are attached at Table 1.

Year	Total Social Housing New Build Units Completed
2018/19	86
2019/20	45
2020/21	25
Total	156

A further 130 social housing units are currently under construction, details of these schemes are attached at Table 2.

246 social housing units are programmed to start through the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) 2020/21 – 2022/23. The detail of these schemes are included in Table 3.

Programmed schemes can be lost or slip to future programme years for a variety of reasons e.g. relating to delays in acquiring sites and/or failure to secure Planning Approval.

Co-Ownership Housing Association (Co-Ownership) is a mechanism for the delivery of affordable homes. In 2019/20 61 homes were purchased in the East Belfast Parliamentary constituency via this scheme.

In 2014 the Department launched the Affordable Homes Loan Fund (AHLF) pilot scheme across three Housing Associations. The aim was to provide up to 600 affordable homes, both new build and refurbished empty homes, through an alternative shared ownership product. To date 159 homes have been provided with 18 located in East Belfast.

Table 1: Belfast East Parliamentary Constituency social housing completions from 2018/19 to date (156 Units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Connswater	15/19 Ballygowan Road	Castlereagh	New Build	General Needs	31	2012/13	2018/19
Choice	263-285 Beersbridge Road (T) (DPF)	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	9	2016/17	2018/19
Clanmil	Lisnasharragh High School	Castlereagh	New Build	General Needs	19	2016/17	2018/19
Clanmil	Lisnasharragh High School	Castlereagh	New Build	Wheelchair	6	2016/17	2018/19
Connswater	27 Channing Street	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2017/18	2018/19
North Belfast HA	19 Cooneen Way	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2017/18	2018/19
Connswater	13 Knocknagoney Grove	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2017/18	2018/19
Connswater	12 Reaville Park	Dundonald	Rehabilitation	General Needs	1	2017/18	2018/19
Radius	3 Grampian Close	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2018/19	2018/19
Choice	51 Abetta Parade	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2018/19	2018/19
Triangle	761-765 Upper Newtownards Road	Dundonald	Off The Shelf	General Needs	6	2018/19	2018/19
Triangle	761-765 Upper Newtownards Road	Dundonald	Off The Shelf	CAT1 Elderly	9	2018/19	2018/19
Triangle	18 Fernvale Street	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2016/17	2019/20
Triangle	55 Ashmount Park	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2016/17	2019/20
Triangle	69 Clarawood Park	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2016/17	2019/20
Apex Housing	Westbourne Church	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	6	2017/18	2019/20
Choice	136-152; 183-191; 211-217 Beersbridge Road	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	18	2017/18	2019/20

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Choice	136-152; 183-191; 211-217 Beersbridge Road	Belfast	New Build	Wheelchair	1	2017/18	2019/20
Choice	81-85 Channing Street	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	6	2017/18	2019/20
Connswater	5 Connswater Grove	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2017/18	2019/20
North Belfast HA	26 Southland Dale	Belfast	Rehabilitation	General Needs	1	2018/19	2019/20
North Belfast HA	35 Carncaver Road	Belfast	Rehabilitation	General Needs	1	2018/19	2019/20
Connswater	3 Connswater Mews	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2019/20	2019/20
Radius	Leaseholds, Phase 7	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	7	2019/20	2019/20
Choice	55 Belle Bashford Court	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2019/20	2020/21
Clanmil	5-7 Connsbrook Avenue	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	21	2017/18	2020/21
St Matthew's	71 Beechfield Street	Belfast	Rehabilitation	General Needs	1	2019/20	2020/21
Ark	5 Hornby Crescent	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2019/20	2020/21
Connswater	15 Connswater Grove	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2019/20	2020/21

Table 2: Belfast East Parliamentary Constituency social housing units under construction (130 Units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Alpha	123 Barnetts Road	Belfast	New Build	CAT1 Elderly	14	2019/20	2020/21
Choice	Ballybeen Square Phase 2 (T)	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	26	2018/19	2020/21
Choice	Ballybeen Square Phase 2 (T)	Belfast	New Build	Wheelchair	2	2018/19	2020/21
Choice	179, 181, 187, 197, 199-203 Beersbridge Road	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	18	2018/19	2020/21
Choice	71 Inverary Avenue	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2019/20	2020/21
Connswater	Lands adjacent to 91 Gilnahirk Road	Belfast	New Build	CAT1 Elderly	6	2019/20	2021/22

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Radius	288 Beersbridge Road	Belfast	New Build	Wheelchair	2	2018/19	2021/22
Radius	288 Beersbridge Road	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	20	2018/19	2021/22
St Matthews	50 Harper Street	Belfast	Rehabilitation	General Needs	1	2018/19	2020/21
St Matthews	22 Beechfield Street	Belfast	Rehabilitation	General Needs	1	2019/20	2020/21
South Ulster	Redcar Street	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	12	2018/19	2020/21
Triangle	98 Holywood Road	Belfast	New Build	CAT1 Elderly	25	2018/19	2020/21
Triangle	98 Holywood Road	Belfast	New Build	Wheelchair	2	2018/19	2020/21

Table 3: Belfast East Parliamentary Constituency social housing units programmed to start 2020/21 - 2022/23 (246 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Need Group	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Apex Housing	10-12a & 14-16 Parkgate Avenue	Belfast	New Build	CAT1 Elderly	14	2020/21	2021/22
Apex Housing	Bryson Street, Phase 2	Belfast	New Build	CAT1 Elderly	8	2020/21	2021/22
Ark	1-3 Evelyn Avenue	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	6	2020/21	2021/22
Choice	Park Avenue	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	21	2020/21	2021/22
Choice	4a Galway Mews	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	21	2020/21	2020/21
Choice	Sirocco Works Site (Waterside)	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	70	2020/21	2022/23
Choice	Sirocco Works Site (Waterside)	Belfast	New Build	Wheelchair	7	2020/21	2022/23
Choice	50 Reaville Park	Dundonald	Rehabilitation	General Needs	1	2020/21	2021/22
Connswater	2 Knocknagoney Avenue	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	1	2020/21	2021/22
Connswater	2A Knocknagoney Avenue	Belfast	Off The Shelf	General Needs	1	2020/21	2021/22
Choice	Morven Park (T)	Dundonald	New Build	General Needs	20	2021/22	2023/24
Choice	Lands to the rear of 85 Channing Street	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	20	2021/22	2023/24
Clanmil	Masonic Hall, Park Avenue	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	24	2021/22	2023/24
South Ulster	Stormont Inn	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	28	2021/22	2023/24
Choice	Redcliffe Street	Belfast	New Build	General Needs	24	2022/23	2023/24

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Communities what (i) Housing Executive schemes; and (ii) housing association schemes are due to take place in the Colin area of West Belfast in (a) 2020/21; (b) 2021/22; and (c) 2022/23.

(AQW 6105/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In terms of refurbishment schemes currently programmed for the Colin area of West Belfast, details are listed in Table 1 below.

In terms of social housing schemes, there have been 49 social housing units completed to date in 2020/21 in the Colin area. A further 405 social housing units are currently under construction.

Additionally there are 38 social housing units programmed to start through the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) 2020/21 – 2022/23 (15 units in 2020/21 and 23 units in 2022/23).

Details of these can be found in Table 2 attached below.

Programmed schemes can be lost or slip to future programme years for a variety of reasons e.g. relating to delays in acquiring sites and/or failure to secure Planning Approval.

Table 1 Planned Maintenance in Collin area

Work Category	Project Number	Scheme Title	Properties
Heating	26661107	Belfast Covid Backlog Emergencies	20
Heating	26661030	West Belfast Phase 1	25
Heating	19661016	Lisburn Dairy Farm	70
Bathroom	19710374	Glendowan/Glenfearna	134
ECM	19781010	Woodside	149
Fence Painting	19781103	West Belfast Fence Painting	1015
Bathroom and Kitchen	19711002	Cherey/Aspen Phase 1	88
Bathroom and Kitchen	19701150	Cheery/Aspen Phase 2	80
Bathroom and Kitchen	19701048	Dairy Farm Phase 1	138
Bathroom and Kitchen	19701050	Dairy Farm Phase 2	67
ECM	26780478	Lower Suffolk	187
ECM	26781088	Lower Suffolk Phase 2	56
ECM	19780191	Old Colin	110
ECM	19781009	Ardcaoin/Glenkeen	184
ECM	19781042	Laburnum Walk	22
ECM	19781030	Colinbrook	91
Double Glazing	19781042	West Belfast DG	100
Bathroom and Kitchen	26701072	Twinbrook Flats	13
ECM	26701072	Summerhill/Thornhill	143

Table 2: SHDP Completions to-date (2020/21), Under Construction and Programmed to Start in Colin DEA

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year	Status
Ark	22 Mount Eagles Square	Belfast	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	1	2019/20	2020/21	Completed
Choice	Gardenmore Road (Former St Mark's PS)	Belfast	New Build	48	2018/19	2020/21	Completed
Radius	Lands north of 159 Mount Eagles Avenue, Belfast (Lagmore Avenue)	Belfast	New Build	29	2019/20	2020/21	Under Construction

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year	Status
Apex Housing	Areema Drive (T)	Dunmurry	New Build	16	2019/20	2021/22	Under Construction
Apex Housing	Areema Drive (T)	Dunmurry	New Build	4	2019/20	2021/22	Under Construction
Apex Housing	Areema Drive (T)	Dunmurry	New Build	2	2019/20	2021/22	Under Construction
Choice	Kilwee, Upper Dunmurry Lane	Belfast	New Build	73	2019/20	2021/22	Under Construction
Choice	Kilwee, Upper Dunmurry Lane	Belfast	New Build	12	2019/20	2021/22	Under Construction
Choice	Kilwee, Upper Dunmurry Lane	Belfast	New Build	5	2019/20	2021/22	Under Construction
North Belfast HA	35 Colinbrook Crescent	Belfast	Rehab	1	2020/21	2021/22	Under Construction
Radius	Gardenmore Road/ Summerhill Road (T)	Twinbrook	New Build	13	2020/21	2021/22	Under Construction
Radius	Gardenmore Road/ Summerhill Road (T)	Twinbrook	New Build	1	2020/21	2021/22	Under Construction
Radius	Visteon, Blacks Road	Belfast	New Build	186	2017/18	2021/22	Under Construction
Radius	Visteon, Blacks Road	Belfast	New Build	10	2017/18	2021/22	Under Construction
Choice	Belvedere, Upper Dunmurry Lane	Belfast	New Build	43	2018/19	2022/23	Under Construction
Choice	Belvedere, Upper Dunmurry Lane	Belfast	New Build	8	2018/19	2022/23	Under Construction
Choice	Belvedere, Upper Dunmurry Lane	Belfast	New Build	2	2018/19	2022/23	Under Construction
Habinteg	6 Suffolk Road	Belfast	New Build	15	2020/21	2021/22	Programmed to Start
Choice	Corrib Flats Regeneration (T)	Belfast	New Build	22	2022/23	2024/25	Programmed to Start
Choice	Corrib Flats Regeneration (T)	Belfast	New Build	1	2022/23	2024/25	Programmed to Start

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the reasons behind the current waiting times for maintenance schemes to Housing Executive properties in Lagan Valley.

(AQW 6106/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has for many years had a backlog in planned maintenance. This has been due to a combination of historical and more recent factors.

There have been additional delays due to the restrictions in place around the Covid-19 pandemic and the Housing Executive are currently working with contractors to put in place a programme in the Lagan Valley area up to the end of the current financial year.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister for Communities (i) how many requests were received for a Mandatory Reconsideration of a Personal Independence Payment decision between (a) June 2017 and June 2018; (b) June 2018 and June 2019; (c) June 2019 and June 2020; and (ii) how many decisions (a) remained the same; and (b) were changed.

(AQW 6214/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The most recent Personal Independence Payment statistics were published on 26 August 2020 and covered the period from the introduction of PIP on 20 June 2016 up to 31 May 2020.

The IT system used to administer PIP records Mandatory Reconsideration (MR) outcomes by award changed and award unchanged. The table below provides the number of MR requests received between June 2017 and 31 May 2020 and the number where the award was changed or unchanged.

Virtually all decisions are changed because additional evidence is provided at the reconsideration stage, which was not available to the officer who made the initial decision.

Mandatory Reconsideration Outcomes since June 2017

Year	Number of MR requests received	New Decision - Award Changed	New Decision - Award Unchanged
June 2017-May 2018	19,120	4,410	14,200
June 2018-May 2019	25,990	4,260	20,600
June 2019-May 2020	10,890	2,050	7,960

NB: The shortfall between the number of decisions changed or unchanged and the total received is due to some cases where the MR was withdrawn and also rounding of the figures.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities whether she intends to extend the Access to Work scheme to provide extra support to disabled workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 6275/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is fully committed to supporting people with disabilities, and does this through a wide range of projects and initiatives. The Department recognises the additional challenges that COVID 19 has made on all citizens but in particular for those people who have disabilities.

Access to Work helps people with disabilities who wish to take up employment or who are in work and experience difficulty related to their disability. The Department continues to work with our contracted partners to ensure that any changes in the level of support needed for those people with disabilities in work, as a result of COVID 19, will be considered under the Access to Work scheme. Anyone who wishes to discuss their current level of support or any possible extension of this support, should contact the Department via Health&WorkSupportCo-ordination@communities-ni.gsi.gov.uk

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities (i) whether she has the legislative power to amend the six month rule in the Special Rules for Terminal Illness in the Personal Independence Payments process; (ii) whether she intends to bring legislation to that effect in this mandate; and (iii) whether her Department has estimated the cost of implementing extending special rules to all Personal Independent Payment applicants with a terminal diagnosis.

(AQW 6276/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In relation to the special rules for terminal illness in Personal Independence Payment and other social security benefits, I am very aware of the calls for reform. I and my Department are actively considering next steps and I will continue to engage with key stakeholders on this as a priority.

I continue to look at how my Department can improve processes in order to ensure a fair system that will lessen stress and anxiety on people during what is an extremely difficult time and I will continue to engage with key stakeholders on this.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities to detail the rationale and scientific evidence as to why theatres remain closed as a response to COVID-19.

(AQW 6322/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Executive decisions on actions related to COVID-19 are made in the light of advice given by the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor.

On 6th August, the Executive agreed the reopening of theatres and concert halls for rehearsals and staff from 8th August and gave an indicative date of 1st September for the return of live audiences. However, due to concern over a rise in cases numbers and the R-number at the time, the 1 September date for live audiences could not subsequently be ratified.

My department is working with the Arts Sector on measures aimed at enabling the safe return of live audiences to our theatres as quickly and as practicably as possible.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Sub-Regional Stadia Funding Programme.

(AQW 6455/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the "New Decade, New Approach" Deal and my Department has begun work to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust

evidence base on the current challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels. Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department has had any communication with the Department for Work and Pensions in regard to the Kickstart Scheme, in order to assist with setting up a Northern Ireland-specific employer incentive scheme.

(AQW 6465/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Officials in the Department for Work and Pensions were in contact with Department for Communities on 8 July 2020 after the announcement requesting a meeting to discuss the measures outlines by the British Chancellor. This meeting took place on 16 July 202 with a second meeting taking place on 30 July 2020. The Department for Work and Pensions has shared information on how the Kickstart Scheme will be delivered in Britain.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on cavity wall installation programme of work that was to start in the Creggan estate, Derry, in 2018.

(AQW 6508/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The preparation of a number of Cavity Wall Insulation schemes - including one for Creggan in 2018 - were deferred as the Housing Executive commissioned a Cavity Wall Insulation research programme to ascertain the extent of CWI problems with a view to bringing forward a new action plan for all of its stock as necessary. The research report was published in 2019 and the Housing Executive is currently finalising its action plan for public and industry consultation.

However, with regard to the Creggan estate, the Housing Executive acknowledges that there has been an issue for some time and it will therefore appoint a consultant to consider the extent of the problem in the locality and bring forward a remedial works scheme as necessary.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities (i) how many social security appeals there have been in the last ten years; (ii) how many successful appeals there have been in the last ten years; (iii) for a breakdown of the figures by (a) whether the appellant had representation; and (b) who represented the appellant; and (iv) to detail success rates according to (a) whether the appellant was represented; and (b) who represented the appellant.

(AQW 6522/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department holds information on the number of social security appeals there have been in the last five years and how many of these have been successful (Annex A).

My Department also holds information on the number of successful appeals where the appellant was represented (Annex A).

In relation to the name of the individual representative for each appellant and associated success rate (per representative), this information is not available in a readily accessible format.

Annex A

Personal Independent Payment Appeals

Year	Number of Appeals	All Successful	Successful with Representation	Success Rate %
19/20	8,110	3,517	2,630	74.8%
18/19	11,443	3,984	3,012	75.6%
17/18	10,959	2,758	2,085	75.6%
16/17	10,048	3,304*	2,227*	67.4%*
15/16	15,073			
14/15	13,016	3,891	2,700	69.4%
Total	68,649	17,454	12,654	72.5%

*Due to a system anomaly, years 15/16 and 16/17 were combined

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities how many people in the Upper Bann constituency are awaiting a decision on their application for a Personal Independence Payment; and what is the average waiting time.

(AQW 6579/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The most recent Personal Independence Payment statistics were published on 26 August 2020 and covered the period up to 31 May 2020. At that date, there were 580 people who had registered an application to claim Personal Independence Payment in the Upper Bann Assembly Area and had yet to receive a decision on their application. These cases are at various stages of the PIP claims process, such as the Department awaiting return of a completed PIP2 Questionnaire

from the applicant, with Capita for an assessment to be completed or the assessment report is with the Department for a decision to be made on entitlement to PIP.

The average waiting time for PIP claims in the Upper Bann Assembly Area, from registration of the PIP application until a decision is made on the claim is 12 weeks, which is less than the average waiting time of 13 weeks for all PIP applications received and determined since PIP was introduced in June 2016.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's delivery of maintenance schemes.

(AQW 6580/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive have advised that COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the delivery of their planned maintenance schemes. It currently estimates that 19 weeks of its programme were affected by COVID-19.

A phased resumption of its planned maintenance work was implemented in July 2020. In addition, a revised programme detailing work to be commenced by the end of March 2021 is currently being prepared.

The Housing Executive has been working with its contractors to ensure that all maintenance work is completed safely and in accordance with current PHA & government guidance.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Communities, from the Common waiting list as of 25 August 2020, how many applicants registered with Newtownabbey 1 and Newtownabbey 2 offices have been awarded intimidation points, broken down by the criteria set out by the Housing Selection Scheme points which is confirmed by the PSNI or Base 2 Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders.

(AQW 6581/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has provided the following table which details the number of Applicants who were registered on the Waiting List as at 1 September 2020 and had been awarded Intimidation Points under Rule 23 of the Housing Selection Scheme in the requested areas.

Intimidation Reason	Newtownabbey 1	Newtownabbey 2
Intimidation (Paramilitary(terrorist))	<10*	17
Intimidation (other reason*)	0	<10*

- *Note: Numbers less than 10 and type of intimidation cannot be reported as to do so would potentially identify individuals.
- Since Waiting List data is not available on a daily basis the question has been answered using the relevant data extracted from the most recent download (1 September 2020) closest to the 25 August 2020.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister for Communities how many applicants were on the Common waiting list for Glengormley Central in each month from July 2019 to August 2020.

(AQW 6583/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has provided the following table which details the information requested for the Glengormley Central Common Landlord Area (CLA). Please note that the Housing Executive produces this information quarterly and therefore figures have been provided on this basis. It has also advised that as this CLA was created in October 2019 it is not possible to provide the information requested prior to the quarterly report produced in December 2019.

	Applicants (Total)	Applicants in Housing Stress (Subset)
June 2020	125	107
March 2020	103	93
December 2019	61	53

- "Applicants" and "Applicants in Housing Stress" are reported as at that date.
- "Applicants in Housing Stress" is a subset of the overall "Applicants".

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for Communities how many telephone consultations have been made by Capita for Personal Independence Payment first time assessments within the East Londonderry constituency since the start of lockdown; and when face to face consultations will return at the assessment centres.

(AQW 6599/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Capita do not hold or compile management information on a constituency basis but have estimated using the relevant postcodes that between 23 March 2020 and 4 September 2020 the number of PIP new claims conducted via telephony assessments within the constituency is approximately 1,276.

Due to Covid-19 and in line with public health guidance face to face PIP assessments are currently suspended and are instead conducted through paper based or telephone assessments. This situation is kept under regular review.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for Communities how many Personal Independence Payment (PIP) recipients in the East Londonderry constituency have had their award reviewed via telephone consultation since the start of lockdown; and to outline a timeframe for a return to face to face PIP reviews, either in the home setting or at assessment centres.
(AQW 6600/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Personal Independence Payment (PIP) assessments are carried out by Capita who do not hold or compile management information on a constituency basis. However, using the relevant postcodes they estimate that the number of PIP award reviews conducted via telephony assessments between 23 March 2020 and 4 September 2020 within the constituency is approximately 252.

Due to Covid-19, and in line with public health guidance, face to face PIP assessments are currently suspended and are instead conducted through paper based or telephone assessments. This situation is kept under regular review.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Communities whether a review is to be carried out into the Housing Executive's timescales for urgent repairs.
(AQW 6601/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Covid 19 has disrupted the normal repair service provided by the Housing Executive. In accordance with Public Health guidance, the Housing Executive had been operating an emergency repair service only between March and the beginning of July 2020, which resulted in a significant backlog of non-emergency jobs. As such, the Housing Executive have been unable to deliver the service to the normal response times. They are currently working through this backlog and are confident that normal services will be resumed across the majority of its Area offices within the next two months

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities whether businesses situated outside designated town centre areas could be made eligible for Business Adaption and Improvement Grant Scheme in Ards and North Down.[R]
(AQW 6616/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My department has made available funding to Councils for the implementation of COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Plans in their areas. In Ards & North Down, £561,000 has already been transferred to the Council to cover immediate first tranche actions across the Borough, including the business support scheme. A further significant tranche of funding aimed at supporting medium to longer-term needs will be made available once the Revitalisation Plan is finalised. It is a matter for the Council to determine eligibility criteria for the provision of funding through this scheme.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the formation of community land trusts in areas where the housing market is unaffordable for local residents to buy or rent homes.
(AQW 6620/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There is currently no legislative basis to permit the establishment of Community Land Trusts (CLT) here. Work to establish such Trusts would in the first instance require extensive feasibility assessment to test its viability.

Thereafter, if a need was identified, suitable arrangements would need to be made to amend existing legislation which currently sits within the remit of the Department of Finance.

Beyond that, suitable governance and regulation arrangements to oversee CLTs would also need to be developed, agreed and implemented before any scheme could be piloted, evaluated, funding secured and subsequently launched.

In summary then, significant work would need to be carried out, without any guarantee it would lead to any improvement to housing supply.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities whether approval will be given to the proposals submitted by Housing Executive for the refurbishment of the Triangle property complex in the Foyle constituency.
(AQW 6623/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive recently undertook an Economic Appraisal for the properties in Clooney Terrace, Dungiven Road and Duddy's Court. This explored a range of potential investment options for the blocks before recommending that a comprehensive improvement scheme should be carried out to address the ongoing issues at the properties. Departmental officials have raised a number of concerns around the cost of these works to leaseholders in these blocks and the Housing Executive's ability to recover their required contribution. The Housing Executive is currently working with the Department to address these concerns.

Please see previous response issued to Martina Anderson, Reference AQO 600 17-22 for information.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the review of the housing allocation points system used for social housing accommodation.
(AQW 6642/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A consultation on 'A Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations' ran from September to December 2017.

I am actively considering proposed changes to the points system and other important issues raised by this Review. Progress has been affected by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during which I have updated Executive colleagues and the Communities Committee.

I am keen to progress the Review by publishing a consultation report that not only details stakeholder views but that importantly provides a clear way forward and includes an implementation plan. I anticipate publication of the report later in the autumn.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Communities what additional guidelines have been issued to staff or private agencies assessing applicants or applications for (i) Employment and Support Allowance; and (ii) Personal Independence Payment from individuals who have had COVID-19 and exhibit long-term health impacts.

(AQW 6659/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: No additional guidelines have been issued to staff or private agencies assessing Employment and Support Allowance or Personal Independence Payment applications from people who have had COVID-19 and exhibit long-term health impacts.

At this relatively early stage, the after effects and long term impacts of COVID-19 on an individual's functional abilities are not yet fully known.

Within ESA and PIP, assessors must consider the impact of an individual's condition and symptoms on their ability to function on a daily basis and within the work place. This position has not changed and will continue to form the basis of these assessments. Therefore, any long term symptoms of COVID-19 will be considered along with all other conditions to ensure that robust information gathering occurs to enable the appropriate outcome to be advised.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Communities for an update on when the Dormant Accounts Fund, administered on her Department's behalf by the National Lottery, is due to open.

(AQW 6681/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I intend to lay a Strategic Plan setting out the purpose of the Fund in the Assembly very shortly. This is a requirement under the Dormant Bank and Building Society Accounts Act 2008. Once this Plan is in place the National Lottery Community Fund will proceed to open the Fund.

My officials are working with the NLCF to ensure that the Dormant Accounts Fund also complements and builds on the Covid Social Enterprise and Charities Funds established in response to Covid 19.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Communities what programmes her Department has put in place, equivalent to the JobCentre Plus Rapid Response Service in England, specifically to assist people resident in Northern Ireland who have been made redundant in the aviation industry during this financial year.

(AQW 6690/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is responsible for providing a redundancy support service to employers and people being made redundant. The Department works with other departments and stakeholders to provide people facing redundancy with information and advice on matters such as CVs, job searching, claiming benefits and training needs. The service offers virtual and face to face support to best meet the needs of both the employer and employees.

A Redundancy Clinic Webcast has been developed to provide employees with information on benefits, supports and services available as they prepare for redundancy including help with costs such as travel to interview expenses and help to search for and find a new job. On-site Redundancy Clinics can be arranged where social distancing requirements can be adhered to and immediate support is also available to impacted staff who make a claim for benefit as they will have a dedicated Work Coach who will provide ongoing tailored support to help them find work or retrain.

My Department is committed to supporting people who have been made redundant in the aviation industry and has delivered a virtual redundancy clinic for Thompson Aero Seating Ltd as well as an on-site redundancy clinic for Collins Aerospace. On-line resources have also been shared with both Easyjet Airline Company Ltd and Jet2.com for their impacted employees.

In addition to Redundancy Services my Department continues to provide Recruitment Services, including JobCentre Online and recruitment events which people facing redundancy can avail of.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities whether there are plans for additional funding to be provided to local councils to deal with deficits caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 6755/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 19 May 2020 Minister Hargey announced that the Executive was allocating £20.3m to local councils for the period mid-March – 30 June 2020, to assist them with their financial pressures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My Department continues to liaise with the Association of Local Government Finance Officers (ALGFO) and SOLACE to assess the cash flow issues faced by councils for the period 1 July – 31 March 2021. As a result of this liaison my Department is working with the Department of Finance in order to seek urgent funding for the second quarter, especially as they have and continue to lead on the community response to COVID-19.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what correspondence or communications she has had with the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy regarding the Kickstart Scheme for 16-24 year olds.

(AQW 6776/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My officials have had extensive engagement, meetings and workshops with officials from the Department for the Economy during the pandemic. These have focussed on the immediate labour market response and our longer term collective recovery response.

My Department is currently in the process of bidding for funding from the Department of Finance to cover the spend that will be required for an equivalent KickStart scheme here which should be up and running in November.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what correspondence or communications she has had with the Department for Work and Pensions regarding the Kickstart Scheme for 16-24 year olds.

(AQW 6777/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Officials in the Department for Work and Pensions were in contact with Department for Communities on 8 July 2020 after the announcement requesting a meeting to discuss the measures outlined by the British Chancellor. This meeting took place on 16 July 2020 with a second meeting taking place on 30 July 2020. The Department for Work and Pensions has shared information on how the Kickstart Scheme will be delivered in Britain.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Communities to detail her plans for the Affordable Warmth Scheme.

(AQW 6794/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A budget of £12m has been allocated to the Affordable Warmth Scheme for the year 2020/21. This level of funding will improve the energy efficiency of almost 2,700 low income households.

The Scheme is delivered in partnership between my Department, Local Council and the Housing Executive. Since its introduction in September 2014 my Department has invested just under £77m to improve the energy efficiency of 20,710 low income households. The Scheme has business case approval to run until March 2024.

I have recently approved some changes to the eligibility criteria for the Affordable Warmth Scheme in relation to increasing the income threshold from £20,000 to £23,000 and removing disability benefits from the calculation of income for the Scheme. Work is now ongoing to amend the relevant Scheme regulations and these changes to scheme eligibility will then be implemented.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the Rates Support Grant; and what progress has been made on the review of this grant scheme.

(AQW 6795/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Rates Support Grant (RSG) funding mechanism has been in place since 2003 and the policy intent of the grant is to annually provide financial support to those councils whose needs exceed their wealth relative to other councils.

At a meeting with council officials from the 7 councils currently in receipt of RSG, Minister Hargey agreed to provide the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) with a Terms of Reference for a review of the current funding mechanism of the RSG. My Department is currently engaging with Departmental Statisticians and Economists to ascertain capacity to take forward the review. This is at an early stage and SOLACE will be provided with a Terms of Reference for the review before it is commenced.

It is the Department's intention to commence the review in this financial year and an assessment of the RSG cannot be made until the review is completed.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Communities what measures will be brought forward to allow local councils to capitalise severance.

(AQW 6796/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Section 19(5) of the Local Government Finance Act (NI) 2011 allows my Department to issue capitalisation directions to councils. This permits, in very limited circumstances, specified items of expenditure normally classified as revenue to be treated as capital expenditure.

As part of the Reform of Local Government, cost cutting measures such as staff severance costs, were considered to meet the capitalisation criteria during the period 1 April 2015 – 31 December 2019.

My officials are currently looking at options of how the use of capitalisation directions for staff severance costs could be utilised for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the reduction in mandatory reconsideration requests for Personal Independence Payments from March 2020 to May 2020.

(AQW 6799/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The priority during this early period of the pandemic was to ensure people continued to receive their existing Personal Independence Payments.

To support this approach we announced on 23 March that no new award reviews forms would be issued and that awards would be automatically extended in those cases. In addition a further 2500 people whose award review was in progress also had their award extended.

This easement in PIP review work enabled the Department's resources, which were extremely limited at the time due to the pandemic, to focus on enabling access to financial support for new applicants.

The PIP statistics published at the end of August showed that almost 6,780 claims were determined in the 3-month period prior to March 2020; however, in the period between March and May 2020 just 3,100 claims were determined.

In addition, there was understandably a general reduction in the activity initiated by people claiming PIP during the pandemic. This reduction of customer activity, the temporary easements on review work and the reduction in the number of claims cleared between March and May 2020 all contributed to decrease in the number of Mandatory Reconsiderations received.

The most recent data collected in the Personal Independence Payment Centre indicates that the number of Mandatory Reconsideration received has now returned to similar levels prior to the pandemic.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities whether the £16m allocated to the Affordable Warmth scheme has been reduced; and by how much.

(AQW 6816/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A budget of £4m was initially allocated to the Affordable Warmth Scheme for the year 2020/21. This was increased to £8m in June 2020, then further increased to £12m following budget reallocations after the June monitoring round. There was a delay in setting opening budget allocations due to the COVID pandemic.

The situation this year is also unusual due to the impact of the COVID pandemic. This has challenged our ability to spend the allocated budgets due to restrictions imposed on the day to day running of the scheme earlier in the year, such as home visits. Work is ongoing with the Housing Executive and Councils to address this.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities on what date her officials began to design a bespoke scheme for young people in Northern Ireland, rather than signing up to the Kickstart scheme announced by the Chancellor.

(AQW 6863/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is important to understand that the Kickstart scheme only applies to Britain, Employability and Employment Schemes are a devolved matter. Following the date of the British Chancellor's announcement my officials commenced designing an equivalent scheme.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what date in November the bespoke scheme for Northern Ireland will be launched as an alternative to the Kickstart Scheme announced by the Chancellor.

(AQW 6864/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will ensure that details of the launch will be made available as soon as practically possible.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to outline her rationale for describing the Kickstart scheme as not being good enough for Northern Ireland at the Committee for Communities on Wednesday 9 September 2020.

(AQW 6866/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The KickStart scheme as set out by the British Chancellor was not designed for and does not meet the needs of here. Employability and Employment Schemes are a devolved matter.

I want to provide a scheme that best suits the needs of employers and young people here.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 6413/17-22, when her recommendation will be published to (i) the Executive; (ii) the Assembly; and (iii) the public.

(AQW 6871/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme is a commitment in the New Decade New Approach Agreement and I am committed to its implementation. Currently my officials are undertaking work to provide a robust evidence base for the Sub Regional Stadia Programme, to include a club survey and a series of strategic discussions with key stakeholders. A full analysis of the outcomes of both of these exercises, along with benchmarking and research will inform my proposals to Executive colleagues, the Assembly and the public on the future of the Programme.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities (i) how membership of the expert review panel on the Sexual Orientation Strategy was decided upon; (ii) how the Department ensured that membership was representative of the LGBTQ+ community; (iii) whether she intends to review the process that led to the appointment of the panel; and (iv) whether any future appointments to the panel will be made.

(AQW 6888/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My proposals for the development of four cross-cutting Social Inclusion Strategies, including a Sexual Orientation Strategy, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach are currently being considered by the Executive.

Subject to Executive agreement, I intend to appoint a four-member Expert Advisory Panel to make recommendations for the development of a Sexual Orientation Strategy and associated Action Plan. Panel members will be drawn from academia and the voluntary and community sectors, to ensure a balanced and representative perspective informs the development of the recommendations. Expert Advisory Panel members will be appointed based on their relevant knowledge and expertise to ensure they can make effective recommendations on the themes and key actions a Strategy should include and the gaps in provision that it should seek to address. The effectiveness of the co-design approach will be reviewed continuously throughout the development process.

I will publish more details of the Panel's membership and other aspects of the co-design process for developing the Sexual Orientation and other Strategies following Executive endorsement of the way forward.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities to detail the rationale for the delay in distributing further financial assistance to the arts and cultural sector, following the £33m in Barnett consequentials received by the Executive in early July.

(AQW 6892/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is for the Executive to decide where Barnett consequentials are allocated, however, DfC has submitted a bid for £33m, to secure financial support here to support culture, language, arts and heritage organisations, local musicians, freelancers and artists at a time when they are struggling to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. A Creative Support Fund, of £5.5 million, has already been established by the Department of which, to date, £1.9 million has been paid to small to medium organisations in addition to just over £0.5 million to individuals.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on COVID-19 Charities Grant; and to detail (i) the total number of applicants; (ii) the number of charities which were successful in their application; and (iii) whether any of the funding was sent back to the Executive.

(AQW 6943/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Covid-19 Charities Fund closed on 21 August 2020 and (i) six hundred and forty five applications had been received. Up to 9 September 2020 (ii) four hundred and sixty five applications have received offers of grant funding. One hundred and eighty applications remain to be assessed, and I fully expect that will be completed within a few weeks.

I have asked my officials to identify ongoing financial challenges within the sector and bring forward options so that I can consider how to best address these.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities for clarity on the possible resumption of Parkrun events.

(AQW 6944/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can advise that the current Covid Regulations permit sporting and recreational activities to recommence on the basis that the organisers can fully comply with the Covid safety guidelines including social distancing, hygiene and the completion of risk assessments.

Event organisers should also ensure that consideration is given to the potential risks events might present to local communities and other facility users and build these into their plans and protocols.

Sport NI continues to provide advice and guidance to the sports sector as the various bodies take steps to ensure a safe return to activities. More details can be found at www.sportni.net/return-to-sport/.

I can also advise that Parkrun Global have developed protocols which were considered by the Return to Sport Expert Group, an advisory body which is chaired by the Department. The Group considered the protocols on 21 August and provided a number of comments.

The resumption of Parkrun events is a matter for Parkrun Global and the local event organisers who will be responsible for ensuring that events are fully compliant with the Covid Regulations and for providing a safe environment for all those involved including administrators, volunteers and participants.

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Communities whether gambling operators are permitted, under the Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (Northern Ireland) Order 1985, to advertise their services on online platforms to the public in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6953/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (NI) Order 1985 (the 1985 Order) regulates local gambling advertising on radio, television and on billboards. It does not permit online advertising as it predates the Internet.

Online advertising of gambling products and services is regulated under

Section 5 of the Gambling (Licensing and Advertising) Act 2014 which permits a remote (online) operator to advertise to consumers here provided they hold the appropriate Gambling Commission licence.

Both local and online advertising of gambling products and services must comply with the Advertising Codes issued by the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) and administered by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA).

Enforcement of the law is a matter for the PSNI.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the sub-regional stadia programme for soccer, including when the fund will be open for applications.

(AQW 6963/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the “New Decade, New Approach” Deal and my Department has begun work to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the current challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels. Following this work I will present recommendations to Executive colleagues on the future implementation of the Programme including proposed timescales.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the development of St Patrick’s Barracks.

(AQW 7040/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department for Communities is leading the housing-led regeneration of the former St Patrick’s Barracks site as a mixed use development. My officials are working closely with all the project stakeholders to deliver a regeneration scheme which will realise the site’s potential and benefit the entire community.

While stakeholders are progressing the detail of their individual schemes, the Department is working to make the site ready for development in accordance with the approved development plan. This will include the delivery of significant new road infrastructure at the site, and work is progressing to begin the process of procuring a contractor for this in the coming months. Further buildings demolitions are also required, in addition to those already removed, to facilitate recent requests from stakeholders. This will also be the focus of an upcoming procurement exercise.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities for an update on implementation of Greater Clarendon (Sailortown) Masterplan.

(AQW 7070/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have recently agreed to formally adopt the Greater Clarendon (Sailortown) Masterplan and associated documents as supplementary policy for the regeneration of Belfast City Centre and the Department is currently exploring options with Belfast City Council, the Harbour Commissioners and other stakeholders for taking forward priority projects contained in the Accessibility and Design Guide.

The Department for Communities is preparing work that will seek to identify opportunity sites within the Greater Clarendon Masterplan area, particularly those within the emerging Ulster University and City Fringe areas, for future development.

The Department is currently considering how these projects are prioritised within existing budgets and plans.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities, to enable proposed developments on the Fort George site in Derry to progress, whether her Department will meet the estimated £1 million cost of remediation work on Creggan Reservoirs.

(AQW 7164/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The issues around the Creggan Reservoir are not specific to just the Fort George site. However, DfC officials, in partnership with DfI and Derry City and Strabane District Council colleagues, are working in partnership in order to seek solutions. Work is underway to identify the cost of essential remediation works but, once quantified, any funding requirement will need to be considered more fully alongside key partners.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what steps she is taking to tackle fuel poverty; and what support is available to support households out of fuel poverty.

(AQW 7224/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department of Communities approach has been to tackle the effects of fuel poverty both through direct interventions and behavioural changes within households.

Current Programmes include the Affordable Warmth Scheme, Boiler Replacement Scheme, The Energy Advice line, Oil buying clubs and the School Education Programme.

Department of Education

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education whether his current plans for the return of education are based on the R rate being zero by September, or are they based on the current R rate.

(AQW 4950/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Department of Education's plans for reopening schools are guided by the prevailing scientific evidence base. The re-opening schools guidance, "New School Day", has been informed by judgements based on the scientific and public health advice available at the time of writing, with planning assumptions for end August. The document should be read and applied in conjunction with the latest public health guidance.

Given the changing scientific and public health environment we are in, this guidance will change in line with the latest advice and as such should be treated as "agile" guidance.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education what support will be made available to schools should they experience staffing pressures relating to self-isolating.

(AQW 6147/17-22)

Mr Weir: To help support schools address many of the new pressures arising as a result of Covid-19, I outlined a significant package of funding to help support the safe reopening of schools, details of which are available on the Department's website.

This includes £17.5m towards the cost of substitute teachers, non-teaching staff and other school expenditure. The Department, in conjunction with the Education Authority will continue to monitor funding requirements as schools reopen and as the pandemic progresses, and any school facing financial difficulty should contact the Education Authority as Funding Authority for grant aided schools, in the normal way.

The Education Authority has also established an Operations Centre Helpline for Schools. The Operations Centre has been established to support with enquiries relating to Education, Health and Safety, Human Resources, Transport and Procurement and is available Monday –Friday 9:00am –5:00pm by calling 028 3836 8186 or Email: covid-19@eani.org.uk.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether schools will be provided with additional funding to ensure pupils have appropriate seating while attending classes.

(AQW 6169/17-22)

Mr Weir: New School Day guidance, issued on 13 August 2020, relaxed the stringent application of social distancing requirements between pupils. Guidance outlines key risk mitigation strategies, such as regular cleaning, adjusting physical layouts in classrooms, use of segmentation (or bubbles) and use of face coverings where appropriate. The relaxation of social distancing requirements should reduce the need for any additional seating.

To help support schools address many of the new pressures arising as a result of Covid-19, I outlined a significant package of funding to help support the safe reopening of schools, details of which are available on the Department's website.

The Department, in conjunction with the Education Authority (EA), will continue to monitor funding requirements as schools reopen and as the pandemic progresses, and any school facing financial difficulty should contact the EA as Funding Authority for grant aided schools, in the normal way.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education what efforts are being made to identify and support at risk children who may have suffered as a consequence of lockdown with no respite from a potentially abusive environment at home.

(AQW 6224/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department has been progressing work to ensure an effective response to Covid-19 related issues. This includes contributing to the development and monitoring of a cross-departmental plan to support vulnerable children and young people during the pandemic which was tabled and agreed before the NI Executive. A copy of the consultation document and questionnaire for the plan is available at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/consultations/consultation-cross-departmental-covid-19-vulnerable-children-and-young-peoples-plan>.

Increased risk of harm in the home is one of the risks to vulnerable children and young people that the cross-departmental plan seeks to address along with the challenge of reduced visibility of children and young people due to lockdown restrictions. Public awareness of the risks and challenges to children as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions and signposting of sources of advice and support were promoted during lockdown.

In addition to schools remaining open to facilitate the education for children of key workers, a multi-disciplinary team was also established to consider referrals for school placements for vulnerable children and young people where it was in their best interests. Schools were encouraged to identify those children who would most benefit from the safety and stability of school during the lockdown and encourage them to attend during that time. Vulnerable children were also among the first cohorts to return to school on 24 August 2020 under the Department's Education Restart Programme.

Departmental Guidance, 'Safeguarding and Child Protection - a Guide for Schools' remained applicable throughout lockdown and the Education Authority (EA) also published, 'Safeguarding Children Guidance – During Covid-19'. Both publications are

available on the respective websites and provide advice on the support and identification of those children and young people at risk.

It is also important to highlight the contribution of the Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS), funded by my Department and managed by the EA which operated remotely throughout the lockdown and education restart, providing effective support to post primary pupils.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Education to clarify the risk assessment guidance his Department has provided to schools with regards to the use of single use plastics.

(AQW 6263/17-22)

Mr Weir: The operation of school meals kitchens and dining facilities is generally a matter for the Education Authority.

The Education Authority (EA) recognises the issue you have raised and are conscious of the use of single use plastics within the school environment.

All measures currently being taken in restarting education are of a temporary and emergency nature. The resources deployed and decisions being made in relation to school safety and reduction in the risk of infection are based on the latest ongoing and continuously updated advice from the NI Public Health Agency (PHA), to minimise or eliminate the spread of Covid-19 between and within the home and school settings.

EA has developed a range of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's) on its website as a means of disseminating relevant information related to Covid-19. <https://www.eani.org.uk/education-restart>

The latest guidance from the PHA is that a child may bring their lunch to school in a reusable, washable container and the parent/guardian should take care to make sure this is washed thoroughly every day after school.

Likewise, a reusable bottle filled with water at home may be used, and again the parent/guardian should take care to make sure this is washed thoroughly every day after school. If water bottles are to be filled in schools then appropriate hand hygiene should be adhered to prior to filling the water bottle and the school should arrange frequent cleaning of the water taps / machines surfaces to allow children to refill bottles.

This guidance will allow parents to choose for themselves whether to use reusable containers or single use containers for their child's lunch requirements.

This updated PHA guidance will be added to the EA FAQ guidance under the "Health and Safety FAQ" section at <https://www.eani.org.uk/education-restart>

Where a single use plastic container or bottle is used in a school, these should be put into the recycling waste stream after use.

EA Catering is currently using such materials across schools where classroom service is in place. The EA Catering fully recognise the environmental implications associated with single use plastics and similar products. EA are reviewing this usage and have successfully sourced a multiple use product which they are encouraging schools to revert to using, where practicable.

Bottled water is mainly being provided where meals are being served in classrooms. Carrying jugs of water around corridors and constantly having to return to refill these is not a viable option due to the health and safety risks associated with spills, etc. and the timeline available in meeting the lunchtime period.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education whether additional funding will be provided for substitute cover for staff who will not be able to return to school following a risk assessment.

(AQW 6271/17-22)

Mr Weir: To help support schools address many of the new pressures arising as a result of Covid-19, I outlined a significant package of funding to help support the safe reopening of schools, details of which are available on the Department's website.

This includes £17.5m towards the cost of substitute teachers, non-teaching staff and other school expenditure. The Department, in conjunction with the Education Authority will continue to monitor funding requirements as schools reopen and as the pandemic progresses, and any school facing financial difficulty should contact the Education Authority as Funding Authority for grant aided schools, in the normal way.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Education whether (i) the area planning process has recommenced; and (ii) the Education Authority's Education Committee has restarted discussions and decisions on development proposals.

(AQW 6316/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- i All Area Planning activity (with the exception of special education provision in mainstream and special school settings) was paused on 3 April 2020 with all available resources being deployed in support of the Department's emergency response to COVID-19. The Department has written to the Area Planning Steering Group convening a meeting in October.

- ii. The Education Authority's Education Committee met for the first time this academic year on 10 September 2020. Only area planning business/development proposals for Special Schools and specialist provision in mainstream schools is being considered until area planning activity is resumed.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education to outline the dates for the essential training package to be delivered to school principals concerning the handling of potentially hazardous materials.
(AQW 6373/17-22)

Mr Weir: There is no need to handle potentially hazardous materials in schools by teaching and non-teaching staff.

The Public Health Agency (PHA) has published guidance to support safe working in educational settings in Northern Ireland at the following link:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Guidance%20to%20support%20safe%20Working%20in%20Educational%20Settings%20in%20Northern%20Ireland%20-%202022%206%2020.pdf>

This advises that routine use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) within education settings is not required other than for certain tasks deemed to be of higher risk of transmission.

When PPE is used, it is essential that it is used properly. This includes scrupulous hand hygiene and following guidance on putting on and taking off PPE safely to reduce the risk of contamination.

PHA guidance makes clear that staff should continue to use PPE in line with current health and safety policies and risk assessments. Staff should only wear PPE when it is appropriate to the task they are undertaking.

Enhanced and Terminal Cleaning are only recommended during an outbreak of COVID-19. For further detailed information read 'COVID-19: cleaning of non-healthcare settings. COVID-19: cleaning of non-healthcare settings'.

This and further detail on hygiene and physical protection measures can be found in Section 2 of the New School Day guidance.

Schools have been made aware of and signposted to all the relevant Departmental, PHA and Government guidance on hygiene and physical protection measures.

Schools have recently been advised that they will receive a supply of 10 home test kits through a Department of Health and Social Care initiative. These are home test kits which should only be offered to individuals in the exceptional circumstance that you believe an individual may have barriers to accessing testing elsewhere.

Schools are responsible for storing test kits, offering the option of a test kit to a parent/carer/staff member (only where there are concerns that normal testing arrangements to source a test have failed) and for re-ordering of kits. These tasks pose no danger to any individual or to a school. Tests will not be administered in schools, therefore there are no issues arising regarding use of PPE.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how his Department is supporting and monitoring the capacity of schools to implement the school restart guidance.
(AQW 6394/17-22)

Mr Weir: To help support schools to address many of the new pressures arising as a result of Covid-19, on 24 August 2020 I outlined a significant package of funding to help support the safe reopening of schools. This funding will help address some of the new pressures arising as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and in doing so, protect our children and young people and those working in education settings.

Designated link officers from the Education Authority are working directly with school leaders to ensure that individual issues are resolved promptly and to identify what more can be done to provide support. My Department also has ongoing engagement with Managing Authorities, trades unions and sectoral support bodies to work through some of the operational aspects.

An updated version of the New School Day (NSD) Guidance will issue later this week to take account of comments from schools and further information provided by the Public Health Agency.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education (i) to detail the use of face coverings in post-primary schools; (ii) to advise of the process if a child is unable to wear a face covering due to a medical or other issue; and (iii) whether schools have discretion to decide if, where and when their students must wear face coverings.
(AQW 6572/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- i) In light of the latest scientific advice from the World Health Organisation, and from the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Officer, the advice on the use of face coverings within education settings is as follows:
- In Primary schools children are recommended not to use face coverings because of the range of mitigation measures schools have in place, the reduced rate of transmission to and from children of this age.

- Face coverings are strongly recommended to be worn where adults and young people in post-primary schools (including special schools and independent and grant aided schools) are moving about the school in corridors and confined communal areas (including toilets) where physical distancing is particularly difficult to maintain.
 - In line with the current arrangements for public transport, it is mandatory for all pupils aged 13 and over to wear a face covering on public transport. It is also strongly recommended that all pupils, regardless of age, should wear a face covering on all buses, trains or taxis for the journey to school where it is appropriate for them to do so and they are able to handle them as directed.
 - Outside of classrooms, face coverings must be worn by adults where they cannot keep 2m distance and are interacting face-to-face with other adults and/or children and young people; and, by all adults visiting the school site.
 - Face coverings are strongly recommended for activities that entail large numbers of staff or pupils within an enclosed space where social distancing is not possible.
 - Staff and pupils may wish to use them during the routine school day and this is acceptable.
- ii) Schools should be aware that some persons (including children) are exempt from wearing face coverings and this should be treated sensitively. There is no need to get a letter from a doctor or the government to show that you do not need to wear a face covering.
- iii) Schools are advised to operate within the relevant guidelines. No one should be excluded from school for failure to have or wear a face covering.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what is the (i) budget; and (ii) cost to date of the HR/Payroll project in the Education Authority.

(AQW 6594/17-22)

Mr Weir: The new HR/Payroll solution for the Education Authority (EA) forms part of the EA One Project that encompasses an integrated Finance, Procurement, HR, Payroll and Online Recruitment solution on one single Oracle platform.

The budget for the EA One Project is as set out in the approved business case. This covers the design, build, implementation and ongoing live service costs of the new Oracle system over a ten year period through to April 2027.

The Finance and Procurement elements of the solution have been in live service since December 2016 and the complete Online Recruitment solution (for internal EA and school-based recruitment) since January 2020. However, the most complex element of the solution, HR & Payroll, is still going through the build and testing phase in preparation for the commencement of implementation activities in April 2021. Consequently, elements of the contract might still be subject to future negotiations with the supplier should deviations from the initial plan be required.

Public disclosure of the budget and spend to date would be commercially prejudicial to the EA as this information would provide the supplier with valuable insight and context for any future negotiations the EA might be required to undertake with them between now and full implementation of the HR & Payroll solution, which is currently scheduled to complete by March 2022.

The EA One Project is currently forecasting to deliver the full integrated solution and live running costs for the contract life span within the approved financial envelope.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what assessment of value for money made of the HR/Payroll project in the Education Authority; and by what criteria.

(AQW 6595/17-22)

Mr Weir: The new HR/Payroll solution for the Education Authority (EA) forms part of the EA One Project that encompasses an integrated Finance, Procurement, HR, Payroll and Online Recruitment solution on one single Oracle platform.

The value for money case for this Project formed a key part of the assessment carried out by the EA, the Department and the Department of Finance prior to approval to proceed being granted.

The objectives of the project were assessed against a range of monetary and non-monetary costs and benefits criteria including:

- allowing the integration of Finance, HR and Payroll across the EA to enable staffing and service delivery efficiencies;
- allowing the delivery of robust and reliable information for the financial management and accountability of the EA;
- provision of an accurate and timely payroll function to employees within education; and
- providing the EA with access to the latest market technology to meet its needs in respect of Finance, Procurement, HR, Payroll and Recruitment.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what has been paid since the start of the HR/Payroll project in the Education Authority to (i) Deloitte; (ii) Fijutsi; and (iii) other private consultants.

(AQW 6596/17-22)

Mr Weir: My answer to AQW 6594/17-22 refers.

Public disclosure of this information would be commercially prejudicial to the Education Authority (EA) as it would provide the supplier with valuable insight and context for any future negotiations the EA might be required to undertake with them between now and full implementation of the HR & Payroll solution.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education (i) how many staff are involved with the HR/Payroll project in the Education Authority; and (ii) of those, how many are staff of (a) Deloitte; (b) Fujitsu; and (c) other private consultants.
(AQW 6597/17-22)

Mr Weir: The number of staff currently working on the Project are as follows:

- Education Authority (EA) staff - 23;
- Deloitte – 18;
- Fujitsu – 24; and
- other external staff – 2.

In addition to this, the Project also requires input from internal EA business-as-usual staff on an ad hoc basis on all aspects of the design, build, test and implementation of the new HR & Payroll solution. A policy is adopted of seeking to fill Project positions through internal EA recruitment first, before external recruitment options are considered.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Education (i) what actions are being taken to progress work on the School Enhancement Programme for (a) Fairview Primary School; (b) Ballyclare Primary School; and (c) Ballyrobert Primary School; and (ii) what stage these schools are at in the process.
(AQW 6680/17-22)

Mr Weir: Fairview Primary School, Ballyclare Primary School and The Thompson Primary School were all included in an announcement on the 21 January 2019 of a second tranche of schools to advance in design under the School Enhancement Programme Second Call (SEP2).

As these are controlled schools the Education Authority (EA) is undertaking the delivery of these projects. The EA has advised that these three projects are currently at Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Stage 1, with Integrated Consultancy Teams (ICTs) appointed to each project. The ICTs are currently working on technical feasibility studies for each school, which involves looking at various options on the existing school sites. The outputs from the technical feasibility reports will inform the business case for each project.

Steering Groups have been set up for each individual school, involving representatives from the school and other key stakeholders.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to explain how the HR/Payroll project in the Education Authority is monitored to whom it is answerable.
(AQW 6692/17-22)

Mr Weir: The EA One Project is managed and monitored in accordance with best practice set out by the Department of Finance's Centre of Expertise for Programme and Project Management. In accordance with PRINCE2, the Project is reportable and answerable to a single Senior Responsible Owner (SRO), the Director of Finance & ICT for the Education Authority (EA).

The SRO chairs both the lead design authority for the Project, the EA One Project Implementation Board, and the overall governance authority for the project, the EA One Project Board. Both of these Boards include senior officers from the EA and the Department of Education (DE), and they meet every 4-6 weeks with regular updates provided by individual project managers.

The SRO for the EA One Project also reports to the DE ICT Programme Board.

Finally, as the EA One Project is led at Director level within the EA, regular updates are also provided to the EA Corporate Leadership Team chaired by the EA Chief Executive.

The Project is monitored through regular update meetings at all levels, all of which ultimately report through to the SRO (in accordance with PRINCE2 methodology.) It also incorporates the DoF recommended gateway review processes into its planned activities to provide assurance for operational readiness.

The Project continues to work within established project governance structures, and reports to DE through regular update meetings with the DE Finance Director. These updates focus on risk, financials and benefits realisation, in line with the Departmental role in respect of the business case approval.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education to explain the (i) status; (ii) function; (iii) composition; and (iv) cost of EAOne in regard to the HR/Payroll project in the Education Authority.
(AQW 6694/17-22)

Mr Weir: The new HR/Payroll solution for the Education Authority (EA) forms part of the EA One Project that encompasses an integrated Finance, Procurement, HR, Payroll and Online Recruitment solution on one single Oracle platform. It is a major

system implementation project responsible for the design, build, testing and implementation of a procured Oracle solution required to deliver integrated Finance, Procurement, HR, Payroll and Online Recruitment functions for the EA (and DE in respect of the teachers' payroll.)

- i. The status of the EA One Project is that the Finance and Procurement elements of the solution have been in live service since December 2016. In relation to the HR/Payroll elements of the Project, Online Recruitment went live for corporate EA staff in May 2019 and for schools in January 2020. The remaining HR and Payroll elements of the Project are at User Acceptance Testing stage with implementation due to commence in April 2021.
- ii. The function of the EA One Project is to ensure the successful implementation of these integrated solutions within a revised operating model for the EA. The delivery of the Project is a strategic priority for the EA and the wider Education Sector in Northern Ireland as it is a fundamental building block in delivering the sectoral solution for education, as set out by the Public Sector Shared Service Programme. It is paramount that the integration of systems, people and processes can be enabled to deliver better, more efficient and more effective outcomes into the sector.
- iii. As regards the HR & Payroll solution, the composition of the Project consists of procured supplier resource from Fujitsu Services Limited as the main Oracle system provider and integrator. This resource is matched with an EA project implementation team that consists of internal EA recruited staff and external staff substitution resource from Deloitte LLP. These resources are augmented with input from operational business teams within the EA and DE to assist with the overall design, testing and implementation. The Project also has appropriate governance arrangements in place in the form of a Senior Responsible Owner who is the EA Director of Finance and ICT, a Programme Board comprising Directors and Assistant Directors from across the EA and DE, as well as an Implementation Board comprising other senior managers from EA and DE.
- iv. The approved cost of the EA One Project covers the design, build, implementation and ongoing live service costs of the new Oracle system over a ten year period through to April 2027. As noted in my answers to AQW 6594 17-22 and AQW 9596 17-22, public disclosure of the budget and spend to date would be commercially prejudicial to the EA as this information would provide the supplier with valuable insight and context for any future negotiations the EA might be required to undertake with them between now and full implementation of the HR & Payroll solution.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education what actions he has taken to ensure children and young people who have hearing impairments are not being excluded through use of material face coverings.
(AQW 6739/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority Sensory Service has advised that individual discussions/assessments should take place in schools, in partnership with individual children with hearing impairments and their families, to consider the impact of any decision to use face coverings in the classroom and communal areas of the school.

The Education Authority Teachers of the Deaf are available to provide support in order to mitigate the risks to the learning and communication needs of deaf children and young people.

There has been no specific guidance issued in relation to the use of clear masks in Special Schools; ordinary schools nor in relation to transport staff.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education what guidance has been provided to (i) special schools; and (ii) all other schools to ensure clear face masks are used by teaching and other staff, including transport staff, to improve communication and reduce anxiety for children and young people.
(AQW 6740/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority Sensory Service has advised that individual discussions/assessments should take place in schools, in partnership with individual children with hearing impairments and their families, to consider the impact of any decision to use face coverings in the classroom and communal areas of the school.

The Education Authority Teachers of the Deaf are available to provide support in order to mitigate the risks to the learning and communication needs of deaf children and young people.

There has been no specific guidance issued in relation to the use of clear masks in Special Schools; ordinary schools nor in relation to transport staff.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education when he will publish the Children and Young People's Strategy.
(AQW 6761/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Children and Young People's Strategy was scheduled to be sent to the Committee for Education in March 2020, following which I had intended to bring it to the Executive for consideration; unfortunately its progress was paused due to the pandemic.

The strategy has been updated over the summer to reflect the impact of the pandemic and will be referred to the Committee for Education shortly. An oral briefing session with officials is scheduled for 14 October, following which I will bring the Strategy to the Executive for consideration in accordance with procedure. Once the strategy is adopted by the Executive, I will arrange for it to be laid in the Assembly and published.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Education when the land and school at St Mary's High School, Brollagh, became vested with Department of Education.

(AQW 6834/17-22)

Mr Weir: The lands at St Mary's High School, Brollagh are registered to St Michaels Diocesan Trust. The Vesting Leases fall under two Folio's, Number 14456 which was signed by the Diocese on 24 November 1958 and Number 14780 which was signed on 22 November 1962.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education (i) what work is being undertaken by his Department to assess circumstances where legal deferral of statutory school starting age may be appropriate; and (ii) whether he has plans to legislate in this regard in time to provide clarity for parents of children due to commence statutory education in 2021.

(AQW 6845/17-22)

Mr Weir: You will be aware that my Department consulted previously on proposals for deferring school starting age in exceptional circumstances. I have asked officials to revisit and update that work for me to consider the most appropriate way forward.

Any change in policy could require primary legislation and would include the need to engage with the Education Committee.

Until I have fully assessed the options presented, I will not be in a position to set out how I intend to proceed in terms of legislation or timing.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Education whether the childcare sector will receive personal protective equipment from the £19.2 million recently received by the Department of Education.

(AQW 6874/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department has recently allocated an additional £19.2m funding to the Education Authority (EA), specifically for Education Restart Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) pressures in schools.

You will be aware that the childcare sector has been supported during the Covid-19 pandemic by two separate funding streams. The Covid-19 Childcare Sector Support Scheme covered the period (April-June) and was an emergency package of measures. The support enabled a number of registered daycare settings, school age childcare settings and childminders to remain open for vulnerable children and those of key workers and provided support to settings which closed, helping to support the sustainability of the sector. Payments made to providers who remained open would have helped them to meet enhanced requirements on infection control, including PPE where required.

The purpose of the Childcare Recovery Support Fund (July-August) was to support the reopening of childcare provision in July and August 2020, to ensure childcare was available as far as possible for parents who need it, to support economic recovery and return to work in line with the Northern Ireland Executive Recovery Plan. It provided a level of financial support to childcare providers to assist with the additional costs of operating within Department of Health COVID-19 guidance in particular the guidance on Infection Control and Prevention e.g. additional cleaning, cost of more cleaning products, and/or PPE.

My officials are continuing to work with the sector and the Childcare Reference Group to consider the needs of the sector post August subject to the availability of further funding from the Executive specifically for the childcare sector.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education whether the criteria for youth capital funding has been updated.

(AQW 6881/17-22)

Mr Weir: To be eligible for capital funding under the 2016/17 Voluntary Youth Capital Call, voluntary youth organisations had to be registered with the Education Authority and be able to demonstrate a youth programme for at least 9 hours a week for a minimum of 30 weeks per annum.

There is currently no open Call for voluntary youth capital schemes. The protocol identifying eligibility criteria would typically be reviewed in advance of any planned future call for proposals.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Education, in relation to Key Stage 1 pupils who live more than two miles from their primary school, for a breakdown of the number of pupils that (i) avail; (ii) do not avail, of transport via the Education Authority.

(AQW 6883/17-22)

Mr Weir: In terms of the proximity of a child's home to their school and their use of the home to school transport service, the Education Authority (EA) only holds data relating to those pupils who have applied for home to school transport assistance. To be eligible for transport assistance, pupils at primary level need to live more than two miles from their school, based on the shortest walkable route, and have been unsuccessful in applying for a place in all schools in the same category of school within two miles of their home. It is therefore not possible to provide the information you have sought, however the EA has confirmed that 5,432 pupils at Key Stage 1 currently receive transport assistance.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on discussions with the Department for the Economy on the publication of qualifications, obtained by pupils while at school, by the Department for the Economy in the Longitudinal Education Outcomes database; and (ii) whether he will commit to his Department's full engagement and co-operation in

making the Longitudinal Education Outcomes database a comprehensive and valuable tool that helps develop Northern Ireland's policy on skills development.

(AQW 6896/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) Officials in my Department have been in discussion with officials in the Department for the Economy to develop a Longitudinal Education Outcomes database in Northern Ireland. Discussions have been focussed on data sharing protocols and governance arrangements regarding the purpose and use of the database.
- (ii) My Department is working with officials in the Department for Economy and I hope this will prove to be a valuable tool.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether he has considered prioritising COVID-19 testing for key education workers.

(AQW 6911/17-22)

Mr Weir: The responsibility for COVID-19 testing rests with the Department of Health (DoH). DoH has advised that there are currently no immediate plans to introduce routine testing for asymptomatic teachers and pupils in Northern Ireland.

Currently testing is only available for individuals who have symptoms of COVID-19 or have been advised by the Public Health Agency Contact Tracing Service to have a test. If an individual does not have these specific symptoms, they do not require a test.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education whether he has considered revision of care allowance for teachers who receive loss of pay for following self-isolation guidelines.

(AQW 6912/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department of Education is not the employer of teachers. In Northern Ireland teachers' terms & conditions are negotiated through the Teachers' Negotiating Committee (TNC) which has representatives from Management and the teachers' unions. The main teaching employers, Education Authority (EA) and Catholic Council for Maintained Schools (CCMS) have both advised that they are not aware of any teacher having lost pay as a result of following self-isolation guidelines. Teachers who are absent as a result of following self-isolation guidelines continue to receive normal pay.

Teachers do not receive care allowance, however they may apply for special leave to care for dependants. Revised absence guidance will issue shortly, which covers arrangements for leave in situations where teachers are absent due to caring responsibilities for their dependants, who have been required to self-isolate.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Education to provide an update on plans to address the building improvements required at Moneyrea Primary and Nursery School.

(AQW 6926/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is a matter for the Education Authority (EA), as the school's managing authority, to determine whether they would submit Moneyrea Primary and Nursery School for consideration under future calls for either the Major Capital Investment Programme or the School Enhancement Programme.

The school submitted one application for a multi-purpose hall under the October 2017 Minor Works Call. The application was however not ranked highly enough to proceed at this time. Outside the call, only emergency or unavoidable works are currently being considered. The school can make applications to the Education Authority (EA) for such works through the minor works process.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education (i) for an update on the Free School Meals scheme over summer months; (ii) to detail the total spend on the scheme, (iii) to detail the number of children who received entitlements; and (iv) whether any of the £12 million funding was returned to the Executive.

(AQW 6941/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Summer Food Payment scheme ran from 1 July to 31 August and provided assistance to families whose children were entitled to free school meals at 30 June 2020. The total DE spend for the Summer Food Payment Scheme was in the region of £11,942,445 and 100,570 children received assistance via the payment scheme. These figures include 88 children of asylum seekers who were provided with support via the Aspen card scheme at an estimated cost of approximately £10,400.

No funding has been returned to the Executive to date.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Education what steps can be taken by the Education Authority to improve the building facilities at Ballycraig Primary School.

(AQW 6947/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is a matter for the Education Authority (EA), as the school's managing authority, to determine whether they would submit Ballycraig Primary School for consideration under future calls for either the Major Capital Investment Programme or the School Enhancement Programme.

The school can also make applications to the EA for smaller capital works through the minor works process and the EA recently completed a roofing upgrade scheme at the school in January 2020.

Outside of the last minor works call in October 2017, only emergency or unavoidable works are currently being considered.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education (i) whether he has sought, or plans to seek, assistance from the Minister of Health to provide counselling in schools and colleges for staff and pupils in order to secure better mental health support and outcomes; (ii) how many post-primary pupils are currently on a waiting list for counselling services; and (iii) how long it will take to fulfil the waiting list demand.

(AQW 6987/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) My Department has been working collaboratively with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency, the Health and Social Care Board, the Education Authority (EA) and other Government Departments to develop a Framework for Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education. This work is progressing well and we are working to complete it by December 2020.

The main emphasis of the Framework is to support schools to promote emotional health and wellbeing at a universal level, through a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach, and providing early and enhanced support for those children and young people who may be at risk or showing signs of needing further help. It also recognises that staff need to be supported themselves if they are to be expected to support children and young people in their care.

In implementing the Framework, £5m recurrent funding has been made available by my Department to support mental health and wellbeing within the education sector, and the Health Minister has agreed to provide an additional £1.5m on a recurrent basis from 2021/22 onwards.

Agreement on the appropriate interventions and support will form part of the outworkings of the Framework, through an agreed action plan. While further research is needed to inform any future decision on providing counselling in Primary Schools, my Department is in the process of engaging with the EA to develop an appropriate pilot for evaluation taking into account the needs of primary school children.

- (ii) The EA has advised that as of 11 September 2020 there are 89 pupils on the waiting list for counselling services from the 199 Post Primary Schools and 25 Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) Centres. 48 pupils have been assessed and the remaining 41 will be assessed within the next week. There is also one post primary aged pupil on the waiting list in a Special School who has been assessed.
- (iii) The EA has also advised that Counselling will commence for pupils on the waiting list within the next 2-6 weeks.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education to detail any discussions he has had with CCEA regarding qualification specifications and exams for academic year 2020/21.

(AQW 7021/17-22)

Mr Weir: My officials have been working closely with CCEA throughout the summer as proposals for examinations in 2021 were developed, and are continuing to work with CCEA to take account of the feedback from the recent public consultation. I also met with the Chair of CCEA Council on 17 September. Careful consideration is being given, as a matter of urgency, to the views expressed during the consultation before final decisions are taken.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education when the Area Planning team will recommence their work; and to outline what impact the temporary suspension of duties has had on schools caught in the system.

(AQW 7031/17-22)

Mr Weir: Arrangements are being finalised to convene a meeting of the Area Planning Steering Group in October to restart formally area planning activity.

The integrity of the area planning process relies on engagement and consultation to help shape formal proposals for educational provision. Where necessary, my Department has extended the consultation period for Development Proposals published prior to the decision to stand down area planning activity and divert that resource to the COVID response. This will ensure that all schools impacted by a proposal will have full opportunity to have their views taken into consideration when area planning activity is recommenced.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Education in relation to improvements for Ballycraigy Primary School, to detail (i) the estimated cost to bring the building up to good repair; (ii) when it was last inspected; (iii) any applications for medial works; (iv) any work that failed to be carried out and why; and (v) any works currently programmed and when these will start.

(AQW 7053/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The estimated cost to bring the building up to good repair, based on the latest condition report, is £729,428;
- (ii) The last condition survey was carried out in February 2016;

- (iii) The Education Authority has confirmed that there are currently no applications for maintenance at Ballycraigy Primary School;
- (iv) The Education Authority has confirmed that all response health and safety maintenance repair works at the school have been carried out as and when reported;
- (v) A replacement window, door and curtain wall upgrade scheme is on the minor works programme for proposed delivery in the 2021/22, subject to capital funding being made available.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education to provide a breakdown of GCSE attainment of all grades for Craigavon Senior High School, for the last 4 academic years, broken down by Lurgan Campus and Portadown Campus.

(AQW 7104/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Summary of Annual Examination Results (SAER) process collates summary school level examinations data for Northern Ireland and validates them with schools. The data include equivalent qualifications.

School level examinations data for Craigavon Senior High School for the last four academic years are detailed below in Table 1. As the data are attributed to a single school reference number (521-0282), it is not possible to distinguish between the pupils of Craigavon Senior High School with regard to which campus (Lurgan or Portadown) they attend.

Table 1: Craigavon Senior High School (School ID: 521-0282) Examination Results - 2015/16 to 2018/19

Academic Year	2015/ 2016	2016/ 2017	2017/ 2018	2018/ 2019
Number of Year 12 pupils eligible for inclusion in SAER return	265	283	241	281
Year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs1, 2 at grades A*-G	100.0%	98.6%	97.5%	94.7%
Year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs1, 2 at grades A*-G (incl. GCSE English and GCSE maths)	95.1%	92.9%	96.7%	86.5%
Year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs1, 2 at grades A*-C	49.1%	48.1%	42.7%	63.7%
Year 12 pupils achieving 5 or more GCSEs1, 2 at grades A*-C (incl. GCSE English and GCSE maths)	34.0%	26.5%	27.0%	37.0%

Source: Summary of Annual Examination Results

Notes:

- 1 GCSE examination results include equivalent qualifications.
- 2 Excludes pupils ineligible for inclusion in the SAER return.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Education, in light of current social distancing restrictions for parents and guardians taking pupils to school premises, what consideration can be given to recategorising the provision of school crossing patrols as an essential service.

(AQW 7105/17-22)

Mr Weir: Although there is no legal requirement for the Education Authority to provide school crossing patrols, legislation allows them to do so on the basis of them "assisting in the prevention of accidents." Their role therefore does not extend into areas such as the application of social distancing.

I value the important role played by school crossing patrols in the prevention of accidents, however I believe the current non-statutory nature of the service should be retained.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Education, in relation to Ballycraigy Primary School, (i) how much has been spent on maintenance; and (ii) how many children attended the school, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 7145/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- 2015 - £23,000
- 2016 - £13,500
- 2017 - £13,500
- 2018 - £15,000
- 2019 - £60,000

Over the last 5 years, the number of children attending the school was as follows:-

- 2015/16 – 143
- 2016/17 – 140
- 2017/18 – 135
- 2018/19 – 142
- 2019/20 – 129

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the budgetary constraints that schools are under, for his assessment of the costs that Capita charge schools for computer maintenance.

(AQW 7149/17-22)

Mr Weir: Capita is the managed service provider for the Education Network (ni) contract. The contract provides service to over 1100 schools, 320,000 pupils and 30,000 teaching and non-teaching staff from Primary, Post Primary, Special schools and Education Other than at School Centres (EOTAS).

Capita does not charge individual schools for 'maintenance' of machines under the EN(ni) managed service contract. These are met as part of the managed service provision to run the entire EN(ni) contract.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether his Department's review into CCEA and the awarding of AS levels and A levels will be independent.

(AQW 7208/17-22)

Mr Weir: Yes.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education what criteria was used to determine schools eligibility for involvement in the most recent investment in nurture units.

(AQW 7230/17-22)

Mr Weir: The following criteria was used to select the 15 new proposed Nurture Groups, within the available budget and subject to business case approval:-

- (1) The school has:
 - (a) a high number of pupils with social services involvement (Children Looked After (CLA), child on the Child Protection Register (CPR) or child known to social services); and
 - (b) a high number of pupils living in areas of deprivation (as measured by the Extended Schools eligibility criteria);
- (2) There are no school sustainability issues;
- (3) The latest P1 and P2 enrolment number is at least 20 for each year group;
- (4) There is physical space within the school to facilitate a nurture room, with any minor works not expected to exceed £10-£15k; and
- (5) The school's Board of Governors and Senior Management Team are supportive of nurturing principles and whole school nurture practice.

The Education Authority is currently scoping the costs of works for the proposed schools.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education to detail the future plans for the old Bangor Central Primary School site if the schools moves to the Balloo/Gransha site.

(AQW 7258/17-22)

Mr Weir: Bangor Central Integrated PS is likely to move to its new site in approximately five years. One year in advance of the move the EA, as the owner of this controlled-sector asset, will begin to consider its future need for the site and buildings.

Should it not be required for future educational use, either by the EA or the wider education sector, then the EA will dispose of it in line with the applicable LPS guidance at the time.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Education whether he has considered making the Cycling Proficiency Scheme mandatory in schools.

(AQW 7324/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Cycling Proficiency Scheme (CPS) is a mixture of theory and practical experience and teaches children in years 6 & 7 to cycle safely, and encourages them to cycle more often. CPS has been delivered by DfI and previously by DOE for over 40 years.

It is taught as an after school activity delivered by CPS trained teachers. Each year, every Primary School in Northern Ireland is invited to participate in the scheme. However, it is up to each principal to decide whether to join the scheme.

Making cycling safety training mandatory could discriminate against those children with disabilities or who do not have access to a bicycle. It would also reduce the amount of teaching time which is currently spent on other subjects, consequently there are currently no plans to make the Cycling Proficiency Scheme mandatory in schools.

Department of Finance

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance whether he will lobby the UK Financial Conduct Authority and the Bank of England to permit Northern Ireland credit unions to lend a proportion of their deposits to highly rated housing associations, to enable the associations to increase the building of social housing.

(AQW 6432/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): In principle, I am supportive of initiatives which might improve the delivery of new social or affordable homes given the significant housing need that exists in the North. However, consideration of this would be a matter for the Department for Communities (DfC) in conjunction with the Department of the Economy (DfE) in the first instance. DfC has responsibility for housing policy and the registration, inspection and monitoring of Housing Associations locally, while DfE is responsible for the policy and legislative framework for credit unions and societies here in the North. I am happy to look at any proposals that are brought forward for my Department's consideration.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance whether she will back the call from the City of London's Recapitalisation Group for coronavirus loans, issued by banks on behalf of the UK Government that borrowers are unable to repay, to be transferred to a state agency to handle in order to prevent the collapse of a vast number of long-term viable businesses that are over-burdened with short term debt due to the pandemic.

(AQW 6433/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I recognise that there will be many otherwise viable businesses that will now have a significantly increased debt burden as a result of COVID-19. It is therefore vital that they are both supported and treated fairly by the banks as we move into the economic recovery phase of the pandemic.

The consideration of the City of London Recapitalisation Group's proposal is a matter for the Treasury in the first instance. It is responsible for the regulation of financial services and has the necessary policy competence in the regard. My Department has raised this with Treasury who have indicated that their position is that the private sector should be the first port of call for any business looking to refinance or restructure debt, and that their priority is to identify private sector solutions to this issue before determining what role may be played by Treasury.

Clearly it is vital that both the banks and the Treasury each play their part in supporting businesses and recovery. As the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash demonstrated, proposals to transfer private debt to the public sector require careful consideration. My Department is monitoring this situation and I will continue to press for an effective solution to be found that meets the needs of our businesses here.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance whether he has any plans to change the Northern Ireland building regulations to incorporate mandatory standards for the provision of changing place toilets in the categories of the large public buildings and development, as set out in the current British Standard BS8300/2018.

(AQW 6669/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am committed to incorporating Changing Places Toilets into local building regulations and have tasked my Department's Building Standards Branch with bringing forward the necessary changes as quickly as possible.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Finance whether there are plans to review and expand COVID-19 financial support schemes and grant schemes to include sole traders and businesses which have been excluded from previous schemes.

(AQW 6729/17-22)

Mr Murphy: DfE provided an options paper on 19 June 2020 for Executive consideration and discussion at the subsequent Executive meeting. The paper set out options for utilising the projected underspend from their three support schemes to support the economy. It included potential schemes for sole traders and sectors that had benefited little from existing support measures.

To date my Department has received two bids relevant to this issue, both of which were met in full. A £7m bid from the Department for Communities was allocated to Social Enterprises, and a £1.4m bid from the Department for Infrastructure was provided to waive licence fees for the bus and taxi industries. I would welcome further bids targeted at sole traders and sectors that benefitted little from other schemes.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Finance whether he has received correspondence or communications from the Minister for the Economy regarding sole traders and business excluded from COVID-19 financial support schemes and grants.

(AQW 6730/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the member to the answer to AQW 6729/17-22.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Finance when he received correspondence or communication from the Minister for the Economy regarding sole traders and business excluded from COVID-19 financial support schemes and grants.
(AQW 6731/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the member to the answer to AQW 6729/17-22.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Finance what meetings have taken place with the Minister for the Economy about sole traders and businesses excluded from COVID-19 financial support schemes and grants.
(AQW 6732/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the member to the answer to AQW 6729/17-22.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Finance what financial support was requested by the Minister for the Economy for sole traders and businesses excluded from COVID-19 financial support schemes and grants.
(AQW 6733/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the member to the answer to AQW 6729/17-22.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance for an update on implementation of the commitment in New Decade, New Approach to publish details of (i) gifts and hospitality received by special advisers; and (ii) meetings with external organisations by special advisers.
(AQW 6803/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Details of gifts and hospitality received by special advisers and meetings with external organisations by special advisers are currently being collated and will be published shortly on the Open Data portal.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance whether he will commit to a review of the 2004 guidance issued by the Department of Finance and Personnel for the Scheme of Emergency Financial assistance, specifically the criteria for eligibility and the time limit in applying for the scheme.
(AQW 6849/17-22)

Mr Murphy: While my Department has an approval role in request to the activation of the Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance in response to events, the policy and legislation for the scheme are held by the Department for Communities. Accordingly a review of the scheme would be for the Communities Minister to consider.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance how many people have died since 1 June 2020 of (i) cancer; (ii) heart disease; (iii) stroke; (iv) COVID-19; and (v) other causes.
(AQW 6851/17-22)

Mr Murphy: NISRA collates data on registrations of death. Cause of death information is currently only available for registrations up to 30 June 2020. Between 1 June and 30 June 2020, (i) 398 people have died due to cancer; (ii) 130 people have died due to heart disease; (iii) 63 people have died due to stroke; (iv) 63 people have died due to Covid-19; and (v) 653 people have died due to other causes.

In the year to date (1 Jan to 30 June), (i) 2,302 people have died due to cancer; (ii) 843 people have died due to heart disease; (iii) 441 people have died due to stroke; (iv) 755 people have died due to Covid-19; and (v) 4,673 people have died due to other causes.

Deaths with a mention of Covid-19 on the death certificate are distinct from deaths due to Covid-19. Between 1 June 2020 and 11 September 2020, there have been 129 deaths registered which mention Covid-19 on the death certificate.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Finance to detail the rate of uptake of the Lone Pensioner Allowance in the North Antrim constituency, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 6861/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Lone Pensioner Allowance is administered jointly by Land & Property Services for ratepayers who own and occupy their own home and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive for the rental sector.

LPS has provided figures representing the total number and total amount awarded for 'Owner Occupiers' for the North Antrim Parliamentary Constituency in each of the last five years.

	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17	2015/16
No of Awards	1,916	1,815	1,717	1,715	1,678

	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17	2015/16
Total awarded (£)	£398,874.16	£371,921.30	£330,729.80	£323,761.45	£307,752.53

My Department does not hold information on the rental sector at the level of detail requested. Additional information on LPA is published online at

<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/lone-pensioner-and-disabled-person-allowance-statistics>

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance what actions are being taken to ensure that additional in-year Barnett consequentials are not surrendered at year-end.

(AQW 6890/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The In-year Monitoring process has always provided a formal mechanism for reviewing spending plans in light of the most up to date information to aid good financial management. This process not only ensures that resources are directed to priority areas but also includes the reallocation of resources surrendered by departments to ensure that any underspend at year end is within the limit of what can be carried forward to the next year.

All departments are encouraged to surrender any easements at an early stage so that the resources can be reallocated to other priority areas and my officials engage with departments regularly throughout the year to gauge the level of expenditure and any potential underspends.

The response to COVID-19 has provided an unprecedented level of additional Barnett Consequentials to the Executive. This has also required an unprecedented response from the Executive which has reacted in a dynamic way to ensure that allocations are made quickly and outside of the formal in-year processes where the need is critical. This allocations provided to departments are ring-fenced meaning that any unrequired funding should be returned to the Executive for reallocation at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance what measures his Department is planning to help the Arts industry recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 6899/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I recognise the important contribution the Arts industry makes and I acknowledge the difficulties the sector has faced due to the impact of Covid-19. I hope that the Executive can shortly make allocations to the Arts industry, alongside other sectors, to help with its economic recovery. This will be in addition to the £4m that has already been allocated to help the arts as part of the June monitoring process.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance whether his Department has had any discussions with Ards and North Down Borough Council regarding the council's debt.

(AQW 6901/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department continues to liaise with the Association of Local Government Finance Officers (ALGFO) and SOLACE NI to assess the cash flow and debt issues faced by councils, for the period 1 July – 31 March 2021. Both ALGFO and SOLACE NI include representatives from Ards and North Down Borough Council.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance to detail the number of suicides in (i) March; (ii) April; (iii) May; (iv) June; (v) July; (vi) August; and (vii) the first two weeks of September 2020; and how this compares with figures in the last three years.

(AQW 6954/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) collates data on registrations of death. Cause of death information is currently only available for registrations up to 30th June 2020.

There are some situations where the registration of the death can be delayed, specifically where the death has been accidental, unexpected or suspicious, and must be referred to the Coroner. A death which is suspected to be suicide must therefore be referred to the Coroner and can only be registered after the Coroner has completed his or her investigation. The time taken to carry out this investigation can result in a delay in registration and thus such deaths may not appear in published statistics until at least six months after the death occurred. Suicides registered during the months in question will therefore not be reflective of suicides which occurred during the lockdown period.

At present, NISRA recommends that users of suicide statistics refer to the subset of 'self-inflicted injury' only as the most accurate picture in relation to trends. This is due to an ongoing review of the coverage of the sub-category 'undetermined intent'. Details of the review are outlined in the 'Guidance Note to Users on Suicide Statistics in Northern Ireland' published on 30th July 2020 and available at:

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/Guidance%20Note%20to%20Users%20Northern%20Ireland%20Suicide%20Statistics.pdf>.

The table below shows the number of registered deaths as a result of self-inflicted injury during the months of March to September for 2017, 2018 and provisionally for 2019 and 2020 (March to June only).

Year	ICD10 Codes	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep
2020	Self-Inflicted injury	10	11	16	16	-	-	-
2019	Self-Inflicted injury	23	15	21	12	7	14	15
2018	Self-Inflicted injury	17	11	12	16	16	16	9
2017	Self-Inflicted injury	20	16	11	14	11	11	14

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance what steps he is taking to address instances where residents in the Republic of Ireland who work in Northern Ireland are unable to work remotely because of existing tax legislation.

(AQW 6990/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am fully aware that this issue has become of increasing concern due to the increased instances of working from home arrangements brought about by COVID-19.

I recently met with a representative of the Cross Border Workers Coalition (CBWC) who are currently campaigning for legislative change on remote tax rules, and in particular, the Trans-border Tax Relief. My officials have also been engaging with their counterparts in the Irish Government on this issue over recent weeks pressing for greater clarity on how more flexibility can be shown to such workers at this difficult time.

The Irish Revenue has subsequently updated its published COVID-19 information and advice regarding the relief which now confirms that in terms of the Trans-Border Workers Relief: "If employees are required to work from home in the State due to COVID-19, such days spent working at home in the State will not preclude an individual from being entitled to claim this relief, provided all other conditions of the relief are met."

This new flexibility which will enable cross border workers to safely work from home is welcome. My Department has also asked how a more pragmatic approach on this issue can be taken in the longer term and this is a matter I am happy to discuss with my Irish Government counterpart, Paschal Donohoe TD, in due course.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance why Land and Property Services would not process the £10,000 Small Business Grants for businesses who share space within the same property when other businesses in that same property had applied successfully before them; and whether the £10,000 Small Business Grant was only available on a first-come-first-serve basis for businesses in a shared property.

(AQW 7017/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The essential eligibility criteria for the £10,000 Small Business Grant were as follows:

- 1 The Net Annual Value of the property was £15,000 or less.
- 2 The property was in receipt of Small Business Rate Relief at the scheme launch date.
- 3 The property was occupied at the scheme launch date.

In addition to eligibility criteria, only one grant could be paid in respect of each qualifying property.

LPS followed policy advice from the Department of Economy in respect of shared spaces. Where the property was occupied by more than one business, LPS was advised to pay the grant to the named ratepayer.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Finance (i) when his Department will allocate the £33 million in Barnett consequentials received as a result of the UK arts support package; (ii) whether the Executive have agreed to allocate the £33 million to support the arts sector; and (iii) how much of the £33 million is the arts sector to receive.

(AQW 7041/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I recognise the important contribution the Arts industry makes and I acknowledge the difficulties the sector has faced due to the impact of Covid-19.

£4 million has already been provided to the arts sector as part of the June Monitoring process.

The quantum of any further support is a matter for the Executive and I hope we will shortly be in a position to announce further allocations to this important sector along with other measures to assist with economic recovery.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether consideration is being given to undertaking an independent review of Non Domestic Rating System.

(AQW 7068/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have no plans to have an independent review of the non-domestic rating system undertaken. The Public Consultation, undertaken less than a year ago as part of my Department's comprehensive Review of Business Rates,

provided a broad and extensive range of independent responses. That Review led to the Executive's reduction of the non-domestic regional rate by 18%, the extension of the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme, and the re-introduction of the Rural ATMs Scheme. That evidence, along with the advice from the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, helped in the development of the unprecedented £313m in additional rate relief provided by the Executive since April, and I have no doubt it will continue to shape our ongoing response.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Finance what progress reports (i) he has requested of his Department's racial equality champion since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020; and (ii) his Department's racial equality champion has provided since restoration of the Assembly in January 2020.

(AQW 7121/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Per previous response to AQW 5421/17-22, my Department's Racial Equality Champion updates Departmental Board with progress on the Department's contribution towards the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025. In addition, he writes regular staff intranet update articles following his outreach and engagements, promoting and raising awareness of work in the minority ethnic sector, including any Department activity towards the Strategy. Given regular updates are provided, no specific requests have been required by me.

Published Annual Reports to the Equality Commission, with Racial Equality Champion input can also be found at:

<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/annual-report-equality-commission>

He has the full support from myself and my Department's Permanent Secretary, Sue Gray and the Department Board. He also provides verbal updates when the need arises and continues to chair the DoF Racial Equality Network to monitor any actions.

Recent updates from Racial Equality Champion include:

- Staff intranet article, offering a COVID-informed perspective on some of the main issues affecting the sector, including reflection on #BlackLivesMatter.
- Departmental Board Paper to update on progress with DoF's participation at the Belfast Mela Festival 2020 (Mela at Home); an opportunity to outreach and engage with our minority ethnic communities and other members of the public and contribute to the Equality of Service Provision outcome of the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025.
- Submission to myself, with update on progress, to participate in video for Mela at Home, which I was glad to do.
- Staff intranet article highlighting my Department, as a Friend of Mela, once again supporting ArtsEkta as they mark Mela at Home 2020. This year we participated virtually, raising awareness of Census 2021, Go ON NI programme, nidirect, Land and Property Services rate relief schemes and showcasing wide range of careers in NICS as we accelerate our ambition of a truly inclusive organisation which reflects the society we serve.

Furthermore as recently appointed NICS Race and Ethnicity Champion (July 2020), he has also updated, via NICS staff intranet article, on the establishment of the NICS Race and Ethnicity Staff Network (August 2020), which he chairs. He has also set up the NICS Race and Ethnicity Working Group (September 2020), which he chairs. He has updated NICS Diversity Champion, on plans for NICS to participate in Black History Month and contribute to the UN International Decade for People of African Descent (2015-2024), seeking to collaborate with the minority ethnic sector to promote recognition and inclusion.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Finance to detail the Barnett consequentials received in respect of the Kickstart scheme.

(AQW 7129/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the member to the answer to AQW 6775 /17-22.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Finance to detail the Barnett consequentials received as a result of the £30 million Changing Places fund announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in his 2020 budget.

(AQW 7130/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive received Barnett consequentials of £0.983 million in 2020-21 as a result of the £30 million Changing Places toilet fund for England, announced in the Chancellor's March 2020 Budget.

Although it is for the Executive to decide how to allocate these funds, I am committed to implementing Changing Places Toilets into local building regulations as soon as possible.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Finance when he will introduce legislation to make changing places toilets mandatory in larger new-builds and renovations.

(AQW 7228/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am committed to incorporating Changing Places Toilets into local building regulations and have tasked my Department's Building Standards Branch with bringing forward the necessary changes as quickly as possible.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance for an explanation of the delays in the allocation of COVID-19-related underspends and Barnett consequentials.

(AQW 7331/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Following careful consideration of bids submitted by departments, I submitted an Executive paper for discussion at its 17 September 2020 meeting. Unfortunately the paper did not make the Executive's agenda, however I am hopeful that it will be considered by the Executive this week (24 September).

Department of Health

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health whether he will ensure the re-opening of Daisy Hill emergency department in Phase 2 of his Rebuilding the HSC plan, before the Health Service faces winter pressures.

(AQW 4928/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I am committed to the reinstatement of the Emergency Department in Daisy Hill Hospital as soon as it is feasible and safe to do so. The Southern Health and Social Care Trust recently announced that plans to reopen the Emergency Department by the end of September 2020 would regrettably now be postponed until 19 October 2020.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health how many people aged between 50 and 70 years are on the three-yearly screening waiting list for the NI Breast Screening Programme.

(AQW 5688/17-22)

Mr Swann: The NI Routine Breast Screening Programme was amongst those screening programmes paused from mid-March 2020 in order to reduce the risk of Covid-19 infection to participants and staff, and to redirect healthcare and laboratory resources to the pandemic response. A total of 26,099 women would have been invited for routine breast screening from the beginning of the pause through to the 20th of July 2020 when the programme recommenced. This has resulted in a backlog of women awaiting screening.

Inevitably, the pace of rebuilding and the rate at which the backlog of postponed appointments can be cleared will be influenced by the progress of the pandemic. The programme will not be able to screen the same number of women as it did before the Covid-19 pandemic. This is due to the need for social distancing and enhanced infection control measures which have led to an increase the duration of clinic appointment times.

Consideration is being given to the provision of additional funding to increase screening capacity in order to address the backlog and to increase the number of clinics.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health what action is being undertaken to ensure that social care provision is available to patients who live in rural areas.

(AQW 6107/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current commissioning system requires the Health and Social Care Board and Public Health Agency to produce an annually agreed plan on a regional basis. This enables the effective delivery of health and social care on a Northern Ireland wide basis focused on outcomes, ensure sensitivity to local needs and giving appropriate weight to public health issues.

The overall aim of commissioning is to ensure all the population of Northern Ireland have timely access to high quality services and equipment responsive to their needs and delivered locally where this can be done safely, sustainably and cost effectively. Through use of the capitation formula, funding is allocated fairly across all areas of Northern Ireland.

Additionally, under the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, public authorities including the Health and Social Care Board, Public Health Agency and Health and Social Care Trusts must, amongst other things, have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans and designing and delivering public services.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health for an update on the rebuilding of the Parkinson's service in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, with specific reference to the future provision of specialist nurses.

(AQW 6127/17-22)

Mr Swann: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust has engaged with Parkinson's UK to explore how they can improve services for patients with Parkinson's Disease. This work includes reviewing clinical pathways, streamlining the service, utilising digital technology and ensuring equitable service provision across the Trust's geographical area.

Further funding is required to enhance the team to include an additional Parkinson's Disease Specialist Nurse, administration support and Allied Health Professionals to ensure patients receive a holistic assessment and management plan. The Trust is liaising with the neurology commissioning team to take this forward, who will need to consider any proposal in the context of existing budget constraints and competing pressures.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health what extra resources have been made available to the Southern Health Trust to assist in tackling the COVID-19 outbreak in several departments of Craigavon Area Hospital.

(AQW 6231/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Southern Health and Social Care Trust, along with all other Health and Social Care Trusts, has received significant additional funding to manage the response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This has enabled appropriate measures to be put in place to manage the recent outbreaks and ensure service continuity at Craigavon Area Hospital, including funding for locum cover, additional staff hours, bank and agency staff cover, and the enhancement of testing capacity. My Department, through the Public Health Agency's Infection Management Team, will continue to provide any support required by the Trust to manage these outbreaks and mitigate further risk.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health how many Health and Social Care workers have died due to COVID-19; and whether his Department has made any plans to introduce a life assurance scheme to provide the needed support to families of healthcare workers that die as a result of COVID-19.

(AQW 6291/17-22)

Mr Swann: To date, there have been no deaths among Health and Social Care Workers employed by trusts in Northern Ireland, due to COVID-19.

Officials in my Department have already worked closely with their colleagues in the Department of Finance and in the Departmental Solicitors Office, to set up a life assurance scheme to support the families of healthcare workers in event of a death.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health (i) whether he has developed a strategy to ensure that all those who are eligible for the flu vaccine can avail of the flu vaccination programme; and (ii) whether he will ensure that any additional flu vaccine clinics that are required will be held in neutral venues if unable to be facilitated in health care settings.

(AQW 6301/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) There is a robust annual planning process, involving my department and the health and social care sector, to establish the seasonal flu vaccination programme in any given year. This covers the procurement of the different types of vaccine for each eligible group, storage and distribution of vaccine supplies, communications to promote uptake, and arrangements for administering the vaccine. Additional vaccine has been ordered this year to facilitate improved uptake and to offer vaccination to new eligible groups. It is anticipated that the schools programme and the GP led element of the programme may need to be delivered slightly differently this year due to the Covid-19 related requirements of social distancing and enhanced infection control. My officials are liaising with GP representatives to plan accordingly. The programme for vaccinating frontline health and social care workers is also being delivered differently with, for example, arrangements for increasing the pool of peer vaccinators.
- (ii) The GP led programme covers pre-school children, those aged 65 and over, household contacts of those who shielded during Covid-19 and those in clinical at risk groups. Where it is necessary to have clinics in community settings, the decision on which setting can best meet social distancing and infection control requirements will be for GP practices to make.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health to outline the rationale for the resumption of RQIA inspections of dental practices, at a time when there is so much instability and concern among dental practitioners arising from failure to make Level II supply available, financial concerns, and while staff compliments are impacted.

(AQW 6330/17-22)

Mr Swann: The purpose of the RQIA inspection programme is to obtain assurances that dental practices are complying with the relevant standards. Whilst it is accepted that general dental practice has been severely impacted by the pandemic, because dental treatment and particular aerosol generating procedures are deemed high risk activities it is still necessary to ensure that the care provided is delivered safely. The current risk of precipitating COVID-19 infection clusters due to possible infection prevention control non-compliance around aerosol generating procedures necessitates RQIA inspections of dental practices.

At the moment, checks with local suppliers show that the availability of level II PPE is reasonable and surveys of dental practitioners show that around 90% have acquired level II PPE. The removal of the 20% abatement on the financial support scheme payments over the last two months means that practitioners are essentially receiving their historical gross earnings regardless of their activity levels.

In relation to staffing compliments, I understand that RQIA are prepared to be flexible in relation to the timing of the inspection. RQIA has engaged with the British Dental Association, HSC Board and a number General Dental Practitioners to understand the pressures dental practices are currently facing. This has ensured that RQIA's inspection approach is undertaken in a supportive manner. RQIA Inspectors are contacting all the dental practices by phone to offer support and arrange a suitable date and time for inspections.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what charities his Department has engaged with to address multi-generational abuse.

(AQW 6331/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department recognises the important role the charitable sector plays in supporting the work of the health and social care system including in addressing multi-generational abuse. The Department currently engages with a variety of charities which carry out activities in support of this work. These activities include user advocacy; engaging in policy development activity; research; and leadership and coordination within the sector. The organisations operate across a range of policy areas including, but not restricted to: family support; mental health services; physical and learning disability support; elderly care; sexual health services; and support for victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse. Examples include (but are not limited to): Age NI; Alzheimer's Society; Cares NI; Childline NI; Hourglass NI (previously Action on Elder Abuse); NSPCC; Men's Advisory Project; Nexus NI; Presbyterian Council for Social Witness; Women's Aid; Society of St Vincent De Paul.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health what plans are in place to expand the support, and location of COVID-19 testing services, to those who are under 5 years old.

(AQW 6343/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am advised that HSC colleagues are looking again at how best to support COVID swab taking on occasions where parents or carers may not be able to obtain a sample at National Testing centres.

The locations of test sites, including Mobile Testing Units deployed through the National Testing Programme, is kept under active review.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, in relation to self-isolation due to COVID-19, to detail (i) each requirement on someone to self-isolate; and (ii) each support that is in place to assist individuals with these requirements.

(AQW 6344/17-22)

Mr Swann: A person is required to self isolate if they have returned to Northern Ireland from one of the countries on the prohibited list (requirement is 14 days isolation); they have received a positive test result for Covid-19 indicating they have the infection (requirement is 10 days isolation) or they have been advised by the Contact Tracing Service or via the StopCOVID NI App that they have been identified as a close contact of a confirmed case (requirement is 14 days isolation).

The Freephone Covid-19 Community Helpline hosted by the Department for Communities, which is the access channel into support, has been extended until the end of September when the requirement to continue this service will be reassessed. The helpline connects people into a wide range of supports available through a range of statutory, regional and local delivery organisations. This includes access to food, pharmacy and psychological support services (including the specific CovidWellbeingNI partnership supported by the Department for Communities and delivered by an Inspire led consortium of 15 charities and 27 Healthy Living Centres.)

The Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) (No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 assist people who are entitled to payment and who are advised to stay at home and to self-isolate and who are therefore deemed to be incapable of work. In addition, Discretionary Support is available to support people who find themselves in an emergency or crisis situation and who need to support themselves and their families. The Department for Communities advises that it will apply whatever flexibility it can in relation to situations as these arise.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of whether the current differences in COVID-19 travel regulations across these islands is detrimental to the public health and safety.

(AQW 6346/17-22)

Mr Swann: I do not believe the current differences are detrimental to public health and safety. The requirements of individual countries will vary according to the local epidemiology of COVID-19, and also with local data relating to the proportion of imported cases from abroad and regional travel patterns.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health when he will allocate the extra places in the School of Medicine at Queen's University Belfast to allow students, who had been holding conditional offers since early in the year but had them withdrawn due to the initial A level downgrading, to begin their studies in 2020 as initially planned.

(AQW 6352/17-22)

Mr Swann: On Friday 11 September 2020 I announced approval of up to 80- additional medicine undergraduate places at Queen's University Belfast spread across their 2020 and 2021 intakes. This will enable offers to be honoured to students in the exceptional circumstances created by recent A-level re-grading decisions.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what proportion of women who gave birth in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years (i) were obese; (ii) were smokers; (iii) had high blood pressure; or (iv) had a recorded long-term medical condition.

(AQW 6365/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Information on the proportion of women who gave birth in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years that were obese is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Proportion of mothers with a BMI classification of obese at booking appointment in each year.

Proportion of mothers classified as Obese ¹	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
	20%	21%	22%	23%	25%

Source: Northern Ireland Maternity System (NIMATS)

- 1 Information is based on BMI measurements at the 'booking in' appointment and therefore represents mothers at the end of the first trimester. In a small number of cases the 'booking in' appointment may not occur until later in the pregnancy.
- (ii) Information on the proportion of women who gave birth in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years that were smokers is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Proportion of mothers smoking in pregnancy¹

Proportion of mothers smoking	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
	15%	14%	13%	14%	13%

Source: Health Inequalities Annual Report 2020

- 1 Information is gathered at the 'booking in' appointment and therefore represents mothers at the end of the first trimester. In a small number of cases the 'booking in' appointment may not occur until later in the pregnancy. As this indicator is self-reported, it may be subject to a degree of under-reporting.
- 2 2018 is the latest published figure available.
- (iii) Information on the proportion of women who gave birth in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years that had high blood pressure is provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Proportion of mothers that had high blood pressure¹

Proportion of mothers with high blood pressure	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
	3%	3%	4%	4%	4%

Source: Northern Ireland Maternity System (NIMATS)

- 1 Information is based on recorded blood pressure at the 'booking in' appointment. In a small number of cases the 'booking in' appointment may not occur until later in the pregnancy. High blood pressure in pregnancy has been defined as any reading over 140/90 mm Hg.
- (iv) Information on the proportion of women who gave birth in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years that had a recorded long-term medical condition is not readily available and could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what data is held by his Department on the ethnicity of women who gave birth in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6366/17-22)

Mr Swann: Statisticians within the Department of Health have controlled access to the Northern Ireland Maternity System (NIMATS) through the Regional Data Warehouse. NIMATS contains a range of demographic and clinical information on mothers and infants.

Figures on the ethnicity of mothers who gave birth in Northern Ireland over the last five years can be found in Table 1 overleaf.

Table 1. Ethnicity of mothers who gave birth in Northern Ireland (2015-2019)

Ethnicity	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Bangladeshi	25	22	18	24	15
Black African	91	119	97	117	135
Black Caribbean	8	7	10	9	6
Black Other	21	16	34	33	19
Chinese	99	99	95	87	71
Indian	115	111	102	82	101
Irish Traveller	26	29	20	26	23

Ethnicity	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Mixed Ethnic Group	72	86	93	81	104
Pakistani	25	30	29	25	28
Roma Traveller	14	13	29	22	33
White	23,401	23,109	22,270	21,789	21,399
Other Ethnic Group	180	215	202	212	264
Not Stated or not available	31	33	29	43	27
Total	24,108	23,889	23,028	22,550	22,225

Source: Northern Ireland Maternity System (NIMATS)

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what support his Department gives to military veterans, including via any funding of veteran support organisations.

(AQW 6396/17-22)

Mr Swann: Military veterans and service personnel have access to the full range of health services within the Health and Social Care system in Northern Ireland, which are provided on an equal basis irrespective of occupation. If a veteran needs access to services this will be provided as clinically appropriate.

My Department works through the Armed Forces Liaison Forum to facilitate collaboration between health service providers and military community representatives in relation to any issues with health service provision.

There is a commitment within the New Decade, New Approach agreement about the Armed Forces Covenant, which is unfortunately not yet adopted in Northern Ireland. My Department will consider specific health service provision regarding the needs of veterans when UK-wide legislation is introduced to further incorporate the Armed Forces Covenant into law.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the health services provided to military veterans in Northern Ireland compared with their counterparts in Great Britain under the fully implemented Military Covenant.

(AQW 6397/17-22)

Mr Swann: Military veterans and service personnel have access to the full range of health services within the Health and Social Care system in Northern Ireland, which are provided on an equal basis irrespective of occupation. If a veteran needs access to services this will be provided as clinically appropriate.

My Department works through the Armed Forces Liaison Forum to facilitate collaboration between health service providers and military community representatives in relation to any issues with health service provision.

There is a commitment within the New Decade, New Approach agreement about the Armed Forces Covenant, which is unfortunately not yet adopted in Northern Ireland. My Department will consider specific health service provision regarding the needs of veterans when UK-wide legislation is introduced to further incorporate the Armed Forces Covenant into law.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Health to detail the timescale for a return to walk-in services at health centres to be resumed to enable patients to re-order prescriptions or make appointments in person rather than over the phone or online.

(AQW 6408/17-22)

Mr Swann: The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges for the planning and delivery of health and social care (HSC) services in Northern Ireland.

As part of COVID-19 surge planning, non-urgent care was re-prioritised to protect patients and to free up stretched HSC resources. This inevitably involved temporary reconfiguration across the system to ensure continuity of provision of essential healthcare services for the duration of the pandemic, whilst also providing COVID-19 patients with the care they required in the most appropriate setting.

Covid-19 will be with us for some time and this will continue to impact on how, and the extent to which, we deliver services. It will not be possible to immediately return to business as usual and patient and staff safety must remain at the heart of service delivery as we rebuild the capacity of the HSC in Northern Ireland.

On 9th June 2020, I published the "Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services" which recognises the stark impact of Covid-19 on health and social care services across Northern Ireland – elective care has reduced significantly with consequential adverse impact on waiting times and waiting lists.

The key aim of rebuilding these services will be to incrementally increase HSC service capacity as quickly as possible across all programmes of care, within the prevailing COVID-19 conditions

GP practices are currently operating a telephone triage system which allows patients to continue to seek medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP then uses their clinical judgement to decide if the patient can

be safely managed over the telephone or whether a face to face appointment is required. This ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential. Some practices have also utilised other technologies such as video conferencing.

The telephone triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face to face assessment to one of the Primary Care COVID-19 centres which have been established in Northern Ireland. This ensures that these patients do not attend the GP Practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimal disruption.

GP practices are still providing face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them and all practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment to allow them to do so safely.

The Health and Social Care Board recently wrote to GP practices to ask that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices have been advised to communicate to patients (on posters, practice website, or practice newsletter) about the practice services that are available and how to access them and to ensure that this information is made clear to patients.

On 7th September GP leaders, Dr Margaret O'Brien from the Health and Social Care Board, Dr Laurence Dorman from the Royal College of General Practitioners and Dr Alan Stout from the British Medical Association made a statement to reassure patients that GP practices are open to treat patients, provide advice and issue prescriptions. Whilst patients may be seen in a different way, via phone or video link, GPs want anyone who has a health concern to feel reassured that they will be able to get an appointment and see a GP if necessary.

A letter was also issued to all MLAs on 7th September providing an update on the current GP practice environment and asking that they share the key message that GP practices are open, but working differently, with constituents and the wider population to ensure that patients know to contact their GP practice when they need health care and treatment.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health what guarantees he can give that Castledearg Fire Station will retain its two engines and that its staffing complement will be increased to the stated safe staffing levels of 20.

(AQW 6420/17-22)

Mr Swann: Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service (NIFRS) is reviewing its service delivery model across Northern Ireland. NIFRS has revised the projected review completion date from September 2020 to December 2020.

The Interim Chief Fire and Rescue Officer has provided assurance that the current interim service delivery model is safe. NIFRS will conduct a public consultation on any proposed permanent changes to the service delivery model.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health (i) whether pre-exposure prophylaxis is currently available in the Royal Victoria Hospital and Altnagelvin Hospital GUM clinics; and (ii) whether the two-year pilot of pre-exposure prophylaxis at the Royal Victoria Hospital and Altnagelvin Hospital GUM clinics will be extended.

(AQW 6423/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care Board confirmed there have been positive developments regarding the PREP service being rolled out to NHSCT, SHSCT and SEHSCT. The plan is that all Trusts will have a local PREP pilot in their Trust for the period October 2020 to March 2021. Work continues to seek funding to support recurrent investment.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health what measures he will implement to better educate members of the public on how to enhance their immune systems such as through advocating a balanced diet and regular exercise so that people are as healthy as possible to fight any potential COVID-19 infection, especially as we approach the winter months.

(AQW 6436/17-22)

Mr Swann: The importance of a balanced diet and participating in regular physical activity in promoting good health is well known. The current obesity prevention framework, A Fitter Future for All 2012-2022, takes an integrated approach to obesity prevention and contains outcomes to promote healthy eating and physical activity across for the entire population of Northern Ireland.

The latest progress report for the 2015-2019 short term outcomes was published in January 2019 and it is expected that the final progress report from the revised 2015-2019 short term outcomes will be published in December 2020.

Updated Chief Medical Officer Physical Activity Guidelines were published by the four UK CMOs in September 2019. These revised guidelines, as well as recommending minimum amounts of moderate physical activity, look to building strength and balance to prevent falls and immobility in old age.

A revised Eatwell Guide was published in 2017 and continues to be updated. The Eatwell Guide takes into consideration all micro and macro nutritional requirements, now including Vitamin D. The guide also advises on hydration, nutrition labelling and recommends reductions in salt, sugar and saturated fats.

In addition, the Department, Public Health Agency, Food Standards Agency and Safefood work together to promote better nutrition and to produce and implement minimum nutrition standards in a range of settings.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of recipients of shielding letters who were aged (i) 0-10; (ii) 11-18; (iii) 19-29; (iv) 30-65; and (v) 65 years and over.

(AQW 6450/17-22)

Mr Swann: People living with specific clinical conditions which placed them at greater risk of severe illness or hospitalisation if they were to catch COVID-19 were issued with letters by GPs, or in some cases, by hospital clinician advising them to shield.

Due to the way in which the data was collected and held, a comprehensive breakdown of shielding letters by age band is not available.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health why people were allocated COVID-19 test appointments at Carrickfergus Rugby Club for Saturday 5 September 2020 and Sunday 6 September 2020, despite testing facilities not being operational on these dates.

(AQW 6466/17-22)

Mr Swann: Testing at the Carrickfergus Rugby Club was administered as part of a National Testing Programme managed by the Department of Health and Social Care, London (DHSC). A mobile testing unit previously located at Carrickfergus Rugby Club was moved to a new location in Antrim on Saturday 5th September. Unfortunately, the DHSC portal for booking tests did not update the new location and incorrectly booked people for Carrickfergus after the Mobile testing unit had moved. When the Public Health Agency was made aware of the situation they worked with DHSC London to ensure changes were made to the booking portal.

DHSC London has given assurances that every effort will be made to ensure that similar errors do not occur in future.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health what efforts he has made to secure additional Pharmacy, Dentistry and Medicine places at Queen's University Belfast to meet the additional demand for course places following the effect of the pandemic on A level grading; and whether he has made a bid to the Executive for the funds required.

(AQW 6470/17-22)

Mr Swann: On Friday 11 September 2020, following consultation with the university regarding their requirements, and with the Minister of Finance regarding the associated long term financial resource, I announced approval of additional student places for healthcare undergraduate courses at Queen's University Belfast. These additional places for medicine, nursing, and social work, will enable offers to be honoured to students in the exceptional circumstances created by recent A-level re-grading decisions.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health when the most recent Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority inspection of Craigavon Area Hospital was carried out; and what were the main findings of that inspection.

(AQW 6473/17-22)

Mr Swann: On 8 July 2019 RQIA conducted infection prevention/hygiene inspections at Ward 1 North (Cardiology) and a follow up inspection of ward 2 South (Medical) in Craigavon Area Hospital. The Hospital was assessed against the Regional Healthcare Hygiene and Cleanliness Standards. Both areas inspected achieved overall compliance against the standards examined.

RQIA has not conducted an inspection at Craigavon Area Hospital in response to recent Covid-19 outbreaks at the hospital. The Public Health Agency take the lead in the management of outbreaks of infectious disease and RQIA will liaise closely with PHA to determine an appropriate response.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health what legal powers are attached to a level three Serious Adverse Incident investigation.

(AQW 6474/17-22)

Mr Swann: A level three independent review will be considered for Serious Adverse Incidents that are particularly complex involving multiple organisations, have a degree of technical complexity that requires independent expert advice or that are very high profile, attracting a high level of both public and media attention. There are no legal powers attached to such a review, however, any particular matter arising can and will be referred to the appropriate statutory agency or external body when necessary.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health (i) whether his Department is aware of any difficulties for Northern Ireland residents registering online for COVID-19 tests; (ii) whether there are sufficient test slots being made available at all times for those booking online; and (iii) whether there are any steps being taken to ensure the booking system only offers test appointments within Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6495/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) The National Testing Programme is currently experiencing an exceptionally high demand. This is, at times, making it more difficult for members of the public to book a test slot at time/ place that is convenient. Anyone who tries to book a test and is unable to do so, or who is offered a location or time which is not convenient, is encouraged to wait a few hours and then try again.
- (ii) There is currently a high demand for testing, however, I am advised that more appointments and home testing kits are available nationally every day. Members of the public can only book tests for the following day's testing from 6pm. This allows available bookings up to 1pm the next day. From 8am the following day subjects can book tests for 1pm until site closing.
- (iii) I am aware that there has been some problems with the digital portal impacting a small number of cases in Northern Ireland which has caused testing slots to be offered at sites which are outside Northern Ireland. I understand there have been similar issues across the UK. My officials have been advised by DHSC London that a fix to the digital portal is being developed to resolve this issue.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of COVID-19 tests which have had to be retaken due to the original test going missing.

(AQW 6506/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of COVID-19 tests which have had to be retaken due to the original tests going missing is not available.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health how many people are currently on Health Service waiting lists for transgender healthcare services.

(AQW 6534/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are currently 492 people on the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's Regional Gender Identity Clinic waiting list.

A review of the gender identity services pathway is ongoing, led by the Health and Social Board, to develop recommendations for a service model that can offer timely and accessible treatment for individuals in the context of a sustainable service.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to outline the reasons that some GPs would be refusing to arrange COVID-19 tests for suspected cases.

(AQW 6536/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is for individuals to arrange tests where they have symptoms of COVID-19.

There are a number of ways a person with symptoms of the virus can get tested. These are:

- booking a test online at a drive through test site or a mobile testing unit
- order a postal self-test kit online
- calling the free phone number 119

Information on testing, including how individuals can book a test, can be found on both the NI Direct and Public Health Agency websites:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-testing-and-contact-tracing>

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to detail his plans to address outpatient waiting lists.

(AQW 6537/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services, published in June 2020, outlines the HSC's plans to rebuild health and social care and set out the approach to as quickly as possible reset elective activity in an environment which is safe for both staff and patients. Northern Ireland's six HSC Trusts have published plans setting out the work being done in their areas.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health for an update on a potential COVID-19 vaccine.

(AQW 6538/17-22)

Mr Swann: The UK government, acting on behalf of the whole of the UK has secured access to 6 potential COVID-19 vaccine candidates, across 4 different vaccine types. This reflects the UK's strategy to ensure we have a supply of vaccines should any of these prove safe and effective.

The vaccines are currently at various stages of human trials that they must complete before they can be considered for use in a vaccination programme. One of the leading candidate's phase 3 trial was temporarily halted after an adverse reaction but

following a review by both the independent safety review committee and UK regulator the MHRA, the trials in the UK have resumed. Meanwhile work is ongoing to ensure that should a vaccine become available, we will be able to start a vaccination programme in Northern Ireland.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether the statutory duty of the Health and Social Care Board to identify an appropriate doctor to prescribe medicinal cannabis will be adhered to for patients who need the medicine.
(AQW 6551/17-22)

Mr Swann: The law changed on 1 November 2018 to allow doctors on the specialist register of the General Medical Council to prescribe cannabis-based products for medicinal use (CBPMs) in instances where a clinical need is identified, and where it is deemed clinically appropriate to do so.

There is currently no legal barrier to specialist clinicians prescribing medicinal cannabis in cases where they deem it clinically appropriate.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health what plans his Department has to address the current problems in booking an appointment for a COVID-19 test and to make home testing kits more widely available.
(AQW 6585/17-22)

Mr Swann: Demand for testing has increased significantly across the UK in recent weeks. I am aware that the National Testing Programme is currently experiencing an exceptionally high demand. This has, at times, made it more difficult for members of the public to book a test slot at time/ place that is convenient. Anyone who tries to book a test and is unable to do so, or who is offered a location or time which is not convenient, is strongly encouraged to wait a few hours and then try again.

I am aware that there has been some problems with the digital portal impacting a small number of cases in Northern Ireland which has caused testing slots to be offered at sites which are outside Northern Ireland. I understand there have been similar issues across the UK. My officials have been advised by DHSC London that a fix to the digital portal is being developed. Again, my message is that if members of the public are experiencing problems booking a test, please leave it a few hours and try again.

Overall testing capacity is continually reviewed by my Department and plans to further enhance capacity are kept under active consideration. My officials continue to be in contact with counterparts in London on a daily basis to ensure Northern Ireland capacity is optimised through the National Programme.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health whether the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on the waiting list for cervical screening tests in GP practices.
(AQW 6625/17-22)

Mr Swann: As a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Cervical Screening Programme was paused from mid-March 2020 until 29 June when the programme recommenced with invitations for screening appointments for those women where a repeat smear test had been recommended by a laboratory.

There are no standard waiting lists for cervical screening tests due to participants being called/recalled in 3 or 5 year cycles depending on their age. Routine 3 and 5 year recall invitations recommenced from mid-August. This included routine reminder letters for those women who may have chosen not to attend for screening in the weeks before the Covid-19 lockdown. Progress on catch up will be dependent on primary care, laboratory and colposcopy capacity which, in turn, will be influenced by the ongoing severity of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is vitally important that anyone who is experiencing any of the symptoms associated with early stage cervical cancer should contact their doctor rather than waiting for a screening test.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what actions his Department is taking to address nursing vacancies across Northern Ireland.
(AQW 6627/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has been incrementally increasing investment in the number of nursing and midwifery undergraduate places representing an increase of 87% since 2015/16. Funding for an additional 300 places brings the total to 1,325 to 2020/21

International nurse recruitment is additional interim measure to strengthen the nursing workforce.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to detail his Department's future plans for Muckamore Abbey Hospital.
(AQW 6628/17-22)

Mr Swann: In line with the vision set by the Bamford's Equal Lives report, and more recently the Bengoa review, work is ongoing to resettle patients from Muckamore Abbey Hospital into community settings, where, with the appropriate support they can live independent and more fulfilling lives in the community.

Alongside this, work has recently been resumed by the Health and Social Care Board to plan for the future of acute care for people with learning disabilities in Northern Ireland. This work will build on the recommendations of a recent independent review and learning during the pandemic. The best interests of patients will be the paramount consideration at all times in any decisions taken regarding inpatient and community care – and any changes or new developments will be co-produced with patients, their families and carers, and staff.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) how many potential COVID-19 vaccine doses have been ordered for Northern Ireland; (ii) the potential cost of such an order; and (iii) the name of the companies the orders are placed with.
(AQW 6630/17-22)

Mr Swann: The UK government, acting on behalf of the whole of the UK, has secured access to up to 340 million doses of six potential COVID-19 vaccines. Northern Ireland could receive roughly 3% of whichever vaccine(s) are chosen, if any.

The potential cost of such an order is expected to be millions of pounds but the actual amount will depend on the vaccines used and the number of doses required per person.

The companies involved include: AstraZeneca, Janssen, BioNTech/ Pfizer, Valneva, GSK/Sanofi and Novavax.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health what practical support will be given to local councils regarding the identification of local COVID-19 cases, to assist in communications to businesses and residents.
(AQW 6640/17-22)

Mr Swann: All positive tests of Covid-19 are reported to the Contact Tracing Service which is operated by the Public Health Agency (PHA). The PHA will contact the individual concerned and advise on self-isolation. They will also phone the identified close contacts and again advise on self-isolation. Where a local business is involved the relevant Local Council will be contacted. They in turn will liaise with the business to ensure the appropriate measures including hygiene and social distancing are satisfactory. Where necessary, information on cleaning will be given. Closure of the premises will not always be necessary and will often depend on other factors such as the availability of staff who are not required to self-isolate.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health to detail the COVID-19 uniform guidance for staff working in hospitals as they travel to and from work.
(AQW 6641/17-22)

Mr Swann: HSC Trusts have a regional dress code policy in place. Key elements of the policy relating to travel are that all staff who wear a uniform must change into and out of uniform at the workplace, where there is access to changing facilities that are provided by the Trust.

Where a lack of changing facilities exists, permission to wear a clinical uniform to and from work must be agreed by the staff member's line management; such staff should, where practical, cover their uniform completely when in public view. This does not apply to staff who are required to travel during the course of their duties e.g. community staff, low risk areas.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health to provide (i) an explanation for the excess of a year's delay in applying pay uplifts to doctors and dentists, compared with England; and (ii) why the 2019/20 Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration Body uplift for doctors and dentists has only just been applied, while 2020/21 pay uplifts have been paid in England, Scotland and Wales.
(AQW 6645/17-22)

Mr Swann: Each year, my Department must await the publication of the Public Sector Pay Policy (PSPP) before seeking the approval of the Department of Finance (DoF) for any pay increases. Delays in implementing pay awards can also occur in gathering the evidence required for the approval process, and in making changes to the payroll system. The PSPP for 2019/20 was published on 31 October 2019, DoF approval for that pay round was received by in June, with salaried doctors and dentists receiving their backdated award in July 2020.

While I am aware that the other jurisdictions have accepted the recommendations of the Review Body for 2020/21 pay, my Department cannot do so until the approval of DoF and additional funding is secured. Officials are working urgently on the required submissions.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail the circumstances under which he would recommend the re-introduction of shielding for people with particular clinical vulnerability to COVID-19.
(AQW 6687/17-22)

Mr Swann: The need for further advice for those who were shielding is being kept under continuous review. If it is decided that the current advice needs to be updated further, this will reflect improved understanding of who is at most risk from the virus and the level of transmission of the virus in the community. This will be influenced by the R value (the number of individuals who, on average, will be infected by a single person with the infection) but more importantly by the number of cases present in the community. While I am aware that the need to shield was hugely challenging for many people, where it is necessary to protect vulnerable people, I will not hesitate to issue updated advice.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health how much his Department has spent on smoking cessation services in each financial year from 2011/12 to 2019/20.

(AQW 6689/17-22)

Mr Swann: In order to meet the targets outlined in the Department's Ten Year Tobacco Control Strategy, the Public Health Agency (PHA) invests funding received from my Department in a number of Stop Smoking Services across Northern Ireland. The tobacco control budget is in the region of £3.9M per annum.

There are over 650 PHA commissioned Stop Smoking Services across Northern Ireland and these are provided through Health & Social Care Trusts, Community Pharmacies, GP Practices and Community and Voluntary sector partners. These services aim to help smokers to quit and are provided free of charge to the public.

A summary of investments in Stop Smoking Services in each financial year from 2011/12 to 2019/20 is set out below;

Financial Year	Total Tobacco Control Spend	Cessation Services* (~55%)	Nicotine Replacement Therapy NRT (~37%)
2011-2012	£ 3,912,532.00	£ 2,151,892.60	£ 1,447,636.84
2012-2013	£ 4,572,957.00	£ 2,515,126.35	£ 1,691,994.09
2013-2014	£ 4,229,622.00	£ 2,326,292.10	£ 1,564,960.14
2014-2015	£ 2,976,343.00	£ 1,636,988.65	£ 1,101,246.91
2015-2016	£ 3,910,256.00	£ 2,150,640.80	£ 1,446,794.72
2016-2017	£ 4,039,661.00	£ 2,221,813.55	£ 1,494,674.57
2017-2018	£ 3,947,420.00	£ 2,171,081.00	£ 1,460,545.40
2018-2019	£ 3,955,191.00	£ 2,175,355.05	£ 1,463,420.67
2019-2020	£ 3,912,532.00	£ 2,151,892.60	£ 1,447,636.84

NB: Smoking Cessation Services and the associated NRT expenditure is demand led and is therefore variable from year to year based on the number of people accessing services.

Approximately 8-10% of the annual budget covers other expenditure including enforcement, data system maintenance, website costs etc.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health, in light of an anticipated increase in uptake as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, what guidance his Department has issued to GPs for managing demand for influenza vaccinations.

(AQW 6697/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency has, via the Northern Ireland General Practitioners Network, provided training resources for GPs and recently delivered a training session to a large number of GPs.

GPs have been issued with advice including an information letter from the Chief Medical Officer and access to a webpage on the GP intranet with links to infection control, training materials and Royal College of General Practitioners' guidance.

It is anticipated that the GP led element of the public seasonal flu vaccination programme may need to be delivered slightly differently this year due to the Covid-19 related requirements of social distancing and enhanced infection control. My officials are liaising with GP representatives to plan accordingly.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health what steps his Department is taking to ensure there is not a long-term crisis in mental health services following the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 6698/17-22)

Mr Swann: When I published the Mental Health Action Plan on 19 May I included a dedicated Covid-19 Mental Health Response Plan. This plan set out the mental health response to the pandemic and outlined specific actions, such as:

- public health messaging to support people to look after their mental wellbeing while staying at home, and the provision of updated mental health support and advice on the mindingyourhead.info website;
- the development of an online apps library to help and support self-help;
- rollout of psychological first aid training to staff and volunteers on the front line;
- provision of free Stress Control classes online, which have been available since May and will continue to be available until the end of the year;
- bereavement guidance; and
- a workforce wellbeing framework and dedicated psychological helplines for front line staff.

This support remains in place as we continue to battle Covid-19 and the impact of the pandemic on our communities' mental health. A key element of responding to the emerging mental health need resulting from the pandemic is the implementation of the Mental Health Action Plan, including the development of a new Mental Health Strategy. Work on this is currently ongoing.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health what support his Department is providing mental health services and charities that provide vital assistance to people virtually as a result of COVID-19.
(AQW 6699/17-22)

Mr Swann: On 19 May 2020 I published a Covid-19 Mental Health Response Plan, as an annex to the Mental Health Action Plan. The Response Plan was a summary of a wide range of work that had already been initiated in response to the pandemic. Key actions that have been taken as part of this work include:

- adaptation of Take 5 public messaging to help people stay emotionally well during lockdown;
- Development of an HSC Apps Library, to provide a safe and secure resource for the public to download apps to help them with their mental health and emotional wellbeing;
- Development of a Staff Wellbeing Framework, which includes actions to support staff such as access to helplines, a range of online resources and drop in centres at critical facilities;
- Development of booklets to support students joining the HSC workforce early;
- Provision of free Stress Control classes for the public, until March 2021;
- Roll out of Psychological First Aid training across HSC and community sector;
- Revamp of the Minding Your Head website to provide a range of online support and guidance;
- Development of a Covid-19 wellbeing hub, in partnership with DfC, Inspire and the wider community sector, which provides a wealth of information and support;
- Development of specific resources to support those bereaved during this time.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail his Department's input and role in developing local personal protective equipment manufacturing, including any resource or capital.
(AQW 6717/17-22)

Mr Swann: My officials have been working with colleagues across government in actively engaging with local manufacturing businesses. Through the first stage of the pandemic a number of local businesses became new contractors for the supply of PPE and over £70m worth of orders have already been placed with NI businesses. This engagement continues and contracts have been placed with a number of local manufacturers for the supply of PPE items to support our stock resilience preparations.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health when he will respond to the Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration Body recommendation of a pay uplift of 2.8% for doctors and dentists, now that a public sector pay policy is in place.
(AQW 6728/17-22)

Mr Swann: My officials are urgently working on preparing the necessary pay remit for DoF approval. I am unable to make any announcement on pay uplifts until the appropriate funding has been secured and approved by the Department of Finance.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health to detail his Department's plans to ensure a sustainable supply of clear face masks for health and social care services.
(AQW 6738/17-22)

Mr Swann: Northern Ireland has also been allocated 8,640 clear masks as part of the UK Make pilot scheme (AQW6653/17-22 refers). If deemed successful further orders will follow with Northern Ireland benefitting proportionately.

The Business Services Organisation has commenced work to secure a supply of clear masks for the longer term. An expression of interest will be placed on the Dynamic Purchasing System in coming weeks.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health for an update on progress with the establishment of a Regional Trauma Network.
(AQW 6757/17-22)

Mr Swann: Implementation of the Regional Trauma Network is jointly led by my Department and The Executive Office.

Progress on implementation of the Regional Trauma Network has been delayed due to the emergency Covid-19 response taking priority but efforts are being made to restart the process.

My officials are currently seeking advice on legal aspects of the scheme and I am hopeful that once this has been clarified, progress will resume shortly.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to ensure that victims and survivors are at the heart of the new Regional Trauma Network.

(AQW 6758/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has been working in partnership with The Executive Office, the Health and Social Care Board and the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) to ensure that the Regional Trauma Network (RTN) delivers on the Stormont House Agreement by increasing access for victims and survivors to the mental health services they need. A process of co-design and co-production has been undertaken to develop a comprehensive regional trauma service model. To ensure that the victim's voice is heard in that process, the Partnership Board's membership has included the Victims Commissioner, the CEO of the VSS and individuals with lived experience, who are also represented on the RTN's working groups to help influence the development of the network. Officials have also been discussing with voluntary and community sector groups how their voice can be strengthened in the current governance structure.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health to detail, by modality and specialism, the people recruited from each Health and Social Care Trust to work on behalf of the Regional Trauma Network.

(AQW 6759/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Table below outlines recruitment status, current modalities and specialisms in each of the Health and Social Care Trusts for the Health and Social Care element of the Regional Trauma Network as at 16 September 2020.

Source: HSCB

	BHSCT	NHSCT	SEHSCT	SHSCT	WHSCT
Band 8A Specialist Trauma Therapist	In post	In post	In post	In post	In post
3 Band 7 Trauma Therapists	In post and also includes legacy teams (Trauma Resource Centre and Family Trauma Centre)	All recruited – 2 left post– re-recruited and will be in post October 2020	All in post	2 in post – recruitment complete for 3rd post by October 2020	All in post
Band 4 Project Support	In post	In post	In post	In post	In post
Current Range of Professional qualifications, modalities, specialisms, training and skills in teams based on posts filled to date.	Nursing Systemic and Family Therapy Sensori-motor Psychotherapy Applied Psychotherapy Compassion Focussed Therapy Occupational Therapy Physiotherapy Counselling CBT Dialectical Behaviour Therapy	Clinical Psychology Applied Psychology EMDR Compassion Focussed Therapy Social Psychology Family Therapy and Systemic Practice Counselling and Therapeutic Communication Masters in Trauma Focussed CBT Dialectical Behaviour Therapy	Social Psychology Nursing Thorn (psychosocial interventions) CBT EMDR Consultant Psychology Dialectical Behaviour Therapy Masters in Trauma Focussed CBT Compassion focused therapy	Applied Psychology Nursing Counselling Psychology EMDR Consultant Masters in Trauma Focussed CBT Dialectical Behaviour Therapy Compassion Focussed Therapy	Nursing Psychology Masters in Trauma Focussed CBT EMDR Dialectical Behaviour Therapy Balint

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Health to outline his plans to recruit further personnel for the Regional Trauma Network across the areas of psychology and psychiatry, steps 4 and 5 on the step care model.

(AQW 6760/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below shows the plans and status for future recruitment of personnel for the Health and Social Care element of the Regional Trauma Network across all Health and Social Care Trusts.

Source: HSCB

	BHSCT	NHSCT	SEHSCT	SHSCT	WHST
Funding allocated 2020/ 21 – aim to have posts filled by 1st February 2021					
One WTE Band 8C Consultant Clinical Psychologist (Adults)	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced
One WTE Band 8C Consultant Psychological Practitioner (children and young people)	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced
One WTE Band 7 Trauma Outreach Lead per Trust (Additional 20/21 funding)	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced
Additional trauma therapy (Band 7) (Additional 20/21 funding)	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced	Funding allocated – recruitment process commenced
Four PAs Consultant Psychiatry time	Funding allocated – recruitment process to commence	Funding allocated – recruitment to commence	Funding allocated – recruitment process monitored	Funding allocated – recruitment process monitored	Funding allocated, recruitment to commence
One PA of Pain Management	Model being scoped	Model being scoped	Model being scoped	Model being scoped	Model being scoped
Additional 20/21 funding for Addictions and Psychological Trauma	Model being scoped in WHST	Model being scoped in WHST	Model being scoped in WHST	Model being scoped in WHST	Model being scoped in WHST

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health to detail the average waiting time for a GP appointment. (AQW 6828/17-22)

Mr Swann: This information is not available. As independent contractors, GP practices are responsible for managing their own appointment systems and waiting times.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 4643/17-22, for a timescale for the introduction of regulations to prohibit the sale of nicotine inhaling products to under 18 year olds. (AQW 6833/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department continues to deal with a considerable number of issues relating to Covid-19 which has ongoing staffing implications. Additionally, the NICS legal resource (which is required for clearance of the draft regulations) is currently dealing with a particularly high volume of work relating both to COVID-19 and EU Exit preparations. It remains my intention to progress these regulations at the earliest opportunity.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health whether he will prioritise a plan to facilitate the return of face to face GP appointments in a clinically safe manner. (AQW 6884/17-22)

Mr Swann: I want to stress that GP practices are open and are providing face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them. All practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to allow them to do so safely.

GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients and the current pandemic does not negate this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how best to prioritise patients to provide this core service whilst maintaining patient safety.

GP practices are currently operating a telephone first triage system which allows patients to seek medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP then uses their clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be safely managed over the telephone or whether a face to face appointment is required. This approach ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential. This helps to ensure infection control and social distancing keeping both patients and staff safe.

The telephone first triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face to face assessment to one of the Primary Care COVID-19 centres. This ensures that these patients do not attend the GP Practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimal disruption.

The pandemic has meant change across a range of services, including in health and social care and General Practice has responded to this. Services will continue to adapt and develop to meet the ongoing threat from Covid-19 and the need to protect the public and staff from the virus.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices in Northern Ireland on 30 July asking that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices were advised to communicate to patients about the practice services that are available and how to access them with the recommendation that these communications make clear that GP practices are open.

On 7 September, GP leaders from the Health and Social Care Board, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association issued a statement to reassure patients that whilst patients may be seen in a different way, by phone or video-link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and issue prescriptions. Similar communication was also issued to MLAs.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Health for an update on the disposal of the Tyrone County Hospital site in Omagh. (AQW 6966/17-22)

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. A previously agreed sale did not complete and the property was re-advertised in June 2020. It is anticipated that a new sale will complete in 2020.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister of Health how the most recent comparable COVID-19 testing data per 100,000 population for Northern Ireland compares with (i) England; (ii) Scotland; (iii) Wales; and (iv) the Republic of Ireland. (AQW 6997/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the daily average number of laboratory completed tests for COVID-19 during the last 7 days (9th – 15th September 2020) per 100,000 population for Northern Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales and the Republic of Ireland, is detailed in the table overleaf:

Region	Daily Average Tests per 100k Population (9 - 15 Sept 2020)
Northern Ireland	348.1
England	325.2
Scotland	289.2
Wales	298.5
Republic of Ireland	220.5

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health for an update on when the bowel cancer screening programme will restart. (AQW 7098/17-22)

Mr Swann: As a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, the bowel cancer screening programme was paused from mid-March 2020. Restoration of all paused screening programmes is a priority for my Department.

In relation to bowel cancer screening, the immediate priority was to clear the backlog of patients waiting for diagnostic procedures (colonoscopy) following a positive screening test result. Consequently, Trusts recommenced colonoscopies from June and have made significant progress to date in clearing this backlog.

Routine bowel cancer screening invitations recommenced from the 17th of August through the issuing of testing kits.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the funding his Department has awarded to community organisations in West Tyrone to address suicide rates, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7113/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Public Health Agency (PHA) commissions and funds suicide prevention and mental health and wellbeing programmes under the Protect Life 2 Strategy. Across the Western area, the PHA have invested the following funding in the last three years with both statutory and community and voluntary partner organisations.

	Suicide Prevention	Mental Health and emotional wellbeing
2019/20	£1,675,601	£100,922
2018/19	£1,468,772	£119,220
2017/18	£1,357,455	£109,553

Within the West Tyrone area specifically, the PHA have funded: SHIP Project provided by ZEST (Healing the Hurt); Mental Health Training and Support provided by Western Health and Social Care Trust including Digital Resilience and protecting mental health in the online world; Suicide Prevention – Health Improvement Training; Lifeskills Programme; Self-Harm Acute Staff; CLEAR Project scheme provided by Developing Healthy Communities across the Western Area; and AWARE Defeat Depression.

CLEAR Small Grants is a programme that will build resilience and capacity, promote early interventions and promote suicide prevention in local communities. A wide range of community projects have benefitted from Small Grants funding within the Western Tyrone area of the Western Trust with total amounts detailed below:

2019/20	£50785
2018/19	£79871
2017/18	£97529

Regional programmes are also available for residents in the West Tyrone area including the 24/7 Lifeline Helpline and online training.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Health for an update on the procurement of further personal protective equipment.

(AQO 684/17-22)

- Mr Swann: I am indebted to frontline health and social care staff who are working tirelessly to provide services in very challenging conditions. Their safety remains an absolute priority for me.
- Led by my Department, the Business Services Organisation with the support of other government Departments and agencies has undertaken significant work to ensure reliable and sustainable PPE supply chains are in place now, and in the event of a second wave of Covid-19.
- Excellent progress has been made in securing local sustainable PPE supply, and work continues across government to promote opportunities for home-grown manufacturers and suppliers.
- My Department continues to work with the UK Government and the devolved nations to seek out options where it is beneficial to procure on a bi-lateral or 4 nation basis. A recent example of this is a supply of clear face masks, purchased by the UK Government, to support those with hearing or other impairments who would rely on lip reading.
- And you will know I have successfully opened up a confident supply chain with China which has supplied products such as gloves that are more difficult to source locally in bulk.
- I commissioned a rapid audit which outlined a need to improve infrastructure. The findings have led to a number of key changes including an improved and more robust process for stock handling with a new process for supply to care settings.
- A new modelling system has been developed to predict projected demand for PPE as we not only begin to rebuild services in the context of winter pressures, but prepare for an anticipated second surge.
- Stock holding has been extended to 12 weeks to minimise risk associated with global disruption, with arrangements in place to warehouse the additional stock levels.
- And, I have approved the introduction of an electronic Dynamic Purchasing System (DPS) which has improved the ease and speed by which potential suppliers tender for contracts. This will support supply of PPE not just in Health but across the Northern Ireland public sector.

I cannot say the process to date has been easy. We have effectively been in competition with every other country for a limited supply of PPE. That said, I am proud of what has been achieved to date and, whilst we can never be complacent, I am confident of our position as we face down the prospect of a second surge.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health what actions are being taken to relieve pressure on Emergency Departments in the Belfast area.

(AQO 685/17-22)

Mr Swann: My immediate priority is to ensure that our EDs can continue to provide life- saving services in an environment that is safe for patients and for staff.

The response to COVID-19 has highlighted the need to bring forward a number of priority actions to ensure that EDs remain safe in terms of infection control, and do not reach the levels of overcrowding that we have seen in previous years. These actions are aligned with the emerging evidence from the work of the Urgent and Emergency Care Review, and are focussed not solely on the ED but on the blockages and barriers across the health and social care system which often manifest in the form of busy EDs.

Officials are currently working with local implementation groups both in greater Belfast and right across Northern Ireland to put in place these actions across primary and secondary care to ensure our urgent and emergency care services are prepared for the coming winter, as well as potential further surges in COVID-19 transmission.

This includes, for example, work to develop a telephone triage service to better direct people to the care they need, improving anticipatory care in nursing homes, improving access to acute care at home, rapid access assessment and treatment services, and improving discharge from hospital to maximise hospital capacity and facilitate admission for those who need it.

The aim - for Belfast and across Northern Ireland - is to ensure that patients are cared for more quickly in the most appropriate setting, preventing crowding, and preserving EDs for truly life-threatening emergencies.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health for an update on the return of face to face GP appointments.

(AQO 687/17-22)

Mr Swann: I spoke to the House last week in response to an urgent oral question on this issue.

As I emphasised then, GP practices are still providing face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them and all practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment to allow them to do so safely. Information from the Health and Social Care Board indicates that there has been an increase in GP face to face contacts and I am pleased to see that this is the case.

GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients and the current pandemic does not in any way negate this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how best to prioritise patients to provide this core service whilst maintaining patient safety.

GP practices are currently operating a telephone first triage system which allows patients to continue to seek medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP then uses their clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be safely managed over the telephone or whether a face to face appointment is required.

This ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential. This helps to ensure social distancing and infection control keeping both patients and staff safe.

The telephone first triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face to face assessment to one of the Primary Care COVID-19 centres. This ensures that these patients do not attend the GP Practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimal disruption. COVID-19 centres are seeing increasing numbers of referrals

I want to reiterate that whilst patients may be seen in a different way, by phone or video-link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and issue prescriptions. Patients should be reassured that if they have a health concern, they will be able to get an appointment to see a GP if necessary.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices in Northern Ireland on 30th July asking that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices were advised to communicate to patients about the practice services that are available and how to access them, with the recommendation that these communications make clear that GP practices are open.

On 7th September, GP leaders from the Health and Social Care Board, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association issued a statement to reassure patients that whilst patients may be seen in a different way, by phone or video-link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and issue prescriptions.

A letter was also issued to all MLAs providing an update on the current GP practice environment and asking that they share the key message with their constituents and with the wider public that GP practices are open, but working differently, to ensure that patients know to contact their GP practice when they need health care and treatment.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the delivery of primary care services in East Antrim.

(AQO 688/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am grateful for the dedication of health and social care professionals across Northern Ireland who have been working tirelessly to deliver services at this challenging time.

In East Antrim, practices reconfigured quickly to protect patients and staff, embracing new ways of working such as virtual consultations.

GP and HSC Trust colleagues have worked together to adapt local intermediate care units to facilitate the care of Covid positive patients, Covid recovered and those Covid negative patients who requiring rehabilitation. Whiteabbey hospital is now the regional designated Nightingale hospital and GPs from East Antrim are involved in the task group for this in co-operation with the local Trust.

Member practices across the East Antrim Federation have developed plans to individually deliver flu vaccination within their own premises or in clusters. There has been an integrated approach to this work – for example, in Larne all five practices will provide flu vaccination locally in the town. This has been in conjunction with Mid and East Antrim Council who have provided premises to facilitate this work.

The paediatric hub service continues to operate in East Antrim, moving to a virtual meeting format. This has supported sharing of current information and guidance on Covid in paediatrics alongside maintaining a timely service for patients with other conditions. Multidisciplinary input remains a core factor in this, including asthma nurse, epilepsy nurse and allergy consultant.

East Antrim has adapted its ongoing proactive fortnightly nursing home service. This is now a virtual ward round review of nursing home patients by their own GP. This anticipatory service has been able to continue uninterrupted through the ongoing Covid pandemic.

Federation elective care reform work continues to be led by GPs from East Antrim. Services are starting to resume in specialities such as gynaecology and dermatology.

Practice Based Pharmacist provision is a further very important element of East Antrim primary care services delivery. Practice Based Pharmacists have been playing an important role in releasing GP time spent on prescribing activities to increase overall GP capacity, working with GPs to improve the quality and safety of prescribing, and securing efficiencies in the primary care prescribing budget.

I would like to take this opportunity to record my thanks for the important work undertaken by all of those involved in the delivery of primary care services in East Antrim – and across Northern Ireland as a whole.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health whether current guidance will be reviewed to allow birth partners to stay with mothers during labour in hospital maternity units for more than an hour.

(AQO 689/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department published updated guidance, effective from 6 July 2020, to regulate visiting in all Health and Social Care (HSC) settings for the duration of the COVID-19 response. The guidance sets out the current position in respect of pregnant women in that, so long as the surge level and the Northern Ireland Executive five step approach permits:

Birth partners will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to dating scan, early pregnancy clinic, anomaly scan, and Fetal Medicine Department, for induction of labour, duration of labour and birth and, to visit in antenatal and postnatal wards as appropriate.

The full guidance is available online on the Department's website at <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-visiting-guidance>.

As a result of the Executive's decision to invoke limited lockdowns in specific areas across Northern Ireland, arrangements within the selected areas do, unfortunately have to be further limited. With effect from Monday 14 September 2020:

Paediatrics: Any child admitted can be accompanied by one parent or carer at a time.

Maternity: A person in labour can be accompanied by one birthing partner. There are no visitors permitted in antenatal or post-natal ward areas.

Neonatal Unit: A patient in the neonatal ward / paediatric ICU may be accompanied by one parent. The duration of the visit must be agreed with the Ward Sister or Charge Nurse.

These additional restrictions will be kept under constant review and will not be left in place for any longer than necessary to control the spread of COVID-19.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health when he plans a full and safe reintroduction of GP services.

(AQO 690/17-22)

Mr Swann: I spoke to the House last week in response to an urgent oral question on this issue.

As I emphasised then, GP practices are still providing face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them and all practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment to allow them to do so safely. Information from the Health and Social Care Board indicates that there has been an increase in GP face to face contacts and I am pleased to see that this is the case.

GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients and the current pandemic does not in any way negate this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how best to prioritise patients to provide this core service whilst maintaining patient safety.

GP practices are currently operating a telephone first triage system which allows patients to continue to seek medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP then uses their clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be safely managed over the telephone or whether a face to face appointment is required.

This ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential. This helps to ensure social distancing and infection control keeping both patients and staff safe.

The telephone first triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face to face assessment to one of the Primary Care COVID-19 centres. This ensures that these patients do not attend the GP Practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimal disruption. COVID-19 centres are seeing increasing numbers of referrals

I want to reiterate that whilst patients may be seen in a different way, by phone or video-link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and issue prescriptions. Patients should be reassured that if they have a health concern, they will be able to get an appointment to see a GP if necessary.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices in Northern Ireland on 30th July asking that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices were advised to communicate to patients about the practice services that are available and how to access them, with the recommendation that these communications make clear that GP practices are open.

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Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health, in relation to COVID-19 testing, for his assessment of the process from booking a test through to receiving the result.

(AQO 691/17-22)

Mr Swann: Everyone in Northern Ireland is eligible for a COVID-19 test if they are showing symptoms of infection. Priority groups eligible for testing continues to be kept under active review and adjusted appropriately in line with emerging evidence and as we continue to scale up in testing capacity.

Testing in Northern Ireland is currently undertaken through two routes: the Trusts' Health & Social Care laboratories, and Consortium laboratory network (referred to as Pillar 1) and the National Testing Programme (referred to as Pillar 2). Symptomatic members of the public are tested via the National Testing Programme.

The National Testing Programme was established and is managed by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in London and operates through collaborative working with my Department and the Public Health Agency (PHA).

In Northern Ireland, we have a number of testing locations for symptomatic members of the public, which are usually available within a very short distance for most people. There are four static sites and six mobile testing units (MTUs) currently operating in Northern Ireland; with two additional MTUs to be operationalised shortly. The MTUs are deployed by the Public Health Agency in towns and villages across the province, often for shorter periods, in response to local need and/or to provide additional testing capacity.

As this is a national programme, it is managed centrally by the DHSC and all tests are booked through the online booking portal or by calling the 119 helpline.

The online booking portal will offer a COVID-19 test at a site closest to the person's home address; this includes at an MTU if one has been deployed locally and if appointments are available at that location at the time of the booking being made. People can also arrange for testing kits to be delivered to their home if, for any reason, they are unable to travel to a testing site.

There has been a significant increase in cases over recent weeks across the UK. This has led to the National Testing Programme experiencing an exceptionally high demand for testing.

I am aware that the increase in demand for testing has created some difficulties for people using the DHSC London online booking portal, with people either finding it hard to book tests, or being offered tests at sites which are inconvenient and at times outside Northern Ireland. I appreciate that those needing a test will be frustrated by these issues. I understand that DHSC London are seeking to effectively address these concerns and my officials continue to actively engage with DHSC in this regard.

I am advised that more appointments and home testing kits are being made available nationally every day. I would therefore strongly encourage anyone who tries to book a test and is unable to do so, or is offered a location or date and time which is not convenient, to please wait a few hours and try again.

The National Program target is that people will receive their COVID-19 test result within 72 hours of taking the test either by text or email. However, I am advised that with current pressures on the national testing program, in many instances this has proved challenging in recent weeks.

It is important that people ensure that they enter the correct contact details when registering their testing kits as it is not possible to receive their test result if the kit is not registered properly on the website.

Anyone who requested a testing kit but has not yet received this is asked to contact 119 directly.

Overall testing capacity is continually reviewed by my Department and there are active discussions underway to further enhance capacity across all aspects of our testing programme.

Optimising available testing capacity will continue to be a key priority for me and for my officials in the weeks and months ahead.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health, given the potential impact of lockdown and restrictions on vulnerable people and people with mental health issues, for an update on his Department's efforts, beyond the appointment of an interim Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland, to mitigate or limit the potential damage to these groups.

(AQO 692/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is accepted that the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular lockdown and other restrictions, will have a negative impact on our population's mental wellbeing.

At the start of the pandemic I put arrangements in place to mitigate and address this impact. When I published the Mental Health Action Plan on 19 May I included a dedicated Covid-19 Mental Health Response Plan. This plan set out the mental health response to the pandemic and outlined specific actions, such as:

- public health messaging to support people to look after their mental wellbeing while staying at home, and the provision of updated mental health support and advice on the mindingyourhead.info website;
- the development of an online apps library to help and support self-help;
- rollout of psychological first aid training to staff and volunteers on the front line;
- provision of free Stress Control classes online, which have been available since May and will continue to be available until the end of the year;
- bereavement guidance; and
- a workforce wellbeing framework and dedicated psychological helplines for front line staff.

This support remains in place as we continue to battle Covid-19 and the impact of the pandemic on our communities' mental health. A key element of responding to the emerging mental health need is the implementation of the Mental Health Action Plan, including the development of a new Mental Health Strategy.

This gives us an opportunity to build our mental health response to the pandemic into a ten year strategic plan, with a substantial evidence base. We can reinvigorate and reorganise services to better reflect the new and emerging profile of need, and we can build on innovative solutions that have come to the fore during this period.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health whether the level of COVID-19 testing capacity has been increased, in response to the lack of available laboratory facilities at the start of September 2020.

(AQO 693/17-22)

Mr Swann: Testing capacity in Northern Ireland has increased significantly since the beginning of the pandemic and is delivered through two routes.

Firstly, testing is undertaken in HSC Trust laboratories and through local testing partners as part of our NI Scientific Advisory Consortium. This is known as Pillar 1 testing.

Secondly, testing is delivered through our participation in the National Testing Programme (NTP) which is managed by the Department of Health and Social care in London. This is known as Pillar 2 testing and currently includes four drive-through fixed testing sites, six operational Mobile Testing Units which are deployed in towns and villages across Northern Ireland in response to local need, and also Home and Satellite testing channels within the NTP.

Overall testing capacity is continually reviewed by my Department and there are active discussions underway to further enhance capacity across all aspects of our testing programme.

Optimising available testing capacity will continue to be a key priority for me and for my officials in the weeks and months ahead.

Department for Infrastructure

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 6013/17-22, to detail what the agreed plans are to secure the necessary chemicals for the safe treatment of water supplies post-31 December 2020.

(AQW 6206/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): NI Water has advised me that it has developed a highly detailed understanding of chemical transport routes and storage requirements, through Ireland and the UK, in order to secure the necessary chemicals for the safe treatment of water supplies post 31 December 2020. It has undertaken actions with its suppliers to minimise the chance of disruption by: (1) maximising the stock levels of chemical it holds and (2) switching import routes from those where the risk of disruption is highest. NI Water maintains up to 7 weeks supply of chemicals in stock, up to the maximum amounts that can be safely stored. The company has also carried out a comprehensive assessment with all its suppliers to detail the supply chain right through from raw products to the chemicals going to its treatments works. This assessment has considered the supply chain in terms of modes and locations of transport and travel. NI Water has advised me that it currently has sufficient chemicals in stock.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure when vehicle testing capacity will increase at MOT centres, while ensuring the health and safety of DVA staff.

(AQW 6297/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There has been a gradual resumption of MOT services from 1 June 2020, when the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed Individual Vehicle Approval testing.

From 20 July, the Driver and Vehicle Agency resumed MOT testing for priority vehicle groups, including those vehicles that are not able to avail of a Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC). This includes taxis and buses due a first time test, vehicles not previously registered in Northern Ireland, vehicles whose MOTs have expired by more than 12 months that includes vehicles previously declared SORN and those sold by car dealerships.

From 1 September, MOT testing for four year old cars and motorbikes and three year old light goods vehicles also resumed and for those vehicles in this category that currently have a 6 month TEC, they will be called for test when their TEC expires. In addition, the DVA recommenced testing of heavy goods vehicles, trailers and buses.

It is my priority to ensure that our staff and customers remain safe. The DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health advice to ensure that necessary and proportionate control measures relating to Covid-19 are incorporated into its risk assessments for safe vehicle testing. Like many other public facing services, vehicle testing capacity will increase as restrictions ease and as risk assessments are updated and this is being kept under constant review. In the interim period, the DVA is continuing to carefully manage the TEC process to prevent customers from being disadvantaged and to ensure all eligible vehicles can legally remain on the road.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider the further roll out of (i) Speed Indicator Devices; and (ii) other road safety signage in the Newry and Armagh constituency.

(AQW 6299/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) My Department is not responsible for the roll out of Speed Indicator Devices (SIDs) which are the responsibility of Councils through their Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs). However, my officials will offer advice on any proposals developed by the PCSP as part of the consultation process. I understand that, following consultation with my Department, 7 locations were selected for SID's within the Newry, Mourne & Down Council area.
- (ii) Effective and appropriate provision of signage is one of the key road safety measures deployed on the road network including within the Newry and Armagh constituency. My Department reviews signage on an ongoing basis, including in response to specific complaints or when accidents occur, to consider if it is appropriate to provide additional signage or other engineering measures to improve safety on the road network.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration has been given to further safety measures on wire rope restraint systems on dual carriageway roads to protect all vehicle users.

(AQW 6305/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department adheres to the current European and GB NI standards when installing safety barriers, including wire rope systems, which are tested to a normal containment level, the most common level used on dual carriageways. The testing regime for normal containment barriers only uses cars for crash testing, therefore these barriers are not designed to redirect errant buses, heavy good vehicles or motorcycles.

As part of the design process, appropriate mitigation measures can be specified where a specific risk is identified for motorcyclists. The GB NI Technical Committee for Road Restraint Systems has recently commenced work to develop further guidance and a risk based scoring system in relation to motorcyclists, to help designers identify specific risks.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the cost of replacing central reservation barriers on dual carriageways to wire rope restraint systems, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6306/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since 2015 my Department has not used wire rope systems for the replacement of other forms of existing central reserve safety barrier on dual carriageways.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure what measures are in place to ensure that grass cutting across the road network is subject to regular competitive tendering processes, therefore providing value for money and an effective use of resources.

(AQW 6308/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department utilises Environmental Maintenance term contracts for the supply of grass cutting services over a 5 year period. This type of contract creates a mechanism to instruct routine services at different locations, without needing to procure a new contract every time.

A well-developed procurement strategy is in place. The contracts are competitively tendered using the Open Procedure, in accordance with the Public Contracts Regulations 2015. Two phases are released during the 5 year period, divided into separate lots geographically, with nine contracts to cover the entire road network. A limit is set on the number of contracts any company can be awarded in each tender competition. My Department's strategy ensures a sustainable supply chain, maintaining a balance in the delivery of value for money, alongside our policy to actively encourage the participation of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure, as members of the public are unable to access test buildings due to COVID-19, whether she will take action to provide shelter for customers during MOT tests.

(AQW 6310/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) has carried out an extensive review of its risk assessments to ensure that all relevant control measures relating to Covid-19 have been incorporated into its driver and vehicle testing processes. These have enabled MOT centres to safely reopen from 20 July, and practical car driver testing to recommence from 1 September.

To mitigate against the risk of spreading Covid-19 and to meet PHA guidelines in relation to social distancing, it has been necessary for the DVA to take steps to reduce the number of people in its test halls and reception areas. Unfortunately, at this time it is not possible for the DVA to accommodate customers in its buildings during the MOT test. Customers are advised of this position when they receive their reminder notice and booking appointment confirmation.

I fully appreciate and accept this is far from an ideal situation. I would, however, stress that these temporary measures have been put in place to ensure the safety of customers and staff, which remains my priority at this time. DVA officials are carefully exploring options to identify practical solutions to this issue.

I am very conscious of the disruption and inconvenience being experienced by many of our customers at this time, and I can assure you that the DVA is working to safely restore normal services as soon as possible.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure what arrangements are in place with local councils to clean roadways and footpaths, including sharing the costs of traffic management processes.

(AQW 6311/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Under most scenarios, Councils are responsible for cleaning roads under Article 7 of the Litter (Northern Ireland) Order 1994 (as amended by the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011). A similar duty is placed on my Department in relation to designated roads such as the motorway network.

My Department notifies Councils of road closures that are being put in place to facilitate resurfacing works and providing there is no adverse impact on the planned works and agreement from our contractors, we will continue to facilitate requests from Councils to clean roads and footways.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of vehicle lifts found to be defective in all MOT test centres; (ii) the replacement costs for these lifts; and (iii) the measures put in place to stop a recurrence of vehicle lift failures.

(AQW 6312/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The number of lifts found to be defective in all MOT centres totalled 52 and the replacement costs for these lifts was £1,838,960.

I commissioned two separate independent reviews to investigate the circumstances that gave rise to the situation and resulted in the suspension of MOT tests. The DVA has reviewed the reports from these reviews and has identified a number of actions and processes that need to be put in place to minimise a recurrence of such events.

The DVA Action Plan and updates on progress to reflect the position at 31 May 2020 can be found at <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/infrastructure/dva-action-plan-progress-report-31may2020.pdf>

The next quarterly update for the period to 31 August 2020 will be published on the Department's website shortly.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to prioritise driving tests for those who are unable to use public transport due to medical or other reasons.

(AQW 6320/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed practical driving tests for cars and lorries from 1 September, initially prioritising those requests from around 200 high priority workers who have previously requested an urgent driving test and were at that time on a waiting list. The DVA is continuing to process requests for high priority workers and these customers will also be offered driving test appointments. Driving tests will also be offered to around 3,600 customers who had a driving test booked between March and June, but whose tests were cancelled due to the lockdown measures imposed to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

The DVA is making good progress in delivering driving tests for these customers and estimates it will take around 6 to 8 weeks to clear this backlog, anticipating a resumption of its normal service delivery from October/ November. While I fully appreciate there are many legitimate reasons why customers will want to take their practical driving test at the earliest opportunity, for prioritisation to be effective it needs to be focussed and be able to be managed by the DVA. The DVA is planning to reopen bookings for all new customers as soon as possible and to increase capacity for driving tests to deal with the likely high demand when normal service resumes. In doing so, this will improve driving tests services for all our customers, including those who are unable to use public transport due to medical or other reasons.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to detail all (a) temporary; and (b) permanent active travel infrastructure established in the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area since COVID-19 restrictions were introduced; and (ii) what further schemes or spaces have been identified for further investment in that council area.

(AQW 6353/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department recently completed the 1.4km shared use path, known as the Blaris Greenway between Blaris Road and Sprucefield Park and Ride Car Park. Design work is underway for the next phase of the Blaris Greenway from Sprucefield Park and Ride to Halftown Road, which is also approximately 1.4km long. Both of these schemes are to be 'permanent' schemes. No 'temporary' measures have been introduced.

My Department is also planning to erect better signage on the Comber Greenway on a stretch which passes through the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area. Officials continue to work with the Council and other local authorities in identifying active travel opportunities.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on the Blue/Green Infrastructure Capital Funds; (ii) how the budget will be allocated; and (iii) whether any allocation has been made for Ards and North Down Borough Council.

(AQW 6356/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have allocated £20 million capital funding for blue/green infrastructure in 2020/21. The purpose of the funding is to support communities through transformation, promoting active travel and shaping our places to live in the new normal in support of the COVID 19 recovery. A proportion of this funding will be available to all Councils in order to develop active travel schemes and support the reimagining and reshaping of town and city centres and I will be making an announcement shortly on the level of funds to be provided.

I also want to make sure that there is an inclusive approach to determining the deployment of this fund. As such, I met with a wide range of stakeholders on 1 September and had a very productive and engaging discussion with them where I explored and sought support for co-design ideas. In addition, my officials recently received a number of greenway proposals from Councils. Following consideration of these, I announced £2.8 million funding last week in support of Council greenway schemes including a proposal to widen a short stretch of the North Down Coastal Path at Bangor.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider introducing the ability to log obstructed pavements online via NI Direct.

(AQW 6360/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The obstruction categories currently available within the 'Report-a-Fault' system on the NI Direct website are designed to cover a wide range of issues that can arise such as fallen vegetation or objects and unauthorised equipment or signs. I can confirm that each category description refers to an obstruction on either the road or footway. After selecting a relevant fault category, customers have the facility to add further details within the additional information text box, for example, to accurately describe the location of the obstruction. The system then sends a notification to the relevant DfI Roads area maintenance office, where the issue is investigated.

It should be noted that parking that causes an obstruction (on the road or footway) has not been decriminalised and responsibility for enforcement currently rests with the PSNI. Footway parking is enforced by Traffic Attendants only where there are parking restrictions in place, such as yellow lines or Clearways, as these apply to both the road and adjacent footway. Further information on parking enforcement can be found at the following link:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/parking-enforcement>.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the status of the Local Development Plans for each of the eleven local councils as per the Planning (Local Development Plan) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2015.[R]
(AQW 6361/17-22)

Ms Mallon: All eleven councils are advancing new Local Development Plans (LDPs) for their respective areas. While progress on LDP preparation varies, seven councils have published draft Plan Strategies, of which one is currently pending Independent Examination by the Planning Appeals Commission.

The current stage of LDP preparation for each of the eleven local councils is outlined in the table below.

Current Stage of Local Development Plan Process	Local Authority
Pending Independent Examination.	Belfast City Council
Draft Plan Strategy published and consultation completed.	Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council
	Derry City & Strabane District Council
	Fermanagh & Omagh District Council
	Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council
	Mid & East Antrim Borough Council
	Mid Ulster District Council
Preparing for publication of draft Plan Strategy.	Ards & North Down Borough Council
	Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council
	Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council
	Newry, Mourne & Down District Council

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many social houses have been delayed in being built due to insufficient waste water sewerage infrastructure, broken down by (i) constituency; and (ii) postcode, for each of the last three years.
(AQW 6375/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have been advised by NI Water that it does not record information in relation to the specific number of social houses which have been delayed in being built due to insufficient waste water sewerage infrastructure.

NI Water does try to minimise delays by encouraging developers to submit a request for a Pre-Development Enquiry (PDE) before a Planning Application is lodged to the relevant Planning Authority. The PDE is a best practice approach which allows NI Water to confirm to a developer if there is available capacity at a specific wastewater treatment works. It thereby provides the opportunity to identify any issues upfront to allow developers to tailor their applications.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she plans to bring forward legislation for the exemption from the roadworthiness test for Vehicles of Historic Interest.
(AQW 6384/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since I announced my decision on 2 July 2020 to introduce the exemption from periodic roadworthiness testing for Vehicles of Historic Interest in Northern Ireland, my officials have been working to progress the legislation as quickly as possible.

I can advise that the regulations received legal clearance and were laid in the Assembly on 18 September 2020. They are subject to the Assembly's statutory period that applies within the negative resolution procedure. It is anticipated they will come into force on 12 October.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the locations which will be developed as Park and Ride sites this financial year.
(AQW 6385/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is my intention to progress the development of five Park and Ride projects in my first phase in this financial year; including bus based sites in Newtownards; Comber, Cairnshill in Belfast and Downpatrick together with a rail based site at Trooperslane in Carrickfergus. All of these projects will service busy commuter routes into Belfast and when complete will provide 2030 spaces.

I am committed to developing sustainable transport projects to support the green recovery and the expansion of the Park and Ride programme is an integral part of my commitment to encourage the use of public transport alternatives for commuting. I hope to announce the second phase of park and rides for this financial year in the coming months.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure for a list of the schools which have met the criteria for 20mph speed limit signage, as outlined in her budget statement in June.

(AQW 6387/17-22)

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 that traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at 100 schools which are split evenly over the 4 Roads Divisions. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

I have provided a list of the 100 schools below:

Southern Division

Abbey Primary School	Movilla Road, Newtownards
Abercorn PS	Newry Road, Banbridge
Andrews Memorial PS	Ballygowan Road, Comber
Armagh CBS	Keady Road, Armagh
Banbridge Academy/Edenderry PS	Lurgan Road, Banbridge
Carrowdore PS	Castle Place, Carrowdore
Christ The King PS	Drumsnade Road, Drumaness
Derryboye PS	Manse Road, Downpatrick
Grange Primary School	Lurganconary Road, Kilkeel
Killyleagh PS	Shirgley Road, Killyleagh
Kirkistown PS	Main Road, Cloughey, Newtownards
Loughries PS	Ballyblack Road, Newtownards
Milltown Primary School	Lurgan Road, Lenaderg
Orchard Primary School	Blackisland Road, Annaghmore
Portadown College	Killycomain Road, Portadown
St Josephs PS	Carnacaville Road, Newcastle
St Josephs PS	Ballynahinch Road, Crossgar
St Marys Aughisnafin PS	Closkelt Road, Castlewellan
St Marys PS	Strangford Road, Dunsford
St Patricks PS	Ballygalget Lane, Portaferry
St Patricks PS	Burrenreagh Road, Castlewellan
St Patricks PS	Ballynoe Road, Downpatrick
St. Louis' Grammar School	Newry Road, Kilkeel
St. Paul's High School	Camlough Road, Bessbrook
Tandragee Jnr High School	Armagh Road, Tandragee

Northern Division

Upper Ballyboley Primary School	36 Braepark Road, Ballyclare BT39 9UW
Islandmagee Primary School	163 Brown's Bay Rd, Islandmagee, Larne BT40 3TQ
Carrickfergus Grammar School	120 North Road, Carrickfergus BT38 7RA
Carrickfergus Academy	110 North Road, Carrickfergus BT38 7QX
Ballymena Academy	89 Galgorm Rd, Ballymena BT42 1AJ
The Diamond Primary School	107 Dreen Rd, Cullybackey, Ballymena BT42 1EE

St Paul's Primary School	32 Ballynafie Rd, Ahoghill, Ballymena BT42 1LF
Moorfields Primary School	180 Moorfields Rd, Moorfields Ballymena BT42 3EF
Ballyclare High School	31 Rashee Rd, Ballyclare BT39 9HJ
Duneane PS	166 Church Rd, Toome BT41 3RD
Moneynick Primary School	104 Moneynick Rd, Randalstown BT41 3HS
Groggan Primary School	179 Portglenone Rd, Randalstown BT41 3EU
Edmund Rice College	96-100 Hughtown Rd Newtownabbey BT36 7AU
Loanends Primary School	193 Sevenmile Straight Crumlin BT29 4YR
Mallusk Primary School	84 Mallusk Rd, Mallusk, Newtownabbey BT36 4QE
Millquarter PS	139 Crosskeys Road Toome, Antrim BT41 3PY
Carnalridge PS	135 Atlantic Road, Portrush BT56 8PB
Eden PS	33 Vow Road, Ballymoney BT53 7BP
Bushvalley PS	175 Ballinlea Rd, Stranocum, Ballymoney, BT53 8PR
Garryduff PS	133 Garryduff Road, Ballymoney BT53 7DR
Ballytober PS	60 Priestland Road, Bushmills BT57 8UR
St Canice PS	34 Glenedra Road, Feeny BT47 4TW
Drumrane PS	286 Drumrane Road, Dungiven BT47 4NL
St Patricks & St Joseph's PS	5 Churchtown Road, Garvagh BT51 5BA
St Matthew's PS	296 Drumsurn Road, Limavady BT49 0PX

Eastern Division

Aquinas Grammar School	B506 Ravenhill Road, Belfast
St Joseph's College	B506 Ravenhill Road, Belfast
St Michael's Primary School	B506 Ravenhill Road, Belfast
Ballysillan Primary School	Ballysillian Park, Belfast
Belfast Boy's Model school	A55 Ballysillan Road, Belfast
Belfast Royal Academy	Cliftonville Road, Belfast
Bunscoil BheannMhadagain	Cliftonville Road, Belfast
Cliftonville Int Primary School	Cliftonville Road, Belfast
Ben Madigan Prep school	A6 Antrim Road, Belfast
Our Lady of Lourdes Primary	A6 Antrim Road, Belfast
Carr's Glen Primary School	Oldpark Road, Belfast
Currie Primary School	Limestone Road, Belfast
Holy Family Primary School	Limestone Road, Belfast
Dominican College	Fortwilliam Park, Belfast
Knocknagoney Primary School	Knocknagoney Road, Belfast
Loughview Integrated	Church Road, Belfast
Leadhill Primary School	Church Road, Belfast
Annahilt Primary School	Ballynahinch Rd, Annahilt
Maghaberry Primary School	Maghaberry Road, Maghaberry
Meadowbridge Primary School	Lany Road, Hillsborough
Riverdale Primary School	Ballynahinch Road, Legacurry

Rowandale Primary School	Clarehill Road, Moira
St Aloysuis Primary School	Ballinderry Road, Lisburn
St Patrick's Academy	Ballinderry Road, Lisburn
Lagan College	Manse Road, Castlereagh

Western Division

St Aidan's High School	Derrylin
St Mary's Primary School	Bellanaleck
St Mary's Primary School	Maguiresbridge
Florencecourt Primary School	Florencecourt
Gillygooley Primary School	71 Gillygooley Road, Omagh
Christ the King Primary School	34 Gortin Road, Omagh
St Patrick's Primary School	171 Newtownsaville Road, Eskra
Omagh County Primary School	Campsie, Omagh
Arvalee School	Strule Campus, Omagh
Crossroads Primary School	147 Drumagarner Road, Kilrea
Edendork Primary School	181 Coalisland Road, Dungannon
Saint Trea's Primary School	225 Shore Road, Ballyronan
Orritor Primary School	249 Orritor Road, Cookstown
Augnacloy College & Aughnacloy Regional PS	Carnteel Road, Aughnacloy
Saint Eoghan's Draperstown	51 Moneyneany Road, Draperstown
Saint Brigids Mayogall	52 Mayogall Road, Magherafelt
Ampertaine Primary School	94 Kilrea Road, Upperlands
Culmore Primary School	181 Culmore Road, Derry
Foyle College	67 Limavady Road, Derry
Ebrington Primary and Nursey	67 Limavady Road, Derry
St Paul's Primary School Slievemore	1 Moss Road, Derry
Model Primary School	Northland Road, Derry
Holy Cross	Melmount Road, Strabane
St Marys PS	Melmount Road, Strabane
Artigarvan PS	Berryhill Road, Artigarvan

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans to address flooding in Ballycolman, Strabane. (AQW 6392/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has commenced initial studies to investigate the operation of the storm sewer drainage network at the Ballycolman estate. In addition, my officials have placed a sand bag container, stocked with 700 sandbags, in the Lower Ballycolman area close to the affected properties, and distributed eight keys for the containers to the local community.

Going forward, my officials will investigate the possibility of reshaping the road at the affected houses in Ballycolman estate and Northern Ireland Water will investigate the possibility of separating storm drainage from the combined system at this location to establish if this would be a viable engineering solution. However this will be expensive to carry out and with all major works will be subject to funding.

I wish to assure residents that my Department will continue to engage with all stakeholders and work to provide change in the area.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for an update on the Residents' Parking Scheme that has been piloted in Belfast; and (ii) when the appraisal will be completed, with a view to rolling out to other areas. (AQW 6409/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The first residents' parking scheme in Rugby Road / College Park Avenue, Belfast, came into operation during April 2018. A review of the scheme, which will reflect the needs, experiences and feedback of residents, is currently nearing completion. I will want to make sure that any lessons learnt from this scheme inform wider policy on implementation of residents' parking schemes to the benefit of communities.

At this stage, I am not in a position to advise on a timescale for completion of the review, but I can confirm that any findings will be made publically available. I will consider any new schemes in light of these findings.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many people have passed the driving theory test from 1 March 2020. **(AQW 6418/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: Driving theory tests were suspended on 20 March to help prevent the spread of COVID-19. From 6 July, the DVA reinstated driving theory tests at its six centres across the north at reduced capacity in order to comply with PHA advice and guidance on social distancing. A very small number of driving theory tests for critical workers were completed in the intervening period.

The number of driving theory test passes is a National Statistic and as such must be released in accordance with the UK Official Statistics Code of Practice. To comply with this code, the Department cannot publicly release figures that are within the scope of National Statistics reporting beyond the latest published statistics.

The 'DfI Driver, Vehicle, Operator and Enforcement National Statistics' report is published on a quarterly basis with the latest edition covering the period from 1 April to 30 June 2020. Quarterly figures for driver theory test pass rates are presented within section 3 of this report, which can be found at <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/dfi-driver-vehicle-operator-and-enforcement-statistics-20120-21-quarter-one>

Given recent public interest in these statistics, the Department is working to publish provisional testing statistics on a monthly reporting cycle, which will be made available on the Department's website. The first monthly report will relate to the month of September and will be published during October.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for her assessment of the Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey 2019, where only 3% of children cycle to and from school; and (ii) what additional resources she will allocate to increase journeys to school by bicycle. **(AQW 6422/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: The Young Persons' Behaviour and Attitudes Survey 2019 continues to highlight the relatively low numbers of children walking and cycling to school (16% walking to school and 22% walk from school as their main mode of transport and 3% cycling all or part of the way to/from school). However, the survey also identifies opportunities to grow these numbers. For example, the data identifies that although 32% of children travel to school by car, only 20% travel home by car. The reduction in car travel on the home journey shows the potential for change and would have the effect of making the morning trip to school much more desirable for walking and cycling and so encourage even more to do so. The Survey also highlights that the proportion of young people who would like to walk or cycle to and from school is higher (20% for walking and 8% for cycling).

In terms of addressing these issues, I recently announced new 20mph speed limit signs for 100 schools to improve road safety around schools. I have also launched a grants scheme for community led road safety initiatives which offers individuals and community groups an opportunity to apply for funding of up to £10,000 to develop and deliver local road safety initiatives.

In addition along with the Public Health Agency, my Department continues to support the Active School Travel programme delivered by Sustrans.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much her Department has spent on the (i) Active School Travel Programme; and (ii) Cycling Proficiency Scheme, in each of the last three years. **(AQW 6427/17-22)**

Ms Mallon: Each year, every primary school in Northern Ireland, is invited to participate in the Cycling Proficiency Scheme (CPS). My Department provides free resources, training and payment to teachers responsible for delivery of the scheme.

In addition my Department jointly funds the Active School Travel Programme (ASTP) with the Public Health Agency. The ASTP is delivered under contract by Sustrans NI.

The table below shows details the annual expenditure for each of the two schemes.

	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
CPS	£68k	£67k	£65k
ASTP	£400k	£400k	£400k

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether consideration has been given to exploring the use of Kinnegar Logistics Base as a Park and Ride site once it becomes available for use in 2022.[R]

(AQW 6428/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to developing new integrated plans which deliver support for public transport, encourage more walking and cycling, better manage car commuting and promote sustainable development all in an effort to improve the environment and people's lives.

I recognise the role of Park and Ride schemes in helping to reduce City Centre congestion, and am keen to see such a facility constructed on the eastern side of Belfast. Initial studies have considered a number of sites around the Tillysburn Junction. Work to develop a Park and Ride site in this area is ongoing.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 6083/17-22, whether she will commit to an accelerated timetable for updating the NI Highway Code to incorporate the changes that she supports that are currently proposed in GB.

(AQW 6430/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to ensuring that the NI Highway Code reflects good practice, and is clear to users. I am supportive of encouraging walking and cycling and wish to assess how best to progress taking account of the changes taking place due to Covid-19. I have asked my officials to keep me informed of the progress on the consultation in GB and will then consider the best time to update the Code.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the roads due to be resurfaced in the Ards and North Down Borough Council area in this financial year.

(AQW 6439/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that the following roads have been included in the resurfacing programme for the Ards and North Down Borough Council area for this financial year:

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| ■ C0271 Kilcarn Road/Saintfield Road, Killinchy; | ■ U0132 Cultra Avenue, Holywood; |
| ■ C0254 Grangee Road, Carrowdore; | ■ U0103 Main Street, Conlig; |
| ■ U8001 Church Drive, Bangor; | ■ U0103 Tower Road, Conlig; |
| ■ U0112 Ballybuttle Road, Millisle; | ■ C0252 Gransha Road, Bangor; and |
| ■ U0133 Kylestone Road, Donaghadee; | ■ A0023 Belfast Road, Ballygowan. |
| ■ U8004 Manse Road, Bangor; | |

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the roads currently on the reserved footpath resurfacing list for the Ards and North Down Borough Council area.

(AQW 6440/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Footways that are currently not included in this year's footway resurfacing programme but are included on a reserve list are listed below. The capacity to deliver these schemes will depend upon the availability of funding for capital resurfacing at any given time. It should be noted that the schemes are not in a priority order and will be added to over time as worthwhile schemes are identified.

- | | |
|--|---|
| ■ Kinnegar Drive, Holywood; | ■ Palace Grove, Holywood; |
| ■ Grove Hill Gardens, Bangor; | ■ Old Holywood Road at Palace Barracks, Holywood; |
| ■ Summerhill Gardens, Bangor; | ■ Park Drive, Holywood; |
| ■ Greyabbey Road, Ballywalter; | ■ Park Avenue, Holywood; |
| ■ William Street, Donaghadee; | ■ Lynne Estate, Bangor; |
| ■ Meadowbank Avenue, Donaghadee; | ■ Wandsworth Area, Bangor; |
| ■ Dalton Way, Comber; | ■ Rugby Crescent/Avenue, Bangor; |
| ■ Glen Road, Comber; | ■ Grange Area, Bangor; |
| ■ Killinchy Road, Comber; | ■ Grove Park, Bangor; |
| ■ Glenariff Drive, Comber; | ■ The Green, Conlig; |
| ■ Mark Street, Newtownards; | ■ Shrewsbury Drive, Bangor; |
| ■ Marquis Street, Newtownards; | ■ Braemar Park, Bangor; |
| ■ James Street, Newtownards; | ■ Henderson Avenue, Bangor; |
| ■ Balfour Street, Newtownards; | ■ Henderson Drive, Bangor; |
| ■ Ann Street/Orchard Place, Newtownards; | ■ Seymour Area, Bangor; |
| ■ Edith Helen Road, Newtownards; | ■ Abbey Hill Drive, Bangor; |
| ■ Rose Park, Newtownards; | ■ Central Street, Bangor; |
| ■ Rathmore Road, Bangor; | ■ Windsor Avenue, Bangor; |
| ■ Redburn/Old Holywood Road, Holywood; | ■ Stanley Road, Bangor; |

- Ardmillan Grove, Bangor;
- Ardmillan Park, Bangor;
- Ardmillan Gardens, Bangor;
- Croft Area, Hollywood;
- Downshire Road, Bangor – Princetown to Maxwell Road;
- Downshire Road, Bangor – Maxwell Road to sea;
- Prospect Road, Bangor;
- Kilbourne Park, Bangor;
- Glendun Park, Bangor;
- Ashbury Road, Bangor;
- Hill Crest, Bangor;
- Innisfayle Avenue, Bangor;
- Golf Road, Helen's Bay;
- Churchill Crescent footways, Bangor;
- Troutbeck Avenue, Bangor;
- Church Road, Hollywood – from Church View to the Church;
- Bryansford Meadow, Bangor;
- Silverbirch Road at School/Church, Bangor; and
- Croft Street, Bangor.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the resurfacing plans for the junction at Upper Gransha Road, Ballyblack Road East, Killaughey Road and Movilla Road.

(AQW 6441/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's intention is to resurface this junction along with a resurfacing scheme to be carried out on the section of Ballyblack Road East between the junction and Moss Road.

However, before the resurfacing scheme can proceed, a side-filling scheme needs to be completed to stabilise the verge alongside Ballyblack Road East. This will necessitate acquisition of a small strip of land and discussions with the landowner are ongoing.

Should the land acquisition be concluded satisfactorily, it is hoped that the side-filling scheme can be completed during this financial year and the resurfacing scheme will follow if funding is available.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given recent localised road flooding, whether her Department plans to increase the level of routine gully cleaning.

(AQW 6443/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Gully cleaning is key to road safety and forms an integral part of my Department's routine maintenance work programme. Since 2015, resource budget pressures within my Department have had a significant impact on the delivery of routine maintenance services and as a result, my Department has had to reduce its routine road maintenance activities to those considered essential for maintaining public safety and protecting the transport network.

Historically my Department aimed to inspect and where necessary clean all gullies in urban areas twice each year and gullies in rural areas once per year however in recent years budgets are such that my Department can only aim to inspect and where necessary clean all gullies once.

Within the funding envelope available this year, it is not possible to increase the level of routine cleaning, however, my officials advise that when severe weather warning are received, gully emptiers are placed on standby, stocks of sandbags, pumps and signs are checked and replenished and gullies and grilles at known flooding hotspots are inspected and when appropriate cleaned.

I will continue to bid for the funding necessary to enhance my Department's capability to properly maintain the road network and this will include cleaning of gullies on a more frequent basis.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether current sewage and drainage capacity issues experienced in parts of Bangor will lead to Northern Ireland Water lodging objections to plans for future major proposed housing developments in the area.

(AQW 6444/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have been advised by NI Water that there are currently a number of issues relating to the sewerage and drainage network within parts of Bangor which could lead NI Water to lodge objections to any plans for future major proposed housing developments in the areas affected.

These capacity issues are planned to be addressed within the proposed Capital Works Programme, in the PC21 Business Plan, for the period 2021-27, and once remediated should allow for additional capacity within the network once more. However, the successful delivery of the business plan is dependent on the level of funding provided by The Executive, following the Utility Regulator's assessment of the PC21 business case.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in the event that Northern Ireland Water identify problems with the sewerage system in Bangor, what the timescale would be for remedial action to be taken.

(AQW 6445/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have been advised by NI Water that there are issues already identified in the sewerage system for Bangor which are to be addressed in the coming 6 year Price Control period (PC21). A number of these projects are currently underway,

with a view to completion before the end of March 2022. However, these will only address the immediate areas, and other schemes will be progressed right up until March 2027 in order to address the entire network area.

The work that NI Water will be able to complete between 2021 and 2027 will depend on the level of funding provided by the NI Executive following the Utility Regulator's assessment of the PC21 business case.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure what actions are currently being undertaken by Northern Ireland Water to address sewerage and drainage capacity issues in the Bangor area.

(AQW 6446/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have been advised by NI Water that, within the current Price Control period (PC15), work is currently underway in developing and delivering solutions for the Bangor Drainage Area as well as addressing sewage treatment capacity at works within the North Down & Ards Council area, such as at Ballygowan Wastewater Treatment Works (WwTW), Ballywalter WwTW, Ballyhaskin WwTW and Carrowdore WwTW.

This programme of work is ongoing and expected to continue delivering solutions into the coming Price Control Period (PC21) relating to both sewerage network and treatment works capacity issues.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of Translink's current service provision in relation to passenger demand.

(AQW 6448/17-22)

Ms Mallon: When restrictions due to COVID-19 were imposed in March 2020, passenger demand for bus and rail services fell consistently below 10% of 2019 levels at the end of March and for the month of April. As Northern Ireland's restrictions have started to ease, I have approved bus and rail timetables which have been developed to provide capacity on services above existing passenger demand.

These timetables have been developed to provide service levels that will ensure that social distancing can be maintained whilst allowing Translink to build resilience into the network, which will be essential during the winter months. In addition to this, in close work with the Department of Education and the Education Authority, significant additional resources have also been allocated to support school transport over and above normal service levels.

Currently, overall passenger volumes are slowly increasing and are currently 37% of pre COVID-19 levels. It is my assessment that the current service provision within our public transport network is well placed to provide a significant public transport network as we seek to connect Northern Ireland throughout COVID-19 whilst providing capacity for our public to socially distance on our buses and trains.

The health and safety of passengers and staff on our public transport network continues to be my priority, therefore, I can assure you that the level of service provision, including the impact of the return of schools on the public transport network, is being kept under constant review.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to COVID-19 measures, whether she can provide assurances that public transport in rural communities receives the same standard of cleaning as services in urban areas.

(AQW 6449/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that public transport in rural communities receives the same standard of cleaning as services in urban areas. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Translink has enhanced its cleaning regimes to include the enhanced cleaning of each vehicle that is in service each day as well as the wiping down of all key touch point areas on Translink's buses and trains with an antiviral sanitising agent. In addition to this, each bus and train also receives a full deep clean every four weeks and this is consistently delivered across all rural and urban bus and rail depots. In addition, from 21st September, Translink has introduced the electrostatic spraying of an antiviral sanitising solution across all of the bus and train fleet which will add even further protection for passengers and staff.

I can assure you that the health and safety of passengers and staff on our public transport network continues to be my priority and I am determined that we get this right for all communities across the North. I am continually working towards rebuilding public confidence in using public transport services and ensuring buses and trains are a safe environment for everyone.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many commercial developments have been delayed due to insufficient waste water sewerage infrastructure, broken down by (i) constituency; and (ii) postcode, for each of the last three years.

(AQW 6462/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water does not hold information specifically related to the number of commercial developments that have been delayed due to insufficient waste water sewerage infrastructure.

It does hold data in relation to the refusal of Trade Effluent applications, and it has confirmed that in the past 3 years, there has been one refusal related to commercial development. This was in the East Antrim constituency and specifically in the Larne catchment.

NIW has identified 116 wastewater systems with potential economic growth constraints and has communicated this information and its impact on future development to Local Councils.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the method used to select schools for the 20mph speed limit pilot. (AQW 6467/17-22)

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 that traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

All schools were assessed across our four Roads Divisions and 25 schools in each Division were identified based on considerations of need. This need was assessed using factors such as traffic speeds, traffic volumes and number of collisions in the vicinity of the school as well as individual site constraints.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on (i) the membership of the Ministerial Advisory Panel; and (ii) their terms of reference. (AQW 6482/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

(i) The Ministerial Advisory Panel on Infrastructure comprises a small group of independent experts and key stakeholders with an interest in infrastructure. The Panel is chaired by Kirsty McManus of the Institute of Directors. The other Panel members are:

- Jenny Green, Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE);
- Ashleen Feeney, Confederation of British Industry (CBI);
- Freddie Patterson, Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation (CIHT);
- Richard Johnston, University of Ulster Economic Policy Centre (UUEPC);
- Craig McGuicken, Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL);
- Stuart Cairns, Partner, Bird & Bird International Law Firm.

(ii) I have asked my officials to provide you with a copy of the Terms of Reference for the Panel.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure when MOT services in Enniskillen will be operational again. (AQW 6483/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There has been a gradual resumption of MOT services from 1 June 2020, when the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed Individual Vehicle Approval testing.

From 20 July, the Driver and Vehicle Agency resumed MOT testing, at all test centres including Enniskillen, for priority vehicle groups, including those vehicles that are not able to avail of a Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC). This includes taxis and buses due a first time test, vehicles not previously registered in Northern Ireland, vehicles whose MOTs have expired by more than 12 months that includes vehicles previously declared SORN and those sold by car dealerships.

From 1 September, MOT testing for four year old cars and motorbikes and three year old light goods vehicles also resumed and for those vehicles in this category that currently have a 6 month TEC, they will be called for test when their TEC expires. In addition, the DVA recommenced testing of heavy goods vehicles, trailers and buses.

It is my priority to ensure that our staff and customers remain safe. The DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health advice to ensure that necessary and proportionate control measures relating to Covid-19 are incorporated into its risk assessments for safe vehicle testing. Like many other public facing services, vehicle testing capacity will increase as restrictions ease and as risk assessments are updated and this is being kept under constant review. In the interim period, the DVA is continuing to carefully manage the TEC process to prevent customers from being disadvantaged and to ensure all eligible vehicles can legally remain on the road.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the backlog of driving tests and the large physical area around the Enniskillen Driving Test Centre to accommodate social distancing, when it will become fully operational again with three driving test examiners. (AQW 6484/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Enniskillen test centre is operational and there are currently three examiners in Enniskillen, conducting both vehicle and driver tests. My officials will look at options to divert additional resources to this area should this be necessary.

The DVA will continue to work with staff and trade unions in the coming weeks to ensure that testing is conducted in line with public health advice and guidance to ensure the safety of all.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on flood defences in Omagh.
(AQW 6488/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In order to further improve the level of flood protection in Omagh a number of flood studies have been carried out to assess the level of risk to properties and determine if a viable flood alleviation scheme could be taken forward. Unfortunately none of the proposals to date, including a joint project with the Strule Shared Education Campus, were found to be feasible or economically viable.

However, my Department intends to re-visit the most recent flood study for Omagh Town, which was completed in 2016. The new study will take into account Climate Change and determine if other viable options, such as upstream flood storage and natural flood risk management solutions can be identified to reduce flooding. It is expected to commence work on the study towards the end of the 2020/21 financial year, however progress will be dependent on the availability of resources and competing priorities with other schemes.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure what ministerial directions have been issued since January 2020.
(AQW 6496/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can advise that no ministerial directions have issued since January 2020.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many locations in the East Belfast constituency have been assessed for traffic calming measures by the Roads Service; and (ii) the locations which have had traffic calming measures implemented, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6501/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently 136 locations / schemes that have been assessed for traffic calming measures within the East Belfast constituency.

Within the last five years traffic calming measures have been put in place at Rochester Road and Shandon Park.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much her Department has spent on traffic calming measures in the East Belfast constituency, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 6502/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below provides details of my Department's expenditure on traffic calming measures, within the East Belfast constituency, over the last five financial years:

Financial Year	Amount
2019/20	Nil
2018/19	£11,269
2017/18	£1,630
2016/17	£28,791
2015/16	Nil

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the traffic calming measures planned for the East Belfast constituency over the next two years; and (ii) the date they are to commence.

(AQW 6503/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that a scheme at Connsbrook Avenue is currently being progressed and is at the detailed design stage. Implementation of the scheme will be dependent upon successful completion of the legislative process and budget availability and it is not possible at this time to identify a commencement date.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) all current street light outages within East Belfast; (ii) the date they were reported; and (iii) when they are to be repaired.

(AQW 6504/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is unable to provide this information by constituency. However, I can confirm that in Eastern Division, which includes the East Belfast constituency, as at 11 September 2020, there were 267 street lighting outages currently recorded as outstanding on the street lighting maintenance system.

Following initial delays in April, due to the COVID19 crisis, my Department is now providing a full street lighting maintenance service with outages generally being attended to within the required 5 working days.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) all traffic calming schemes in the East Belfast constituency assessed by the Road Service; (ii) the date they were assessed; and (iii) where each rank in terms of priority, in the last five years. (AQW 6505/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below provides details of locations, rankings and the dates when the assessment for the provision of traffic calming measures were undertaken within the East Belfast constituency area in the last five years:

Ranking	Location	Assessment Date
4	Connsbrook Avenue	03/10/19
9	Willowfield Street, East Belfast	20/03/18
10	Bloomfield Road, Belfast	08/01/20
14	Dundela Avenue & North Road	22/05/19
16	Ravenscroft Avenue	11/04/19
17	Orangefield Avenue	22/03/17
25	Earlswood Road, Belfast	13/09/17
28	Sandown Road	13/10/15
33	Gilnahirk Road	29/01/19
35	Templemore Avenue (A'bridge Rd to N'ards Rd)	26/11/14
37	Templemore Street / Avoniel Rd / Lord Street area	26/11/14
44	Castlehill Road, Belfast	21/06/18
46	Barnetts Road	02/10/18
50	Gortin Park	28/11/14
51	Knocknagoney Road, Tillysburn	21/05/19
54	Connsbrook Drive	12/02/18
61	Montgomery Road	15/01/20
64	Gransha Road, Dundonald	06/11/17
70	Grahamsbridge Road / Church Rd	21/05/19
72	Parkgate Avenue	27/01/17
80	Cherryhill Park area Dundonald	02/12/14
81	Massey Avenue, Stormont	25/11/14
82	Pims Avenue	03/10/19
83	Hamel Drive & Stirling Gardens	08/08/18
87	Grangewood Road, Dundonald	16/04/19
92	Orangefield Crescent	03/10/19
94	Orangefield Drive	11/05/16
97	Montrose Street South & Erskine Street	24/09/18
104	Bapaume Avenue / Thiepval Avenue Area, Cregagh	28/11/14
108	Dundela Gardens, Belmont Avenue & Belmont Avenue West area	02/06/16
110	Loopland Road, Gardens, Crescent & Court area	02/12/14
112	Cumberland Road / Reaville Park area Dundonald	18/09/18
119	Knocklofty Park	22/01/14
121	Moatview Park & Grand Prix	31/05/18
131	Old Mill Heights, Dundonald	17/10/19
139	Edenvale Drive / Cres, Ferguson / Bathgate / Ranfurly / Sydenham	01/12/14
140	Pim's Avenue	28/11/14

Ranking	Location	Assessment Date
145	Wandsworth Road & Hawthornden Road	24/01/18
148	Cyprus Avenue & Kirkliston Drive	01/12/14
157	Abbey Road (Kings Road to Gortin Park)	04/04/18
158	Ballyhanwood Road, Dundonald	13/06/17
159	Knocknagoney Avenue	27/11/14
165	Rochester Avenue	10/05/19
171	Station Road (Sydenham area)	24/04/17
175	Stormont Park	25/09/18
177	Clonlee Drive, Belfast	29/06/17
184	Cameronian Drive area	28/11/14
185	Lothian Avenue	31/01/20
187	Thornhill Drive, Park & Parade	28/11/14
193	Belmont Park	14/02/18
197	Bute Park	10/12/14
202	Carolhill Park & Ashmount Park Area	06/09/12
204	Knockvale Park	31/05/18
223	Grove Street East	11/06/19
226	Park Avenue, Sydenham	24/10/19
233	Stoneyford Street, Belfast	18/02/19
238	Kings Road (between Knock Road and Sandown Road)	25/04/19
239	Dundela Crescent	04/12/14
240	Glenmachan Road, Belmont	28/11/14
242	Cairnburn Road 'upper' Glenmachan side	25/04/12
244	Paxton Street	03/10/19
252	Kinross Avenue, North & South Sperrin, Belfast	23/03/17
254	Belmont Church Rd (Belmont Rd-Sydenham Av)	08/02/17
259	Moyn Park, Russell Park, Kilmakee Park & Bristow Drive area	08/07/15
261	Cairnburn Gardens, Ave & Cres area	02/12/14
263	Downshire Park East	11/09/18
270	Knockhill Park	03/10/19
274	Kingsway Avenue Area, Gilnahirk	28/02/19
276	Major Street, Belfast	04/12/14
286	Greenville Street	28/11/14
287	Orby Road & Gardens area	22/06/18
297	Kingsland Park	23/07/15
299	Sydenham Gardens & Sydenham Park	09/12/14
301	Rosepark area	10/12/14
302	Brandon Parade, Sydenham	28/11/14
307	Warren Grove, Braniel	12/11/15
310	Haig Street	02/12/14
311	Wanstead Area, Dundonald	03/07/18

Ranking	Location	Assessment Date
312	Ferndene Avenue / Park / Road	19/02/19
326	Cregagh Park & Rochester Road (cu-de-sac)	26/04/16
327	Sagimor Gardens	07/04/16
328	Creevy Avenue, Braniel	01/12/14
330	Marmont Park & Drive area	28/11/14
332	Marlfield Drive, Braniel	02/12/14
337	Cabin Hill Gardens, Belfast	17/07/18
340	Kingsway Avenue	28/02/19
342	Lambert Park, Dundonald	10/12/14
346	Tillysburn Park, Knocknagoney	01/12/14
353	Leven Drive	31/01/20
362	East Link Road, (Old Dundonald to Comber Rd)	09/12/14
368	Kingsway Gardens, Belfast	31/07/18
369	Calvin St & Upper Frank St, Belfast	28/11/14
373	North Gardens, Orangefield	28/11/14
385	Gilnahirk Park	02/12/14
390	Evelyn Avenue, Sintonville Avenue & Finvoy Street area	05/11/15
393	Knocknagoney Park	10/12/14
399	Pottinger Street	19/02/20
405	Orby Drive (not traffic calmed stretch)	10/12/14
413	Ardgreenan Crescent	10/12/14
415	Kinedar Crescent area, Belmont	28/11/14
423	Rochester Road, (Striling Avenue - Cregagh Park East)	17/01/18
428	Beechfield Street, Belfast	14/11/19
442	Downshire Park North, South, East and Central	11/09/18
444	Seaforde Street & Vulcan Street	28/11/14
449	Lochinver Drive	31/01/20
452	Ardgreenan Drive	22/12/14
453	Glenluce Drive, Knocknagoney	02/12/14
454	Langtry Court, Belfast	01/08/18
467	Ebrington Gardens	06/03/19
470	Kingsdale Park	19/05/15
472	Ballybeen Park, Dundonald	22/05/17
474	Glenlea Park, Knocknagoney	02/12/14
477	Bethany Street, Belfast	20/11/19
478	Wilshere Drive	05/11/15
479	Hanwood Avenue & Park	20/05/15
480	Galway Park, Dundonald	28/11/15
484	Southland Dale, Braniel	02/12/14
485	Oakland Avenue	01/12/14
490	Belmont Road (Massey to Ballymiscaw)	28/03/17

Ranking	Location	Assessment Date
492	Killagan Bend, Belfast	05/04/18
493	Eastleigh Dale	26/11/15
496	Fort Road, Dundonald	02/10/19
502	Tamery Pass	14/02/17
507	Callan Way & Grillagh Way area	02/12/14
512	Cherryvalley Gardens	03/10/19
513	Glenview Gardens, Belfast	10/06/19
518	Hatton Drive	06/04/16
519	Old Mill Rise	01/04/16
534	Glenview Park	02/12/14
535	Holland Park	08/11/13
546	Prince Regent Road	29/09/11
554	Glensharragh Avenue (untreated section)	17/12/15
557	Hornby Street / Bright Street Area, Albertbridge	01/06/12
563	Stormount Street	11/05/16
571	Circular Road (Service Road No 47 To 63)	03/10/19
572	Avoniel Road	02/12/14

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department is considering the introduction of double yellow line parking restrictions for road safety reasons, along with subsequent support with enforcement at the Divis and the Black Mountain National Trust sites.

(AQW 6512/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has no plans currently to introduce waiting restrictions along Divis Road in the vicinity of the National Trust site.

However, following a site meeting with Ms Heather McLachlan, Director of the National Trust in Northern Ireland, we do propose to provide additional signage, road markings and marker posts at the location, to highlight the presence of pedestrians and the National Trust entrance.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether Rivers Agency would change the designation of the part of the Moyola River that flows from the Sperrin Mountains to Lisnamuck, from undesignated to designated.

(AQW 6513/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not have the authority to independently extend the current designation of the Moyola River. Any request to designate a watercourse or amend a designation must be formally submitted to the Drainage Council for Northern Ireland for consideration.

During a site meeting with you on 18 September 2020 my officials discussed the detail of your request, the requirements for watercourse designation and gave a commitment to submit the request to the Drainage Council for their consideration.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will implement Speed Indicator Device signs as a speed-calming measure outside schools, as opposed to the currently employed speed ramps.

(AQW 6514/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools in Northern Ireland. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools, ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis. I am determined to ensure that using the roads around all of our schools is safer for everyone and it is my intention that through future programmes, many more schools will have a 20mph speed limit on the roads outside their gates.

Speed Indicator Device signs are provided through the Police and Community Safety Partnership. While my Department does not provide such devices, I can confirm that my officials fully cooperate with the PSNI through the Police and Community Safety Partnership to help deploy this form of speed detection equipment, in partnership with local community groups.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many schools applied for funding to introduce part-time 20mph speed limits; and (ii) whether she will bring forward a further tranche of funding for schools.
(AQW 6519/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

Schools did not need to apply for funding but all were assessed using the assessment framework contained within the Department's current road safety at schools policy document. I am determined that using the roads around all of our schools will be safer for everyone, and it is my intention that through future programmes many more schools will have a part-time 20 mph speed limit on the roads outside their gates.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure why no schools in the North Down Constituency were included in the announcement made on 7 September 2020 concerning the roll out of 20mph speed limit schemes at 100 schools.
(AQW 6524/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

I can confirm that all schools in the North Down area were assessed using the assessment framework contained within my Department's current road safety at schools policy document. However, although none of the schools in the North Down area were ranked highly enough to be included within this year's programme, it is my intention for this programme to be rolled out over the coming years and therefore other schools, including those in North Down, will be considered for inclusion in future programmes.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the conversations she has had with the Minister for the Economy regarding financial hardship facing the local haulage industry as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
(AQW 6526/17-22)

Ms Mallon: From the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic I recognised the importance of undertaking contingency planning to deal with the impact on the various supply chains and I announced a number of regulatory measures to help the local haulage industry to ensure the continuing flow of goods into and out of Northern Ireland.

I had a meeting with Minister Dodds on 9 April 2020, regarding Freight and Haulage, and I have since stated and written many times to confirm my willingness to work with all Executive colleagues to develop further appropriate support for this and other sectors for which I have regulatory responsibility.

I welcome the recent recognition that my existing legislative powers do not provide the vires for my department to carry out such a function. I have written to the Minister for the Economy and the Finance Minister, to urgently request the information they hold and their support in providing evidence based support to those in this and other sectors.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the costs of installing Speed Indicator Devices.
(AQW 6541/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, can help in this regard.

Speed indicator devices (SIDs) are generally provided by Police and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSP) in association with local councils. Although my officials work collaboratively with council officials and may, in conjunction with the PSNI, give advice on where they are located so they are deployed safely, they are not involved in the procurement process. I am not, therefore, in a position to provide details of the installation costs.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the review of old mineral permissions.
(AQW 6542/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have asked officials in my Department to prepare a briefing paper regarding the review of old mineral planning permissions (ROMPs). This will require an up to date assessment of the operational effectiveness of the legislation, as well as further engagement with stakeholders to consider the practical impacts of ROMPs, including the resourcing implications for planning authorities and operators. Once this paper is complete, I intend to look at all options and will decide on the best course of action to take as soon as is reasonably practicable.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the criteria applied in the allocation of 20mph zones at schools.
(AQW 6545/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

All schools were assessed across our four Roads Divisions, and 25 schools in each Division were identified based on considerations of need, established using factors such as traffic speeds, traffic volumes, and number of collisions, as well as individual site constraints.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, should additional funding become available, whether her Department has further schools identified for 20mph zones.
(AQW 6546/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

I am determined that using the roads around all of our schools will be safer for everyone, and it is my intention that through future programmes many more schools will have a part-time 20 mph speed limit on the roads outside their gates.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of each type of MOT test completed in (a) Enniskillen; (b) Cookstown; (c) Omagh; (d) New Buildings, Londonderry; and (e) Altnagelvin Industrial Estate, Londonderry, in each of the last six weeks; and (ii) the number that was completed during the equivalent period in 2019.
(AQW 6566/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The number of vehicle tests conducted is a National Statistic and as such must be released in accordance with the UK Official Statistics Code of Practice. To comply with this code, the Department cannot publicly release figures that are within the scope of National Statistics reporting beyond the latest published statistics.

The 'DfI Driver, Vehicle, Operator and Enforcement National Statistics' report is published on a quarterly basis with the latest edition covering the period from 1 April to 30 June 2020. Vehicle testing statistics are presented in quarterly or monthly schedules, dependent on the volumes in question.

Given recent public interest in these statistics, the Department is working to publish provisional testing statistics on a monthly reporting cycle, which will be made available on the Department's website. The first monthly report will relate to the month of September and will be published during October.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of each type of PSV test that has been completed in (a) Enniskillen; (b) Cookstown; (c) Omagh; (d) New Buildings, Londonderry; and (e) Altnagelvin Industrial Estate, Londonderry, in each of the last six weeks; and (ii) the number that was completed during the equivalent period in 2019.
(AQW 6567/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The number of PSV (Heavy Goods Vehicle) tests conducted is a National Statistic and as such must be released in accordance with the UK Official Statistics Code of Practice. To comply with this code, the Department cannot publicly release figures that are within the scope of National Statistics reporting beyond the latest published statistics.

The 'DfI Driver, Vehicle, Operator and Enforcement National Statistics' report is published on a quarterly basis with the latest edition covering the period from 1 April to 30 June 2020. Vehicle testing statistics are presented in quarterly or monthly schedules, dependent on the volumes in question.

Given recent public interest in these statistics, the Department is working to publish provisional testing statistics on a monthly reporting cycle, which will be made available on the Department's website. The first monthly report will relate to the month of September and will be published during October.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of each type of driving test that has been completed in (a) Enniskillen; (b) Cookstown; (c) Omagh; (d) New Buildings, Londonderry; and (e) Altnagelvin Industrial Estate, Londonderry, in each of the last six weeks; and (ii) the number that was completed during the equivalent period in 2019.
(AQW 6568/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The number of driving tests conducted is a National Statistic and as such must be released in accordance with the UK Official Statistics Code of Practice. To comply with this code, the Department cannot publicly release figures that are within the scope of National Statistics reporting beyond the latest published statistics.

The 'DfI Driver, Vehicle, Operator and Enforcement National Statistics' report is published on a quarterly basis with the latest edition covering the period from 1 April to 30 June 2020. Driving test statistics are presented in quarterly or monthly schedules, dependent on the volumes in question.

Given recent public interest in these statistics, the Department is working to publish provisional testing statistics on a monthly reporting cycle, which will be made available on the Department's website. The first monthly report will relate to the month of September and will be published during October.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has plans for a resurfacing scheme on Hillhead Road, Ballyclare.
(AQW 6586/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A resurfacing scheme at Hillhead Road, Ballyclare is not included in this year's resurfacing programme however I can confirm that a scheme will be considered for inclusion in future programmes. At this time I am unable to be definitive regarding timescales as the content and scale of future programmes will be dependent upon the funding made available to me and prioritisation of all schemes competing for inclusion in this programme.

A recent inspection of Hillhead Road, Ballyclare highlighted that some sections are showing signs of deterioration. Officials will continue to carry out safety inspections of this road and any defects meeting the current intervention levels set out in my Department's maintenance policy will be programmed for repair.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has any plans to further improve road safety along the A26 Antrim to Ballymena road, particularly at junctions with adjoining minor rural roads.
(AQW 6588/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In 2016 my Department carried out a Safety Review of the A26 Lisnevenagh Road from Dunsilly to Ballee Roundabout in Ballymena. Since then a number of safety measures have been put in place along the route which include: prohibition of right turns out Cromkill Road; upgrading of existing lighting at Woodgreen/Maine Rd to LED; enhancement of signs and road markings along the entire route to improve clarity and to ensure consistency; and application of a High Friction Surface treatment to the end of Woodgreen Road to highlight the junction. A further proposal to restrict right turn movements out of Woodgreen Road is currently being progressed.

The A26 Lisnevenagh Road is a very heavily trafficked road with approximately 36,000 vehicles using it each day. In the longer term the Department has further plans to remove right turn manoeuvres by providing grade separated junctions, however, this proposal needs to be considered in the context of the ongoing review of the Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure which schools in the North Down constituency remain under consideration for the roll-out of 20mph speed limit scheme.
(AQW 6613/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

Although none of the schools in North Down area were ranked highly enough to be included within this year's programme, it is my intention for this programme to be rolled out over the coming years and therefore other schools, including those in North Down, will be considered for inclusion in future programmes.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will bid for additional funding in the October monitoring round to address the need for road repairs in North Down.

(AQW 6614/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The October Monitoring exercise has just launched and my Department is currently assessing all funding requirements, including those for road repairs across Northern Ireland. I will be making decisions shortly regarding my bidding requirements.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure why street lighting has been removed from outside Abbey Villa Football Club, Millisle.

(AQW 6626/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials have advised that, as part of an overhead line recovery scheme carried out in October 2019, Northern Ireland Electricity removed three wooden poles in Abbey Road, Millisle that had street lights attached. In accordance with my Department's current policy for the provision of street lighting, an assessment is carried out in such circumstances to determine if the location meets the current criteria. Regrettably this location does not satisfy the current policy requirements and therefore the lights will not be replaced. I can confirm that no street lights have been removed from the junction of Millbank or from the entrance to Abbey Villa football club.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will explore the installation of additional traffic calming measures, such as Speed Indicator Devices, in the Middletown area, Armagh.

(AQW 6633/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department recognises the importance of safer pedestrian links and road safety measures by means of traffic calming measures, signs and road markings and we are committed to exploring solutions that deliver better for communities and improve lives across Northern Ireland.

My Department has implemented a number of traffic calming measures in Middletown including the provision of 40mph speed limits in advance of the 30mph speed limits to help lower the speed of vehicles entering the village. These speed limits have been reinforced with red textured road surfacing and roundels, along with a gateway sign requesting drivers to drive carefully through the village. A pedestrian crossing has also been provided in the centre of Middletown to facilitate safe crossing of the road.

The placement of Speed Indicator Devices (SIDs) in Middletown is a matter for Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon Council, specifically through its Policing and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP). My Department is consulted on proposals however the PCSP and Council make the final decision on the number of SIDs and their locations.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the evidence gathered by her Department on planning policy matters such as Sustainable Development in the Countryside.

(AQW 6634/17-22)

Ms Mallon: You will be aware that, prior to my taking office as Infrastructure Minister, the Department carried out preparatory work to inform potential reviews of strategic planning policy for 'Development in the Countryside' and 'Renewable Energy', issuing 'Calls for Evidence' and commissioning independent research, which is completed. I will be considering the evidence gathered to inform my decision on the best way forward for these important policy areas.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on permitted development rights currently being reviewed.

(AQW 6635/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As you are aware, my Department consulted in 2016 on a range of proposals in relation to permitted development rights for telecommunications, mineral exploration, electric vehicle charging point infrastructure and shops, financial or professional services establishments.

I am actively considering these proposals.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's policy on responding to the unauthorised attachment of flags and banners on Department for Infrastructure property.

(AQW 6636/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Article 87 of the Roads (NI) Order 1993 makes it an offence to attach unauthorised signs or advertisements to structures such as lamp posts. 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 seek to remove that danger. Where there is no such danger, my Department will liaise closely with other key stakeholders and seek to provide a solution. This is the same process that my predecessors adopted.

I understand that The Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition, which was established as part of the Fresh Start Agreement, has been tasked with exploring and finding consensus on a range of issues, including the flying of flags. This

group I understand has submitted its report to the joint First Ministers. The Justice Minister and I have written jointly to the First and deputy First Ministers seeking an update on this matter.

I also note the commitments to respect for different cultures and identities contained in the New Decade New Approach. Finding a sustainable solution to the ongoing problem of illegally erected flags and emblems requires leadership and a united approach. I can assure you that I am committed to working with Executive colleagues and all stakeholders to deal with this issue comprehensively.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she expects the new law on MOT exemptions for Vehicles of Historical Interest to come into force now that MOT Centres have re-opened.

(AQW 6647/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since I announced my decision on 2 July 2020 to introduce the exemption from periodic roadworthiness testing for Vehicles of Historic Interest in Northern Ireland, my officials have worked to progress the legislation as quickly as possible.

I can advise that the regulations received legal clearance and were laid in the Assembly on 18 September 2020. They are subject to the Assembly's statutory period that applies within the negative resolution procedure. It is anticipated they will come into force on 12 October.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration her Department is giving to change rules to allow people, living in terrace houses with narrow front gardens and off street parking spaces, to have a dropped kerb installed to allow them to charge their electric cars at home without having cabling across public footpaths.

(AQW 6652/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise the importance of having modern, reliable public electric vehicle charging infrastructure to provide confidence for users of Ultra Low Emission Vehicles and in respect of the connectivity improvements this would bring about. I am committed to exploring all options and new solutions to enhance our charge point infrastructure, improve lives and tackle the climate emergency.

Where a householder wishes to construct a new or altered access to facilitate charging of their electric vehicle, my Department can grant approval, under Article 80 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993, for the construction of a 'permitted means of access to a road', in those circumstances where planning permission is not required.

Normally, consent under Article 80 covers alterations to a footway or verge, including the lowering of kerbs, if applicable, to facilitate the construction of a new access, or alteration of an existing access, where the access / hard standing complies with 'permitted development' conditions onto a road, and where planning permission is not required. This applies to unclassified roads such as residential streets and rural roads with low traffic volumes.

The householder is responsible for bearing the costs of the works required. Full details of the consent process can be found at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/application-consent-construct-or-alter-vehicular-access>

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will be bringing Northern Ireland into line with Great Britain and allow blue badges to automatically be awarded to anyone who received 10-plus points for the mobility component of Personal Independence Payment.

(AQW 6656/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In August 2019 the Department for Transport in England introduced new eligibility criteria for those with hidden disabilities. This included the introduction of automatic eligibility for those in receipt of a score of 10 points under Activity 11, Descriptor E of the "planning and following a journey" activity of the mobility component of Personal Independence Payment. Descriptor E states "Cannot undertake any journey because it would cause overwhelming psychological distress to the claimant". No other descriptor will qualify. The authorities in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales did not adopt this new criteria as they felt their existing criteria already made sufficient provision.

When developing a new application form in April 2016, my Department's Blue Badge Unit took account people with "hidden disabilities or cognitive impairments" and introduced a new section to deal with applicants who have difficulty planning and undertaking a journey. It is under this section (C3) where we would expect people with "hidden disabilities" to apply, as it takes into consideration those who may be at risk of harming the health and safety of themselves, or any other person, or are unable to plan and undertake a journey without another person or assistance.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure when a second tranche of funding will be available for further 20mph speed limit scheme at schools.

(AQW 6660/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds

outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

I am determined that using the roads around all of our schools will be safer for everyone and am keen to roll this important 20mph scheme out to more schools in the next financial year. I am currently engaging with my Executive colleagues on the Comprehensive Spending Review 2020; when I have certainty on the funding available to me, I will be in a position to give a further update.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the sewerage treatment works that no longer have capacity due to insufficient waste water sewerage infrastructure, broken down by (i) constituency; and (ii) postcode, for each of the last three years.

(AQW 6664/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have been advised by NI Water that it does not collect the information by Constituency but instead by Local Authority area.

The table below details the Wastewater Treatment Works (WwTW) serving a size >250 population equivalent (pe) by Council area. Due to the nature of the WwTWs, it is not possible to accurately list these by postcode as the catchment each WwTW serves may cover a large area with a large number of postcodes.

In terms of the presentation of data in the last three years, improvements in NI Water's network modelling and Geographic Information System capabilities since the 2019/20 financial year have facilitated a wastewater catchment level analysis. As a consequence, works are now listed with insufficient capacity due to issues within their infrastructure network (sewer system) and not solely based on an assessment of the WwTW. This level of detail and analysis is not available for the first two years which form part of the query i.e. 2017/18 and 2018/19.

In the Table below, there is reference to Belfast WwTW as a special case in terms of capacity. Belfast WwTW is operating significantly above its design capacity using additional activate sludge plant (ASP) lanes.

WwTW (>250pe) Name	Council Area	2017/18 (WwTW)	2018/19 (WwTW)	2019/20 (WwTW & Sewer Network)
Antrim Milltown WwTW	Antrim and Newtownabbey	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Ballyclare WwTW	Antrim and Newtownabbey	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Roughfort WwTW	Antrim and Newtownabbey	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Whitehouse WwTW	Antrim and Newtownabbey	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Blackwatertown WwTW	Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Darkley WwTW	Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Lawrencetown WwTW	Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Moneyslane WwTW	Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Poyntzpass WwTW	Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Robinsonstown WwTW	Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Monteith WwTW	Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Rathfriland Drumlough WwTW	Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Dromore Ballymaganlis Banbridge WwTW	Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)

WwTW (>250pe) Name	Council Area	2017/18 (WwTW)	2018/19 (WwTW)	2019/20 (WwTW & Sewer Network)
Waringstown WwTW	Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Belfast WwTW NB Operating significantly above its design capacity using additional ASP lanes.	Belfast	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works & parts of the sewer Network)
Edenderry Belfast WwTW	Belfast	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Newtownbreda WwTW	Belfast	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Aghanloo 1 WwTW	Causeway Coast and Glens	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Armoyn Bush WwTW	Causeway Coast and Glens	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Dervock WwTW	Causeway Coast and Glens	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Moss-Side WwTW	Causeway Coast and Glens	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Stranocum WwTW	Causeway Coast and Glens	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Ballycastle WwTW	Causeway Coast and Glens	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Bushmills WwTW	Causeway Coast and Glens	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Dungiven WwTW	Causeway Coast and Glens	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Garvagh WwTW	Causeway Coast and Glens	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Glenstall WwTW	Causeway Coast and Glens	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Kilrea WwTW	Causeway Coast and Glens	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Limavady WwTW	Causeway Coast and Glens	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
North Coast WwTW	Causeway Coast and Glens	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Rasharkin WwTW	Causeway Coast and Glens	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Donemana WwTW	Derry and Strabane	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Ballymagorry WwTW	Derry and Strabane	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Castlederg 2 WwTW	Derry and Strabane	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Culmore 2 WwTW	Derry and Strabane	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Strabane WwTW	Derry and Strabane	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)

WwTW (>250pe) Name	Council Area	2017/18 (WwTW)	2018/19 (WwTW)	2019/20 (WwTW & Sewer Network)
Drumquin WwTW	Fermanagh and Omagh	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Ederney WwTW	Fermanagh and Omagh	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Garrison South WwTW	Fermanagh and Omagh	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Gortin WwTW	Fermanagh and Omagh	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Lough Macrory South WwTW	Fermanagh and Omagh	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Belleek Fermanagh WwTW	Fermanagh and Omagh	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Enniskillen WwTW	Fermanagh and Omagh	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Omagh WwTW	Fermanagh and Omagh	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Tamlaght WwTW	Fermanagh and Omagh	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Moneyreagh North WwTW	Lisburn and Castlereagh	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Cargan WwTW	Mid and East Antrim	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Martinstown WwTW	Mid and East Antrim	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Ballymena WwTW	Mid and East Antrim	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Carrickfergus WwTW	Mid and East Antrim	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Clogh WwTW	Mid and East Antrim	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Grange Taylorstown WwTW	Mid and East Antrim	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Greenisland WwTW	Mid and East Antrim	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Larne WwTW	Mid and East Antrim	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Ballyronan WwTW	Mid Ulster	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Cabragh WwTW	Mid Ulster	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Derrycrin WwTW	Mid Ulster	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Desertmartin WwTW	Mid Ulster	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Eglisk Dungannon WwTW	Mid Ulster	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Fivemiletown WwTW	Mid Ulster	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)

WwTW (>250pe) Name	Council Area	2017/18 (WwTW)	2018/19 (WwTW)	2019/20 (WwTW & Sewer Network)
Killeen Dungannon WwTW	Mid Ulster	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Killygonlan WwTW	Mid Ulster	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Moneymore WwTW	Mid Ulster	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Moy WwTW	Mid Ulster	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works & Network)
Dungannon WwTW	Mid Ulster	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works & Network)
Killymuck WwTW	Mid Ulster	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Cookstown WwTW	Mid Ulster	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Maghera Londonderry WwTW	Mid Ulster	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Magherafelt WwTW	Mid Ulster	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Clough East WwTW	Newry Mourne and Down	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Dundrum WwTW	Newry Mourne and Down	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works & Network)
Lurganare WwTW	Newry Mourne and Down	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Meigh WwTW	Newry Mourne and Down	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Warrenpoint WwTW	Newry Mourne and Down	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Has Capacity	Has Capacity
Annsborough Station Road WwTW	Newry Mourne and Down	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Ballynahinch WwTW	Newry Mourne and Down	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Downpatrick WwTW	Newry Mourne and Down	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Kilkeel WwTW	Newry Mourne and Down	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Maghera Down WwTW	Newry Mourne and Down	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Newry WwTW	Newry Mourne and Down	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Saintfield WwTW	Newry Mourne and Down	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Ballygowan WwTW	North Down and Ards	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Ballywalter WwTW	North Down and Ards	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works & Network)
Killinchy WwTW	North Down and Ards	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works & Network)

WwTW (>250pe) Name	Council Area	2017/18 (WwTW)	2018/19 (WwTW)	2019/20 (WwTW & Sewer Network)
Loughries WwTW	North Down and Ards	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)	Insufficient Capacity (Works)
Ballyhalbert Victoria WwTW	North Down and Ards	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Greyabbey WwTW	North Down and Ards	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Kircubbin WwTW	North Down and Ards	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)
Portaferry WwTW	North Down and Ards	Has Capacity	Has Capacity	Insufficient Capacity (Network)

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on planned safety measures for the junction at Urney Road and Great Northern Link, Strabane.

(AQW 6671/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Concerns have been raised with my officials about difficulties being experienced by drivers turning right from the Urney Road onto the A5, when traffic volumes are higher. There is currently no dedicated green filter arrow included in the traffic light sequence at this junction.

As traffic volumes are now returning to more normal levels my officials intend to carry out a traffic movement assessment during September. If the investigation confirms there are recurring difficulties affecting either of the Urney Road approaches, then changes to the design of the junction will be considered.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans for speed-reducing measures outside Sion Mills Primary School.

(AQW 6674/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools across Northern Ireland. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds at these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from their schools on a daily basis.

Given the restricted budgets for works of this nature, as well as the practicalities of delivery, it was necessary to limit the number of schools to 100 in this year's programme. I can confirm that all schools in the Derry & Strabane Council area were assessed using the framework contained within my Department's current road safety at schools policy document. Unfortunately, on the basis of the assessment score, Sion Mills Primary School was not ranked as highly as other schools included within this year's programme. However, subject to the availability of funding I do intend to take forward a further tranche of part-time speed limits at schools and this school will be considered for inclusion in future programmes.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the public inquiry on the A1 Junctions Phase 2 Strategic Road Improvement Scheme.

(AQW 6676/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Public Inquiry into the A1 Junctions Phase 2 road improvement scheme began on 11 March and concluded on 13 March 2020. Following the Inquiry, the Inspector undertook a number of site meetings to confirm he had given full consideration to all of the issues raised. Whilst these site meetings were initially delayed due to COVID-19 restrictions, they have now been completed.

The Inspector has confirmed that he intends to issue his report to the Department shortly. Once received, I will carefully consider its findings. I am keen to progress to the next stage as quickly as possible, whilst of course ensuring adherence to all of the necessary statutory processes.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure what discussions she has had with her Executive colleagues regarding additional investment in NI Water.

(AQW 6677/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to ensuring that I secure investment for our water and wastewater infrastructure, and in recent months I have corresponded numerous times with my Executive colleagues in relation to this matter. I have highlighted the seriousness of the 20/21 budgetary situation in letters to the Finance Minister on 8 April, 17 April, 23 April, 13 May, 18 May and 20 June, and to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 26 June.

I have also shared a draft Executive Paper, stressing the importance of capital investment in our water and sewerage infrastructure as the foundation for our economy's recovery from the impact of Covid-19, which calls for investment of some £2.3bn, in line with NI Water's PC21 Business Plan for the period 2021-27. It is vital that, as an Executive, we collectively seek to address the historic underinvestment in our water and wastewater infrastructure, and secure the additional capacity that will allow the development of housing, support businesses and protect our environment.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she would consider a feasibility study into the opening of the Lisburn to Antrim railway line.
(AQW 6678/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to improving transport connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across the North. Our rail network, whilst relatively small, does present a unique opportunity to improve the sustainability of the Department's transport operations. In line with that, my Department is currently developing proposals for a new Regional Strategic Transport Network Transport Plan (RSTNTP) which will help inform priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks.

Timescales for the publication of the RSTNTP have been affected by the COVID-19 emergency. However, when published, this will give the public an opportunity to respond and share their view on the proposals brought forward and I would welcome any feedback for a feasibility study into the opening of the Lisburn to Antrim railway line through this process.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure what urgent changes she intends to make to ensure there is enough human resource to manage the increasing demand for urgent MOTs.
(AQW 6691/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There has been a gradual resumption of MOT services from 1 June 2020, when the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed Individual Vehicle Approval testing.

From 20 July, the Driver and Vehicle Agency resumed MOT testing, at all test centres, for priority vehicle groups, including those vehicles that are not able to avail of a Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC). This includes taxis and buses due a first time test, vehicles not previously registered in Northern Ireland, vehicles whose MOTs have expired by more than 12 months that includes vehicles previously declared SORN and those sold by car dealerships.

From 1 September, MOT testing for four year old cars and motorbikes and three year old light goods vehicles also resumed and for those vehicles in this category that currently have a 6 month TEC, they will be called for test when their TEC expires. In addition, the DVA recommenced testing of heavy goods vehicles, trailers and buses.

TECs will continue to be automatically generated from DVA's system for all eligible vehicles that the DVA does not have the capacity to test at this time.

It is my priority to ensure that our staff and customers remain safe and the DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health advice to ensure that necessary and proportionate control measures relating to Covid-19 are incorporated into its risk assessments for safe vehicle testing. Like many other public facing services, vehicle testing capacity will increase as restrictions ease and as risk assessments are updated.

My officials continue to carefully monitor staffing levels to ensure there is sufficient capacity to meet the increasing demand for vehicle testing across its test centre network.

The DVA is in the process of recruiting additional temporary and permanent vehicle examiners and is keeping its staffing levels under review.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the park and ride facility to be installed at the new Bellarena railway halt.
(AQW 6702/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to improving connectivity for the benefit of our economy and communities across the North. In that regard, I am clear that our rail network, whilst relatively small, presents a unique opportunity to improve the sustainability of our transport operations.

Translink has completed outline designs for a Park & Ride site at Bellarena Halt. Work on an economic appraisal for the project is also continuing, which includes an analysis of demand for parking at the halt. However, given the severe budget pressures facing my Department during COVID-19 and the funding required to ensure the viability of Translink, the reality is that there are significant challenges in providing new public transport infrastructure across my Department.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the importance of transport in plans to address the climate emergency, whether a halt at Ballykelly will be included in the feasibility of the phase 3 of the Derry to Coleraine rail line. (AQW 6703/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current scope for the Coleraine – Derry Phase 3 project relates to the renewal of track between Castlerock and Eglinton and recovery of 90mph line speed capability in this section.

As part my long term commitment to improving journey times on the Coleraine to Derry line, Translink is undertaking a feasibility study that will provide the opportunity to examine further halts along the entire route including at Ballykelly. However, I will only be able to deliver improvements to public transport if sufficient funding is provided.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) whether further schools will be included in the 20mph scheme; and (ii) the criteria for inclusion that resulted in the 100 schools chosen. (AQW 6704/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

I am determined that using the roads around all of our schools will be safer for everyone, and it is my intention that through future programmes many more schools will have a part-time 20 mph speed limit on the roads outside their gates. All schools were assessed across our four Roads Divisions, and 25 schools in each Division were identified based on considerations of need, established using factors such as traffic speeds, traffic volumes, and number of collisions, as well as individual site constraints.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there are works due to be carried out by NI Water that will not proceed as planned due to redirecting of funding. (AQW 6706/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Works were not delayed in 20/21 as consequence of the redirecting of funding. The emergence of the COVID – 19 pandemic, leading to the mandatory closure of many businesses, did have a delaying effect on NI Water's Capital Works Programme in the earlier part of this financial year, in terms of the temporary cessation of a number of projects. NI Water had revised its capital requirement for 20/21 down to £150m from £176m, and that sum had been allocated to NI Water.

The vast majority of contractors and suppliers returned to work in May 2020 and with this opportunity, my Department successfully submitted a bid for further capital funding in 2020/21, amounting to £15m, to accelerate some of the investments for delivery as close as possible to their original completion timescale.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure what percentage of statutory consultee's responses to consultation requests for planning applications were within the statutory time limits, for each of the last three years.[R] (AQW 6711/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The overall percentage of responses by statutory consultees to consultation requests for planning applications within the statutory time limits in the past three years were as follows:

Report period	Performance
2017-18	77%
2018-19	72%
2019-20	70%

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to bring forward legislation during the current mandate that would enable the use of low emission zones in Northern Ireland. (AQW 6712/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is working closely with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs which is 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. A draft Clean Air Strategy discussion document is being developed for public consultation. During the consultation period, stakeholder views will be sought on a range of issues and it is likely that the issue of Low Emission Zones will be considered through this process.

The Department for Infrastructure (DfI) 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. In the short term, we continue to support

the Councils to help them deliver on their Air Quality Action Plans. In the medium term, DfI is currently preparing a new Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan (BMTP) for the greater Belfast area which will provide the framework for transport policy and investment decisions for the greater Belfast area up until 2035. Working in tandem with Councils' Local Development Plan processes, the intention is to encourage new development where people can walk, cycle or use public transport making use of existing or new transport facilities planned by DfI and providing opportunities to reduce congestion and emissions.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure when further secure bicycle parks will be rolled out at Translink bus and rail stations and halts.[R]

(AQW 6713/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In addition to exploring additional bicycle parks at existing facilities, I can confirm that all future development at Translink bus and rail stations will include the provision of secure bicycle shelters. This is in line with my ambition to increase cycling journeys is reflected in the Programme for Government, and my commitment is to increase the proportion of journeys made by walking, cycling and public transport.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans to increase the charge point infrastructure.

(AQW 6719/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently 320 22kWh (Fast) charge points at 160 locations and a further 17 50kWh DC (Rapid) charge points in Northern Ireland. The e-car public charge point network is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and the market is also open to other commercial operators who would wish to provide charging infrastructure. There have been a number of recent developments that are likely to impact expansion and improvement of the network. For example, the Utility Regulator's recent decision to remove the Maximum Resale Price on the electricity cost of charge points will allow commercial operators to charge above cost price of electricity supply. This should give clarity for operators wishing to provide commercial services in Northern Ireland.

I fully recognise the importance of having modern, reliable public electric vehicle charging infrastructure in providing confidence for users of ultra-low emission vehicles and in respect of the connectivity improvements this would bring. I am committed to seeing this infrastructure increased as part of my Department's climate change action. The DAERA Minister and I met earlier this year to discuss opportunities for partnership working. As such, officials are currently exploring a range of options and solutions to enhance the charge point infrastructure, improve lives and tackle the climate emergency, particularly, in the context of COVID-19 recovery plans.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the measures in place to mitigate against overcrowding of bus services, particularly school services.

(AQW 6723/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Whilst school transport is the responsibility of the Minister of Education, my Department and Translink have worked closely with the Department of Education to identify and tackle the challenges that the restart of Education posed for both dedicated home to school transport and our wider public transport network.

Under contract from the Education Authority and in line with the Department of Education's guidance, Translink has put back in service all its vehicles that were delivering the pre-COVID school transport system. In addition, I can confirm that Translink and the Education Authority's Transport Team regularly carry out very detailed localised planning, whereby they review vehicle capacity, potential passenger numbers and mitigating factors such as staggered school opening times. As you will appreciate, COVID-19 has greatly influenced travel patterns. However, this detailed planning will assist in adding capacity to the areas that need it most.

In engaging with Minister Weir and Executive colleagues, I have also been clear of the risk that large numbers of school children seeking to use the main public transport network would present by limiting our capacity to accommodate social distancing. To address this, Translink has worked with the Education Authority and local schools to add additional dedicated school services to increase the capacity of the school transport network. Whilst this will come at a cost to Translink, it is an essential measure to ensure that our school children can travel to schools, whilst protecting the capacity of the public transport network. I can confirm that Translink is regularly monitoring the capacity and demand for bus services across the network to ensure social distancing guidelines are applied. Additional vehicles are being allocated to services where overcrowding has been anticipated or observed.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many miles of grass verges are cut twice each year, at an annual cost of £160,000, in North Down.

(AQW 6725/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Approximately 148 kilometres (93 miles) of grass verges are cut twice each year in North Down. It should be noted that within this total length there are some locations where a number of passes are carried out where the width to be cut is wider than a single swathe.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure what measures are being put in place to improve the MOT telephone booking system, including extending the opening hours.

(AQW 6726/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As part of its plan to restore services, the DVA has recently reintroduced further vehicle testing services which has significantly increased the number of customers requiring to book a test. Currently the MOT telephone booking system is the only channel available to the public for booking tests. Call volumes are almost double what they were this time last year with some customers also using the booking line to make general enquiries about DVA services, rather than using other means. Social media and other messaging is being used to help clarify the contact points that customers should use, depending on their query.

The DVA has urgently explored measures to improve this service and from 23 September introduced a new call messaging service to redirect general calls to nidirect. In addition, the call centre opening hours have been extended by an additional 2 hours from 5pm to 7pm on Monday to Wednesday. To further alleviate pressure on the MOT telephone booking system, the DVA continues to engage directly with the haulage industry, particularly those operators with large fleets, to facilitate bookings at a local test centre level where possible rather than using the booking phone line.

The DVA is also planning to reinstate its online booking service with a phased implementation from 1 October as set out in the table below.

Date	Service
1 October	Vehicle tests for HGVs and trailers only
5 October	Practical driving tests for all new customers
12 October	Vehicle tests for all other categories

This should significantly reduce the demand on the MOT telephone booking system.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on plans for a second footbridge in Strabane to link Bradley Way to the town centre.

(AQW 6756/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The provision of a town centre footbridge and its connecting infrastructure is being explored as part of the Strabane Canal Basin Regeneration Project which is one of the regeneration projects being advanced by Derry City and Strabane District Council and its City Deal Partners.

My Department will continue to work with the Council and its City Deal partners to make the case for the footbridge which would provide an important link between the residential areas south of the river, the bus station and the town centre.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she would consider the provision of a feeder bus service linking Millreagh with Dundonald Park and Ride.

(AQW 6786/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The layout of the Millreagh development makes the introduction of a feeder service problematic as it presents access issues for public transport vehicles.

In addition to this, a feeder service linking Millreagh to Dundonald Park & Ride could not be implemented without additional cost to my Department. Given the severe budget pressures facing my Department during COVID-19 and the funding required to ensure the viability of Translink in the current financial year, regrettably I am not in a position to consider additional services on our public transport network.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she would consider the provision of a feeder service bus linking Tullycarnet with Dundonald Park and Ride.

(AQW 6787/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Given the severe budget pressures facing my Department as a result of Covid-19 and the funding required to ensure the viability of Translink in the current financial year, regrettably I am not in a position to consider additional services on our public transport network.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many prosecutions have been brought against breaches of Tree Preservation Orders (ii) how many convictions for breaches of Tree Preservation Orders, in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 6798/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Unfortunately the information requested is not held by the Department as from April 2015 local councils have had primary responsibility for enforcement including tree preservation orders. Additionally, any files relating to Tree Preservation Orders prior to April 2015 would have been transferred to the local council planning authorities. As such the requested information would need to be sought from each local council planning authority.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department would consider a reduction in the speed limit from 60mph to 30mph in the area of Cotton village, Newtownards Road, Donaghadee.

(AQW 6804/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Changes to speed limits on a public road are assessed in accordance with the Department's guidelines, entitled Roads Service Policy and Procedure Guide (RSPPG) E051 'Setting Local Speed Limits in Northern Ireland'.

I can confirm that my Department will carry out a speed limit review along this stretch of road during the next few months using the criteria set out in our policy document. Officials will advise you of the outcome upon completion of the review.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure why no schools in North Down have been included in the 20mph reduction of speed limits announced across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6815/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

I can confirm that all schools in the North Down area were assessed using the assessment framework contained within my Department's current road safety at schools policy document. However, although none of the schools in the North Down area were ranked highly enough to be included within this year's programme, it is my intention for this programme to be rolled out over the coming years and therefore other schools, including those in North Down, will be considered for inclusion in future programmes.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to roll out the 20mph speed limit reduction to every school in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6817/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

I am determined that using the roads around all of our schools will be safer for everyone, and it is my intention that through future programmes many more schools will have a part-time 20 mph speed limit on the roads outside their gates.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many Penalty Charge Notices for parking have been rescinded after appeal in (i) Magherafelt; (ii) Maghera; (iii) Cookstown, and (iv) Coalisland, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 6820/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am unable to provide figures relating to successful appeals by town or council area for the last 3 years as the information is not maintained in this format, however, the table below contains details for all of Northern Ireland:

Financial Year	PCNs Issued	Number of PCNs Appealed	Number of Successful Appeals
2017/18	158,633	385	124
2018/19	154,874	488	171
2019/20	146,317	389	133

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans are in place to prioritise driving tests for those who are unable to use public transport due to medical reasons.

(AQW 6822/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed practical driving tests for cars and lorries from 1 September, initially prioritising those requests from around 200 high priority workers who have previously requested an urgent driving test and were at that time on a waiting list. The DVA is continuing to process requests for high priority workers and these customers will also be offered driving test appointments. Driving tests are also being offered to around 3,600 customers who had a

driving test booked between March and June, but whose tests were cancelled due to the lockdown measures imposed to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

The DVA is making good progress in delivering driving tests for these customers and estimates it will take around 6 to 8 weeks to clear this backlog, anticipating a resumption of its normal service delivery from October/ November. I fully appreciate there are many legitimate reasons why customers will want to take their practical driving test at the earliest opportunity, for prioritisation to be effective as I hope you understand, it needs to be focussed and be able to be managed by the DVA. The DVA is planning to reopen bookings for all new customers as soon as possible and to increase capacity for driving tests to deal with the likely high demand when normal service resumes. In doing so, this will improve driving tests services for all our customers, including those who are unable to use public transport due to medical or other reasons.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure when Approved Driving Instructor testing will recommence.
(AQW 6867/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As part of the phased resumption of practical driving tests, the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) has reinstated some driver testing services, where testing can be done safely in line with Public Health Agency advice and guidance on social distancing requirements. This includes motorcycle driver testing from 6 July and tests for drivers of buses, tractors and module 4 CPC tests for lorry, bus and coach drivers from 20 July. Practical car and lorry driving tests resumed from 1 September 2020, initially prioritising those requests from key workers followed by those customers whose tests were cancelled due to lockdown.

The DVA is working hard to reinstate other practical driving tests as soon as possible, including the qualifying test for Approved Driving Instructors. However, due to the longer duration of this test, it must be fully risk assessed to ensure it can be delivered safely in line with PHA advice and guidance. The DVA is working to quickly and safely resume this service and as soon as it resumes, I will ensure this is clearly communicated to all affected customers.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) where the park and ride in Dungiven will be located; and (ii) when it is scheduled to be in place.
(AQW 6872/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have asked my officials to bring forward options for a park and ride in this area.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she intends to address the backlog of key workers currently waiting for long periods of time to book the theory test element of their Critical Workers Driving Test.
(AQW 6885/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Although theory tests were suspended in late March both here and in Great Britain, a process was put in place that enabled the delivery of a limited number of theory tests during the period of lockdown for key workers whose role was critical to the COVID-19 response. Critical workers who had requested a theory test were contacted and given appointments before bookings were opened to the general public.

Theory test delivery resumed here in all six theory test centres from 6 July 2020, initially at reduced capacity in order to comply with COVID-19 and social distancing requirements. Since then, a number of steps have been taken to increase the availability of theory test appointments for customers, including increasing opening hours, and decreasing social distancing requirements from 2m to 1m+, in line with revised PHA guidance, to help improve capacity in theory test centres.

My officials in the Driver and Vehicle Agency continue to work with the theory test provider to monitor the situation.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of recent announcements to support and encourage active travel such as cycling, (i) whether she has allocated additional funding for road safety; and (ii) if so, how this money will be spent.
(AQW 6886/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Improving road safety and reducing the number of people killed or seriously injured in road traffic collisions remains a priority for me and the number of road deaths continues to be of concern. Despite budget pressures I have increased road safety funding from £988k in 2019/2020 to £1,135k for this current financial year.

The delivery of my Department's public information campaigns is informed by the PSNI road casualty data and is therefore allocated to where the problem is greatest, to reduce road deaths and serious injuries as effectively and efficiently as possible.

Evidence shows that over 95% of road deaths are due to human error. The main causes of casualties remain inattention or attention diverted; excessive speed having regard to the conditions; driving impaired due to alcohol/drugs and failure to wear a seatbelt in the event of a collision. For this reason, the funding is directed towards changing attitudes and behaviours.

Many road user groups are particularly vulnerable as they are over-represented in the casualties, namely; young people 17-24 years old, older road users, children, pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists. As such, many of the campaigns target the safety of these groups.

I have also delivered campaigns encouraging people to choose active modes of travel, such as walking and cycling. My Department is also simultaneously addressing the safety of those who choose to walk and cycle. Several of the campaigns

encourage drivers to give extra consideration to more vulnerable people, as well as advising people who walk and cycle on steps they can take to keep themselves safe as they share the road.

In recent weeks I have announced the launch of the Road Safety Grant Scheme. This £100k fund is designed to help local communities address their road safety issues through promotion, education or training. The scheme will focus on vulnerable road users by prioritising projects seeking to improve the safety of people walking or cycling, children or older road users.

I am committed to continuing to work towards reducing deaths and serious injuries on our roads.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) why Greyabbey Primary School was not included in the list of schools which will benefit from 20mph speed limit signage; and (ii) what plans are in place to reduce traffic speed outside the school. (AQW 6927/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

I can confirm that all schools in the Ards & North Down area were assessed using the assessment framework contained within my Department's current road safety at schools policy document. Based on its assessment score Greyabbey Primary School was not ranked highly enough to be included within this year's programme. However, it is my intention for this programme to be rolled out over the coming years and therefore other schools, including Greyabbey Primary School, will be considered for inclusion in future programmes.

As part of the Active School Travel (AST) programme, a number of road safety measures have already been installed in the vicinity of the primary school, to highlight the existence of the school to through traffic. These include enhanced signage and accompanying road markings to make drivers aware of the schools presence and enhanced speed limit signage to raise driver awareness regarding the existing 30mph speed limit within the village.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many driving tests are being carried out in Enniskillen Driving Test Centre, broken down weekly since June 2020. (AQW 6929/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The number of driving tests conducted is a National Statistic and as such must be released in accordance with the UK Official Statistics Code of Practice. To comply with this code, the Department cannot publicly release figures that are within the scope of National Statistics reporting beyond the latest published statistics.

The 'DfI Driver, Vehicle, Operator and Enforcement National Statistics' report is published on a quarterly basis with the latest edition covering the period from 1 April to 30 June 2020. Driving test statistics are presented in quarterly or monthly schedules, dependent on the volumes in question.

Given recent public interest in these statistics, the Department is working to publish provisional testing statistics on a monthly reporting cycle, which will be made available on the Department's website. The first monthly report will relate to the month of September and will be published during October.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given it is located on a dangerous corner on a major road from Lisnaskea to Roslea, whether she will consider including St. Joseph's Primary School, Donagh, Lisnaskea, within the 20mph speed restriction zones. (AQW 6938/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools. These measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from their schools on a daily basis.

I am determined that using the roads around all of our schools will be safer for everyone, and it is my intention that through future programmes many more schools will have a part-time 20 mph speed limit on the roads outside their gates.

Given the restricted budgets for works of this nature, as well as the practicalities of delivery, it was necessary to limit the number of schools to 100 in this year's programme. Unfortunately based on its assessment score St Joseph's Primary School, Donagh, Lisnaskea was not ranked as highly as other schools included within this year's programme. However, I do intend to take forward a further tranche of part-time speed limits at schools and it will be considered for inclusion in future programmes.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in regard to people being unable to get through to book their test, how she will address the capacity issue of the Driver and Vehicle Agency's booking line.

(AQW 6971/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As part of its plan to restore services, the DVA has recently reintroduced further vehicle testing services which has significantly increased the number of customers requiring to book a test. Currently the MOT telephone booking system is the only channel available to the public for booking tests. Call volumes are almost double what they were this time last year with some customers also using the booking line to make general enquiries about DVA services, rather than using other means. Social media and other messaging is being used to help clarify the contact points that customers should use, depending on their query.

The DVA has urgently explored measures to improve this service and from 23 September introduced a new call messaging service to redirect general calls to nidirect. In addition, the call centre opening hours have been extended by an additional 2 hours from 5pm to 7pm on Monday to Wednesday. To further alleviate pressure on the MOT telephone booking system, the DVA continues to engage directly with the haulage industry, particularly those operators with large fleets, to facilitate bookings at a local test centre level where possible rather than using the booking phone line.

The DVA is also planning to reinstate its online booking service with a phased implementation from 1 October as set out in the table below.

Date	Service
1 October	Vehicle tests for HGVs and trailers only
5 October	Practical driving tests for all new customers
12 October	Vehicle tests for all other categories

This should significantly reduce the demand on the MOT telephone booking system.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the full amount has been paid to NI Water for the purchase of Portavoe Reservoir.

(AQW 6996/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Northern Ireland Water has advised me that the full amount has been paid for the purchase of Portavoe Reservoir.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to provide funding for greenways in the Newry and Armagh area.

(AQW 6999/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Walking and Cycling Champion wrote to Councils in July seeking an update on the status of their greenway projects. All Councils responded, including a number of proposals from the Newry and Armagh area. Following consideration of the proposals, I announced £2.8 million funding investment towards the development of six greenway projects, where construction could begin this financial year. None of the projects from the Newry and Armagh area were identified by the council as ready to start construction this financial year.

However, Councils still have an opportunity to put forward their schemes. All Councils will have received a letter following my announcement, with an invitation to put forward business cases for their schemes. I would also encourage them to continue the momentum for delivery of greenways and advance their projects through meaningful local consultation and engagement with landowners. I hope to be in a position to fund further greenway projects in coming years. However, decisions regarding potential funding allocations for any future greenway projects will depend on the budget provided to my Department for 2021/22.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the MOT online booking service will be reinstated.

(AQW 7006/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The DVA is planning to reinstate its online booking service with a phased implementation from 1 October as set out in the table below.

Date	Service
1 October	Vehicle tests for HGVs and trailers only
5 October	Practical driving tests for all new customers
12 October	Vehicle tests for all other categories

In the meantime, the DVA has urgently explored measures to improve the telephone booking system and from 23 September has introduced a new call messaging service to redirect general calls to nidirect. In addition, the call centre opening hours have been extended by an additional 2 hours from 5pm to 7pm on Monday to Wednesday. To further alleviate pressure on the

MOT telephone booking system, the DVA continues to engage directly with the haulage industry, particularly those operators with large fleets, to facilitate bookings at a local test centre level where possible rather than using the booking phone line.

This should significantly reduce the demand on the MOT telephone booking system.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 473/17-22, what progress has been made on the proposed high-speed rail link between Belfast and Dublin.

(AQW 7099/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In line with the commitments in New Decade New Approach, officials within my Department have begun discussions with their counterparts in the South regarding the process for developing a feasibility study for a potential high-speed rail connection between Belfast, Dublin and Cork, as we seek to create a spine of connectivity on the island.

I met with Minister Ryan at the recent NSMC meeting to discuss the improvement of transport links, and I will provide a further update in due course.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, with regards that there is insufficient capacity to facilitate booking and conduct of Motor Vehicle Tests, why the decision was taken to end issuance of Temporary Exemption Certificates for four year old vehicles.

(AQW 7159/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) conducts periodic motor vehicle tests in compliance with the Roadworthiness Directive 2014/45/EU ("The Directive"). The Directive stipulates the minimum test frequency for motor vehicles, and provides for cars to be first tested from four years old and at least biennially thereafter.

Article 2(2) of the Directive provides for the frequency of testing to be altered under 'exceptional conditions' and the DVA has relied on this provision to defer the testing of motor vehicles affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and the related withdrawal of testing services. However, with the phased reinstatement of vehicle testing services the DVA can no longer rely on this provision to defer the testing of four year old cars in particular, and as a result, the testing of those vehicles resumed on 1 September. Vehicles in this category with a 6 month Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC) will be called for test when their TEC expires.

My officials are continuing to carefully monitor staffing levels to ensure there is sufficient capacity to meet the demand for vehicle testing across the test centre network.

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether work has been undertaken to establish a database of unadopted, developer-led, residential developments.

(AQO 701/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has in place a private streets database to assist with the management of residential developments and in particular developer led roads infrastructure that is proposed for adoption into the public road network. This is an extremely important management tool which records the status of each unadopted site and its progress towards adoption.

As you will be aware there are many small pockets of developments consisting of 5 houses or less, often located within a larger development, which at the request of the developer are for the developer and homeowners to maintain depending on the circumstances. My Department does not hold records of such developments, which are permitted under Planning Guidance, as they are not proposed for adoption.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's strategy for a recovery in the number of passengers using public transport.

(AQO 702/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department and Translink's response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 outbreak continues in line with Public Health Agency.

I have approved changes to the bus and rail timetables across the North to allow Translink to build resilience into the network and add extra capacity above passenger demand to ensure social distancing can be maintained.

You will understand that the recovery of passenger numbers is dependent on social distancing restrictions required in respect of COVID-19. Whilst our public transport network can currently accommodate passenger demand, eventually passenger numbers will hit a ceiling, as social distancing requirements impact on the capacity of the network.

Whilst my aim is to deliver a recovery from COVID-19 in a green, sustainable manner, our recovery must be focused on delivering the safest public transport for our passengers, in line with the latest public health guidance at the time.

To that end, my Department and Translink have implemented a wide range of measures to protect the public on our buses and trains, including the mandated use of face coverings, an enhanced cleaning regime and protections for staff and customers to minimise contact.

As we progress through this pandemic, my Department and Translink will be cognisant of any change in public health guidelines and we will increase capacity on our network when it is safe to do so.

I have recently brought a paper to the Executive outlining the importance of infrastructure in our recovery to COVID-19 and this included the role of public transport. As we respond to COVID-19 within the Executive, I am clear that we must be considerate of the role our public transport can play in our recovery, as well as the impact that changes to guidelines can have on the network.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure, further to the approval of an aquarium at Titanic Quarter, what plans her Department has to address congestion on Queens Road, Belfast.

(AQO 703/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Although officials in my Department monitor traffic flows through the Queens Road / Sydenham Road junction, Queens Road and other roads in the Belfast Harbour Estate are effectively private with responsibility for maintaining and making improvements to the infrastructure within the estate sitting with Belfast Harbour Commissioners.

Officials in my Department are currently assisting Belfast Harbour Commissioners and their representatives in their development of a Transport Masterplan for Queens Island. This will seek to mitigate impacts associated with further development and will include measures that will encourage use of more sustainable travel in and around the Harbour estate.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on safety improvements on the A1.

(AQO 704/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise that many in the local community support the safety improvements which are being proposed along the A1 between Hillsborough roundabout and Loughbrickland. In particular, I am very aware how important the A1 improvements are for the many people who have expressed their support, especially those who have lost loved ones

A Public Inquiry into the A1 Junctions Phase 2 road improvement scheme was held from the 11th to the 13th of March 2020. Following the Inquiry, the Inspector undertook a number of site meetings to ensure that he gave full consideration to all the issues raised. Whilst these site meetings were delayed by the COVID-19 restrictions, they have now been completed.

The Inspector has confirmed that he intends to issue his report to the Department shortly. Once received, I will carefully consider its findings.

I am keen to progress the A1 Junctions Phase 2 road improvement project to the next stage as quickly as possible, whilst of course completing all of the necessary statutory processes.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action her Department is taking to bridge the Bannfoot.

(AQO 705/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has been approached by elected members, individuals and groups of people who support the building of a bridge at this location. I have also been contacted by some residents in the area who are opposed to the building of a bridge.

The proposal for a walking and cycling bridge at Bannfoot did not feature in the greenway network set out in 'Exercise – Explore – Enjoy: a Strategic Plan for Greenways'. Part of the reason for that was that it was not included in any Council greenway proposals put forward to the Department.

I am keen that my Department works with Councils and with all stakeholders to deliver on projects that have the potential to improve the lives of people and connect communities. However, a proposal to build a bridge at this location would be for the local Council to consider in the first instance in consultation with the local communities and stakeholders.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has for schools not included in the recently announced 20mph speed limit schemes.

(AQO 706/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to work actively with partners to reduce death and serious injuries on our roads. I believe that reducing the maximum speed traffic can travel at on some of our roads, particularly those near schools, can help in this regard.

Indeed some of the key findings of the most recent Northern Ireland Continuous Household Survey indicated that the majority of respondents (53%) thought that a 20mph speed limit should be more widely used, with over four fifths (82%) of respondents believing a 20mph speed limit should be applied outside schools, and three quarters (76%) of the opinion it should also be applied to areas where children play.

I am therefore delighted to have committed funding in this year's capital budget towards the introduction of part-time 20 mph speed limits at around 100 schools across Northern Ireland. I am confident that these measures will increase driver awareness and achieve reductions in vehicle speeds outside and near these schools ensuring that parents, children and staff will be safer as they go to and from the schools on a daily basis.

I view this commitment as just a start and I am determined to ensure that using the roads around all of our schools will be safer for everyone. It is my intention that through future programmes, many more schools will have a part-time 20 mph speed limit on the roads outside their gates.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on her Department's work on New Decade, New Approach commitments.

(AQO 707/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The projects highlighted within 'New Decade, New Approach' will be transformational and I am committed to doing all that I can to deliver on the promises we have made in forming this new Executive.

The north south infrastructure projects contained in NDNA were discussed at the recent NSMC in Dublin. I have also met with Minister Ryan, my counterpart in the Irish Government, to discuss how we can work in partnership to progress these shared commitments.

I have also met with Minister Robin Walker to discuss the necessity of the British Government in honouring its commitments which underpin NDNA, the basis for the restoration of the Assembly and Executive.

Working in partnership within NI and across these islands, I am determined to see progress on delivery of the commitments within NDNA, to ensure that we can improve lives and opportunities for all our communities.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline what progress has been made towards a full resumption of MOT testing.

(AQO 708/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There has been a gradual resumption of MOT services over the summer as COVID 19 restrictions have eased. From 1 June 2020, the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) resumed Individual Vehicle Approval testing.

On 20 July, the DVA resumed limited vehicle testing for:

- vehicles not registered in Northern Ireland and due a test;
- vehicles with MOT expired by more than 12 months;
- vehicles currently declared SORN; and
- buses due a first time test (not for 'hire and reward' use)

From 1 September 2020, the DVA extended vehicle testing to further categories of vehicles to include:

- four year old private cars and motorcycles;
- three year old light goods vehicles;
- heavy goods vehicles; and
- trailers

To manage capacity, TEC's will continue to be issued for all other eligible vehicles until vehicle testing services can be fully reinstated.

Vehicles whose existing MOT certificate expired from 26 March 2020 or will expire before testing for their category resumes will be automatically exempt from testing for a full 12 months, with their new MOT expiry date pushed forward into 2021.

For vehicles which have previously been issued with a TEC as a result of issues with the scissor lifts, their TEC will also be automatically extended to the maximum period of 12 months.

Before the TEC period ends the DVA will issue a reminder notice to the registered keeper to book and present their vehicle for test together with instructions on how to book a test.

My officials are carefully monitor staffing levels to ensure there is sufficient capacity to meet the demand for vehicle testing across its test centre network and are planning to recruit additional permanent vehicle examiners as well as some temporary vehicle examiners to provide flexibility and meet the demand for testing.

The Belfast test centre is currently being used as a Covid-19 testing centre by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. However, the test centre is being returned to the DVA and from mid-October vehicle testing services will have resumed, which will provide significant additional vehicle testing capacity for all categories of vehicle, and be more convenient for those customers who regularly use this centre.

It is my priority to ensure that our staff and customers remain safe and the DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health advice to ensure that necessary and proportionate control measures relating to Covid-19 are incorporated into its risk assessments for safe vehicle testing. Like many other public facing services, vehicle testing capacity will increase as restrictions ease and as risk assessments are updated.

Department of Justice

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department will be employing extra staff to deal with the administration and delivery of the Troubles-related incident victims payments scheme.

(AQW 6560/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): A project team has been established within my Department to progress development of the delivery structures for the Victims' Payment Scheme on behalf of the Victims' Payments Board. One of the key tasks for the project team is to estimate the number of administrative staff that will be required to support delivery of the Scheme. Any additional staff required to support the Victims' Payments Board will be recruited by the Department, subject to the Executive Office approving the number of staff.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice (i) when she expects to see the audit report on Northern Ireland Legal Aid; and (ii) , if it once again shows a deficit due to fraud and error, what action she will take to rectify this.

(AQW 6561/17-22)

Mrs Long:

- (i) The Audit of the 2019-20 Annual Report and Accounts ("the Accounts") of the Legal Services Agency is on-going and is proceeding in keeping with the timetable agreed with the Northern Ireland Audit Office. The statutory deadline for laying the Accounts in the Assembly, towards which the Legal Services Agency is working, is the 15 November.
- (ii) It would be inappropriate to comment on the Accounts in advance of the conclusion of the audit and receipt of the Comptroller and Auditor General's audit opinion.

More generally on fraud and error, as I advised in AQW 1737/17-22, my Department is taking a range of measures to address Fraud and Error within the legal aid system covering official, applicant and practitioner fraud and error. The Standards Assurance Unit of the Department for Communities delivers an independent service to the Legal Services Agency to assess the official error rate within the legal aid system. This focuses on determining financial eligibility and the accuracy of payments. The findings of these reviews informs the refinement of desk instructions, focusing of supervisory checks and delivering of training. The work delivered by the Standards Assessments Unit is being expanded to look at applicants continued entitlement to receive legal aid in civil matters.

The Legal Services Agency is piloting a methodology to conduct sample reviews of practitioners' files. It is intended that this will form part of the Agency's Fraud and Error work. In addition the Agency is exploring the information in its new case management system to identify any claiming patterns which should be the subject of further examination. The information which can be extracted from the new case management system will be refined to inform proactive reviews of claims.

The Legal Services Agency continues to review complaints about alleged fraud received from the public and will refer cases to Police Service of Northern Ireland if there is evidence of fraudulent activity.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether she is aware of the My Family Matters Early Intervention pilot project which aims to protect and support children from psychological maltreatment, coercive control and domestic violence; and (ii) whether her Department will provide funding to support this initiative.

(AQW 6584/17-22)

Mrs Long: While I am not aware of this project I am conscious that domestic abuse, in its many forms, affects people of all ages within our society and children are the most vulnerable.

My officials have been in contact with the Department of Health, (DoH), Department for Communities, (DfC) and the Public Health Agency, (PHA) and have been advised that PHA have, through their commitment to actions in support of the Making Life Better NI Public Health Strategy, and the related Giving Every Child the best start in Life theme, commissioned a number of parenting and family support programmes across NI. This does not include the My Family Matters programme.

Recognising the strong links between domestic abuse and child safety my Department has funded a number of behavioural change programmes, both this year and last, for individuals who have shown concerning behaviour in a family setting but who have not yet entered the criminal justice system. This provides intervention at an early stage adopting a Problem Solving Justice Approach. The Building Positive Relationships Programme encourages individuals to recognise, acknowledge and develop coping mechanisms to address their behaviour. My Department will continue to evaluate these programmes and consider next steps.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what actions her Department is taking to address the shortfall in PSNI numbers.

(AQW 6629/17-22)

Mrs Long: In the New Decade, New Approach Document (NDNA) the British and Irish governments set out a number of priorities for the Executive, including increasing police numbers to 7,500. The Department of Justice has subsequently submitted a Strategic Outline Case seeking DoF approval for the PSNI to proceed to Outline Business Case stage for an additional 600 officers at a cost of £40 million per annum. My officials are engaging with the PSNI and the Department of Finance on this Strategic Outline Case. 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.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Justice whether she intends to introduce a Places of Worship protective scheme, similar to those introduced in England and Wales and more recently in Scotland, and if so, to indicate a timeline for its introduction. (AQW 6648/17-22)

Mrs Long: My officials are exploring evidence based information in relation to attacks on places of worship to allow me to fully consider if any similar scheme for Northern Ireland is required. This currently includes assessing criteria for the non-statute Places of Worship Security Fund that operates in England and Wales and the development of a similar scheme in Scotland, both of which focus on religiously motivated hate crime.

I will consider this further once I have had the opportunity to reflect on the findings which I will receive in the coming weeks.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Justice what analysis her Department has carried out on the role of poverty and trauma in the lives of people who enter the justice system. (AQW 6700/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department and criminal justice organisations (CJO) acknowledge the role poverty and trauma can have in the lives of people we come into contact with.

The 2019 NIPS Prisoner Needs Profile³, indicates that 64% of those committed to prison were in receipt of social security benefits; 21% were homeless; and 47% had no qualifications prior to their custodial sentence.

Analysis by the Probation Board for Northern Ireland indicates that 40% of those they manage in the community and 62% of those they support in

custody identified that their financial situation was directly linked to their offending behaviour.

In response to these issues Justice organisations have:

- proactively engaged experts, such as the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, to ensure better understanding of the impact of trauma and to create the best possible environment to mitigate the risk of re-traumatisation of service-users;
- undertaken bespoke training on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) and Trauma Sensitive Responses to Practice; and
- committed to embed a trauma informed approach in training, strategy, policy, procedure and culture.

I recognise that the impact of trauma and ACEs can be further exacerbated by socio economic factors. Addressing these factors at the earliest possible opportunity is not something Justice can do alone. We can however, with the support of partners, improve outcomes and life chances of vulnerable individuals who are at risk of future offending. In that regard, we are currently involved in early intervention programmes and structures to identify and provide effective early support to those at risk of poor outcomes in their lives. This includes work under the Early Intervention Transformation Programme and the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme. This focus on early intervention is also the basis of multi-agency Support Hubs, which seek to reduce vulnerability and ensure the best outcome for the individual.

I am committed to further progressing the ACE and trauma responsive approach through the justice sector.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice what discussions she has had with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs regarding the introduction of an animal cruelty register. (AQW 6735/17-22)

Mrs Long: Policy responsibility for the welfare of animals sits with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). Any decision to develop a register of those convicted of animal welfare offences under the Welfare of Animals (Northern Ireland) Act 2011 for the purposes of improving animal welfare would be a policy matter for that Department.

I have not had any discussions with Minister Poots regarding the introduction of an animal cruelty register. However, Department of Justice officials have engaged with their DAERA counterparts on a number of occasions on aspects of such a register.

My officials will continue to work with DAERA colleagues to advise on how they could address access to data and offences and penalties issues, should they decide to proceed with the development of an animal cruelty register.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice whether she plans to proceed with the introduction of an animal cruelty register. (AQW 6736/17-22)

³ Although largely designed to address the needs of those in the care of NIPS and their families

Mrs Long: Policy responsibility for the welfare of animals sits with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). Any decision to develop a register of those convicted of animal welfare offences under the Welfare of Animals (Northern Ireland) Act 2011 for the purposes of improving animal welfare would be a policy matter for that Department.

I have not had any discussions with Minister Poots regarding the introduction of an animal cruelty register. However, Department of Justice officials have engaged with their DAERA counterparts on a number of occasions on aspects of such a register.

My officials will continue to work with DAERA colleagues to advise on how they could address access to data and offences and penalties issues, should they decide to proceed with the development of an animal cruelty register.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice what assessment her Department has made with regard to the role of the European Court of Justice in Northern Ireland in a post-Brexit scenario.

(AQW 6741/17-22)

Mrs Long: Under the Withdrawal Agreement, the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) will no longer have general jurisdiction over the UK in relation to any acts that take place on or after 1 January 2021.

Whether it will have any role to play in terms of oversight of any future relationship agreements between the UK and the EU, including on criminal justice co-operation, will depend on the outcome of ongoing negotiations.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice what discussions her Department has held with stakeholders to prepare for the new legal arrangements which will come into force in a post-Brexit scenario.

(AQW 6742/17-22)

Mrs Long: Any new legal arrangements that will apply at the end of the transition period are yet to be agreed.

However, as part of our contingency planning my officials continue to work closely with law enforcement partners here and UK Government on operational readiness to assess risks and put in place mitigations as far as possible. Relations between Northern Ireland justice agencies and their counterparts in Ireland are also good.

Officials are also in regular contact with the legal profession on civil justice co-operation and officials have provided advice and briefings to members of the profession.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice whether ultimate legal authority in Northern Ireland will rest with the UK Supreme Court or with the European Court of Justice in a post-Brexit scenario.

(AQW 6743/17-22)

Mrs Long: Given the ongoing negotiations and possible legislative interventions at Westminster, it is not possible to definitively say how the post Implementation arrangements will operate in practice.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice whether the European Court of Justice will be able to overturn decisions of the Northern Ireland Assembly in a post-Brexit scenario.

(AQW 6744/17-22)

Mrs Long: In principle this would not be the case, but until the outcome of the ongoing negotiations between the UK and the EU is known, it is impossible to say, with any certainty, what the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) will cover.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice what progress has been made on establishing a Places of Worship Security Fund in Northern Ireland, similar to the scheme which operates in England and Wales.

(AQW 6770/17-22)

Mrs Long: My officials continue to explore evidence based information in relation to attacks on places of worship to allow me to fully consider if any similar scheme for Northern Ireland is required. This currently includes assessing criteria for the non-statute Places of Worship Security Fund that operates in England and Wales and the development of a similar scheme in Scotland, both of which focus on religiously motivated hate crime.

I will consider this further once I have had the opportunity to reflect on the findings which I will receive in the coming weeks.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Justice how much her Department has spent facilitating staff working from home.

(AQW 6780/17-22)

Mrs Long: Since the introduction of lockdown restrictions in late March 2020 until 31 August 2020 the Department has spent £265k facilitating staff working from home.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the development of a women's strategy.
(AQW 6801/17-22)

Mrs Long: Officials are currently in the process of finalising a draft framework which will form the basis of a new strategy to support and challenge women and girls in contact with the justice system. The aim is to commence a public consultation in November, with a view to launching the strategy in Spring 2021.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of times she has officially visited each constituency in her role as Minister, broken down by (i) month; and (ii) constituency since January 2020.

(AQW 6835/17-22)

Mrs Long: Covid-19 and lockdown severely disrupted my plans to carry out visits across Northern Ireland but I carried out a number of visits as detailed below. I also held virtual meetings with a range of individuals and groups when it was not appropriate to meet in person.

Month	Constituency
January	None
February	Lagan Valley Belfast South x 2
March	East Londonderry x 2 Foyle Constituency x 2
April	None
May	None
June	None
July	None
August	Belfast South East Belfast
September	East Londonderry

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice (i) for her assessment of comments about the Troubles-related incident victims' payments scheme by former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland Lord Hain at Westminster's Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on Wednesday 9 September questioning how many more of these desperately injured people are going to have to die before the payments are made and that her announcement that payments for the scheme will only start being considered in March 2021, is simply not good enough; and (ii) the estimated time when the first payment is likely to be received by the victims.
(AQW 6836/17-22)

Mrs Long: I fully appreciate that many victims and survivors are concerned about the delays in delivering the Victims' Payments Scheme and I agree with Lord Hain's comments about the need to deliver this important scheme as quickly as possible.

Following designation of my Department by the Executive Office on 24 August to carry out the administrative functions of the Victims' Payments Board on the Board's behalf, a dedicated project team was established to develop delivery structures for the new scheme. A number of important operational steps need to be advanced to implement the scheme, including the development of an IT system, development of a medical assessment process and appointment of members to the Victims' Payments Board. Not all of these are within my Department's direct control. It is the aim, however, to open the scheme for applications in early March 2021, although the issue of longer-term funding for the Scheme is still outstanding. Every effort will be made to shorten that timescale where possible.

It is not possible at this stage to indicate when payments to victims might commence as that will be a matter for the Victims' Payments Board, when established.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail her role and her Department's role in ensuring compliance and enforcement of COVID-19 regulations and legislation.
(AQW 6930/17-22)

Mrs Long: As Minister of Justice, my focus throughout the pandemic has been on supporting the Minister of Health in encouraging people to comply with public health restrictions, whether these are contained in guidance or given legal effect through regulations. We have a collective responsibility to keep each other safe.

The PSNI, together with other organisations such as local councils, have a statutory role in ensuring compliance with public health regulations, travel restrictions and the requirement to wear face coverings in certain settings. My officials are in close liaison with the PSNI to ensure they have the powers they need and are given the opportunity to feed in to the development

of regulations and guidance being brought forward by the relevant departments. The PSNI first seek to engage, explain and encourage compliance with the requirements, with enforcement action only being taken as a last resort.

My officials also participate in the senior level group recently established to take forward compliance and enforcement issues on behalf of the Executive, which is chaired by TEO Junior Ministers, and a group at official level involving PSNI, local government, PHA and relevant departments to facilitate collaborative working on compliance and enforcement.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice following Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services inspection report into how the PSNI treats its work staff, how the Minister intends to reduce the waiting time for mental health support for staff.

(AQW 6931/17-22)

Mrs Long: The health and wellbeing of PSNI officers and staff is a matter for the Chief Constable. You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

However, I am aware of the comments made in the latest inspection report on how well the PSNI treats its workforce and the people of Northern Ireland issued by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services, which referred to long waiting times for accessing mental health support. I am pleased to note that the PSNI are currently recruiting new mental health professionals to help reduce the waiting times.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice whether she will consider introducing a standardised referral form within the PSNI for vulnerable people to ensure greater consistency in the safeguarding support provided.

(AQW 6932/17-22)

Mrs Long: This is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, for which he is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice (i) how many domestic violence incidences were reported during COVID-19 lockdown; and (ii) how many have been forwarded to the Public Prosecution Service.

(AQW 6933/17-22)

Mrs Long: Figures sourced from the statistical bulletin on Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland: Update to 30 June 2020, record that, in the months April to June 2020, there were 8,302 domestic abuse incidents recorded by the police. Additionally, there were 567 domestic abuse calls made to police in the week 25 – 31 March 2020, as recorded in their 'Exceptional Release, Weekly management information on domestic abuse calls received by police since lockdown measures were introduced on March 23' bulletin.

Figures from the Public Prosecution Service Case Management System indicate that there were 1,923 cases submitted to the Public Prosecution Service (2,097 suspects) from PSNI, which included a suspect flagged by PSNI as motivated by Domestic Violence, from 23 March 2020 to 30 June 2020.

Note:

- 1 The figures in the police exceptional release bulletin on domestic abuse calls received are based on calls made to PSNI that were opened or closed on a code that is used to identify potential domestic abuse. This is management information and has not undergone the rigorous quality assurance checks that would be carried out prior to the publication of official statistics.
- 2 Figures on domestic abuse incidents for the period April - June 2020 are sourced from the 'Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland Update to 30 June 2020' bulletin.
- 3 Figures on the number of cases submitted to the Public Prosecution Service are based on information held on the Public Prosecution Service Case Management System. This is management information and has not undergone the rigorous quality assurance checks that would be carried out prior to the publication of official statistics.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) how many children aged 10 to 16 years old have been arrested for an offence in the last ten years; and (ii) a breakdown of the figures by (a) age; (b) year; and (c) offence.

(AQW 6979/17-22)

Mrs Long: Figures sourced from the Police Service of Northern Ireland record the following information.

Table 1: Number of unique persons aged 10-16 arrested¹ by age², 2010 – 2019

Age	Number
10	19
11	81
12	238

Age	Number
13	579
14	1,142
15	1,788
16	2,474
Total	6,321

Table 2: Number of young people arrested¹ by age² per calendar year

Age	Year									
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
10	4	*	5	*	*	*	3	4	*	-
11	20	#	11	#	#	#	8	4	#	7
12	48	41	35	23	20	19	26	19	17	29
13	101	99	87	50	62	73	56	52	51	54
14	241	180	172	150	118	149	105	121	99	127
15	433	306	284	308	218	196	195	181	190	171
16	591	498	449	384	382	346	286	279	249	232
Total	1,438	1,132	1,043	923	809	793	679	660	611	620

Table 3: Number of persons aged 10-16 arrested¹ by principal offence³ per calendar year, 2010 - 2014

Offence type	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Violence Against the Person	302	293	236	229	196
Sexual	44	21	24	30	26
Robbery	26	15	25	16	20
Theft	270	162	151	128	102
Burglary	199	147	128	87	88
Criminal Damage & Arson	265	236	223	205	180
Drugs - Controlled	35	22	24	27	23
Possession of Weapons	43	21	31	18	24
Public Order	118	97	105	89	70
Fraud – NFIB & Other	7	5	8	4	4
Motoring	48	27	17	26	17
Miscellaneous	39	48	33	34	32
Detention	42	38	38	30	27
Total	1,438	1,132	1,043	923	809

Number of persons aged 10-16 arrested¹ by principal offence³ per calendar year, 2015 - 2019

Offence type	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Violence Against the Person	207	174	184	173	166
Sexual	27	21	30	33	25
Robbery	15	7	4	#	6
Theft	91	75	69	65	56
Burglary	71	66	49	44	26

Offence type	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Criminal Damage & Arson	182	166	149	154	184
Drugs - Controlled	27	22	31	25	35
Possession of Weapons	23	27	20	19	17
Public Order	64	40	44	26	46
Fraud – NFIB & Other	3	7	9	*	3
Motoring	20	25	14	13	12
Miscellaneous	33	30	32	33	21
Detention	30	19	25	19	23
Total	793	679	660	611	620

Note:

- 1 Arrested and processed through police custody.
 - 2 Age is based on youngest age at time of arrest per calendar year.
 - 3 Offence type figures are based on principal offence at youngest age at time of arrest per calendar year. Offence type 'Detention' includes Breach of Bail conditions and Detained on Bench Warrant, Money Warrant.
 - 4 Figures in Table 1 relate to unique persons arrested over the time period. In Table 2, persons arrested more than once during the time period may be counted more than once.
 5. An arrest may not necessarily lead to a court prosecution or out of court diversionary disposal – there may be no further action, no prosecution etc
- ** Means a figure relating to fewer than 3 cases has been treated under rules of disclosure.
- # Means a figure of 3 or more had been treated to prevent disclosure of a small number elsewhere.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of making conducted energy devices, such as tasers, available to more frontline uniform officers.

(AQW 7008/17-22)

Mrs Long: This is an operational matter for the Chief Constable, for which he is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Justice to detail the cost of adding security to the homes of prison officers following threats to the officers and their families, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7136/17-22)

Mrs Long: During each of the last three years the cost to the Northern Ireland Prison Service of providing security measures to officer's homes has been:

2017-18	£253,828
2018-19	£81,236
2019-20	£137,796

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice to detail the reoffending rate for children and young people under 18 years old, over the last five years.

(AQW 7151/17-22)

Mrs Long: The information requested is outlined in the table below.

One-Year Proven Reoffending Rate for Young People aged 17 and under, 2012/13-2016/17

Cohort	Number of People in Cohort	Number who Reoffended within One Year	Reoffending Rate
2012/13	2,297	692	30.13%
2013/14	1,905	537	28.19%

Cohort	Number of People in Cohort	Number who Reoffended within One Year	Reoffending Rate
2014/15	1,563	503	32.18%
2015/16	1,543	458	29.68%
2016/17	1,226	352	28.71%

Note:

- Figures relate to young people, aged 17 or under, who have been given a non-custodial disposal at court, a diversionary disposal or have been released from custody during the given financial year.
- The observation period for reoffending is one year and an additional follow up period of six months is given for an offence to be proven in court. This is measured from date of receipt of a diversionary disposal or non-custodial disposal at court or release from custody.
- An offence is counted as a reoffence if it (i) occurs within the one year observation period, (ii) has been committed within Northern Ireland, (iii) is prosecuted via the PSNI and not a third party (e.g. DfC), (iv) is not a breach offence; and (v) has been 'proven', meaning that a court conviction or diversionary disposal has been imposed within the observation year or 6 month follow up period.
- As there are differences in the offending related characteristics of those included within each cohort, when comparing trends, care should be taken to understand the wider context within which offending and reoffending has occurred.
- Figures relating to reoffending for the 2017/18 cohort will be available in November 2020.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice to detail the total cost of youth custodial services over the last five years. (AQW 7152/17-22)

Mrs Long: The total costs of youth custodial services over the past 5 years (including depreciation and apportioned overhead costs) were:

	£000
2015-16	8,435
2016-17	8,318
2017-18	8,566
2018-19	9,072
2019-20	9,141

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice to detail how many children have been in Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre; (i) on remand; (ii) charged with an offence; and (iii) subject to a Police and Criminal Evidence Order, over the last five years. (AQW 7153/17-22)

Mrs Long: All children admitted to Woodlands, Juvenile Justice Centre have been charged with an offence while in police custody prior to admission.

The table below contains the number of children admitted to Woodlands on a Police and Criminal Evidence Order (PACE), on remand and sentenced to a period of detention over the last five years.

Number of Children in JJC by Status and Year, 2014/15 to 2018/19

Financial Year ¹	Statu ^{s2}		
	PACE	Remand	Sentence
2014/15	130	165	52
2015/16	115	127	43
2016/17	105	112	30
2017/18	133	125	35
2018/19	128	105	23
Five Year Period, 2014/15 - 2018/19	449	445	145

- The financial year is assigned based on the date of status change to PACE/Remand/Sentence.

- 2 The sum of PACE, Remand and Sentence does not equal the number of children in each financial year as children may be admitted on more than one status.
- 3 The number of children in the five year period does not equal the sum of the annual figures as children may be admitted in more than one financial year.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) what discussions she has had with Executive colleagues on the issue of the enforcement of the COVID-19 regulations; and (ii) the subsequent outcome of these discussions.

(AQW 7203/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Executive discusses its response to the Covid pandemic, including enforcement of the regulations, at its weekly meetings. The outcomes of these discussions are communicated in a variety of formats, including Ministerial press conferences, statements to the Assembly, and press releases. The Executive agreed on 10 September to set up an enforcement sub-group, chaired by the TEO Junior Ministers, which met for the first time on 16 September.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to list the date she has had (i) face-to-face meetings; (ii) virtual meetings; and (iii) phone conversations with (a) the PSNI; and (b) other statutory agencies, on the issue of the enforcement of the COVID-19 regulations.

(AQW 7204/17-22)

Mrs Long: I have attended Executive meetings and held meetings and phone conversations with a range of stakeholders, including the PSNI, to discuss issues relating to our collective response to COVID-19 and my Department routinely publishes a record of all the meetings I hold.

As I have previously stated, enforcement of the COVID-19 regulations is not the sole responsibility of my Department nor am I, as Minister of Justice, leading this piece of work.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail her role in the enforcement of the COVID-19 regulations.

(AQW 7206/17-22)

Mrs Long: I would refer the Member to my answer to AQW6930/17-22.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice to detail what mental health support is in place for prisoners within the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

(AQW 7316/17-22)

Mrs Long: Healthcare services, including mental health services, are provided to prisoners in Northern Ireland through the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (the Trust).

Mental Health teams are in place at each establishment, staffed by the Trust, and are comprised of mental health nurses, psychiatrists, mental health occupational therapists and clinical psychologists.

Mental health hubs have been put in place at each of our establishments and offer a therapeutic environment for people in our care who have mental health issues.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice to detail what actions have been taken by her Department to address key issues outlined in the 2017 Northern Ireland Audit Office report Managing Children Who Offend.

(AQW 7319/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Audit Office report on Managing Children Who Offend was published on 6 July 2017. The report made 7 recommendations which have been regularly reported on to both the Youth Justice Agency and Departmental Audit and Risk Committees.

Good progress has been made against a number of the recommendations. For example, my Department has developed a strategic vision for youth justice entitled 'Transitioning Youth Justice' which sets out an ambitious programme of work to deliver against the proposals in the Scoping Study which was completed in 2016. This strategic vision has also been underpinned by a series of performance indicators focusing on improved outcomes for young people in the justice system. Furthermore, the Agency is engaged with academia to look at ways in which it can measure the added value of its services and has also benchmarked the costs of custody against similar facilities in other jurisdictions.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office has recently carried out a follow up review of its findings in 2017 and we await the final report.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Justice how her department intends to administer the Victims' Payment Scheme.

(AQO 711/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department was formally designated by the Executive Office on 24 August to carry out the administrative functions of the Victims' Payments Board on the Board's behalf.

A dedicated project team has been established within my Department to progress the development of delivery structures for the new scheme. However, a number of important operational steps need to be advanced to implement the new scheme.

This will include working with the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission on progressing appointments to the Victims' Payments Board, the design and development of an IT system, deployment and training of staff for administrative preparations, development of a medical assessment process, and other steps needed to establish the Board.

Although the Westminster regulations came into force on 29 May, the important issue of longer term funding for the scheme remains outstanding.

I am strongly of the view that the UK Government has an obligation to make the necessary funding available and I am committed to working with the Secretary of State, Treasury and Executive Colleagues to ensure that is in place. In that context, I met with the Finance Minister last week to discuss the need to identify longer-term funding for the scheme. I am also due to meet with the First Minister, deputy First Minister and Finance Minister later today on the same issue.

I am aware of the comments by the Secretary of State and a suggestion that he would reserve the ability to exercise a power to intervene and seek reconsideration of some decisions by the Victims' Payments Board.

The Board must be independent of political interference and should be free to make its decisions without any external interference. I have written to the Secretary of State to express my concerns about his proposal and to seek urgent clarification on his intentions.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether the Minister of Health requested that she chair the Executive working group on COVID-19 regulations compliance; and (ii) to detail her answer.

(AQW 7363/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Executive discusses its response to the Covid pandemic, including enforcement of the regulations, at its weekly meetings. The Member will appreciate the need to respect the confidentiality of both the content of Executive papers and discussions between Ministers at the Executive.

The Executive agreed on 10 September to set up an enforcement sub-group and the group is chaired by the TEO Junior Ministers.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the expose in the Belfast News Letter of 21 September 2020 of the anti-police stance of director(s) of Transgender NI, whether she will review the funding of the organisation to provide training within her Department.

(AQW 7372/17-22)

Mrs Long: Over the past two years there has been an increase in the number of young people admitted to Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC) who have presented as gender transitioning. Staff in the JJC identified a training need to better equip them in supporting these young people and to increase their knowledge in order to provide a sensitive, caring and professional service to them during their time in Woodlands.

Transgender NI was subsequently funded on a one-off basis to provide 2 sessions at a cost of £450 per session. Funding was provided in line with current procurement procedures.

There are currently no plans to avail of this training in the future.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the Secretary of State's recent comments that the British government will reserve the ability to exercise a power to intervene and seek reconsideration of decisions by the independent board overseeing the Troubles-related incident Victims Payment Scheme.

(AQO 715/17-22)

Mrs Long: I am aware of the comments by the Secretary of State regarding the Victims' Payments Scheme and a suggestion that he would reserve the ability to exercise a power to intervene and seek reconsideration of some decisions by the Victims' Payments Board.

It is my strong view that the Board should not be subject to any political interference and should retain full authority for its decisions: to do otherwise risks undermining the Board's authority and the confidence of victims in the impartiality of the scheme.

I have written to the Secretary of State to express my concerns about his proposal and to seek an urgent update on any further developments or considerations he has given to the proposal.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Justice how many prisoners and prison staff in each prison facility have been tested for COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic.

(AQO 716/17-22)

Mrs Long: NIPS has well developed and embedded procedures for prisoners and staff to be tested for COVID-19.

Since the introduction of these arrangements 842 prisoners and 142 staff have been tested at Maghaberry, 30 prisoners and 74 staff have been tested at Magilligan and 118 prisoners and 51 staff have been tested at Hydebank Wood.

46 of our Prisoner Escort and Court Custody staff have been tested, six staff from the Prison Service College and four staff from Prison Service Headquarters. In addition we have also facilitated testing for 108 of our staff's family members.

NIPS is unable to track or record staff who choose to arrange tests themselves using the national testing arrangements.

As a result of these tests one prisoner and 10 members of staff have tested positive. They have received all the necessary support and advice from NIPS.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Justice what departmental support is available for people being released from prison that are homeless.

(AQO 717/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service recognises that access to suitable and sustainable accommodation is one of the most important factors contributing to successful resettlement. There are a range of accommodation options for individuals on release from custody, but I acknowledge that there remain significant challenges in finding suitable settled accommodation for some vulnerable individuals.

The Prison Service takes a proactive approach towards managing the housing needs of those individuals within our care, which focuses on an early assessment of need on entry into custody rather than immediately before release. A key element in addressing accommodation needs is effective partnership working between the Prison Service, the Probation Board for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and the Housing Rights Service, as well as other housing support organisations and accommodation providers.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her legislative programme for the remainder of the current Assembly mandate.

(AQO 718/17-22)

Mrs Long: In addition to the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, which is currently at Committee Stage in the Assembly, I intend to bring forward three definite Bills and one possible Bill to the Assembly during the remainder of this mandate.

Upon the completion of pre-Introduction clearances and securing of the necessary Executive approvals, I plan to introduce a Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill to the Assembly in October / November.

This will be followed by a Protection from Stalking Bill, drafting of which is at an advanced stage, in November / December.

Subject to the analysis of responses to a consultation exercise that concluded on 14 August, this may be followed by a tightly focussed Personal Injury Discount Rate ("Damages") Bill in January / February 2021.

I then plan to bring forward a Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill in spring 2021 to legislate for a number of discrete policy areas that do not come within scope of the other Bills in the mandate.

Introduction of the Justice Bill in early 2021 will ensure that the Bill can complete its Assembly scrutiny and passage before the House rises in March 2022 for the next local elections.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the use of Care and Supervision Units in the Northern Ireland Prison Service.

(AQO 719/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) takes very seriously its responsibility for the safety and well-being of all prisoners in its care.

Care and Supervision Units play an important role in each of our prisons, in essence they are a facility that allows individual prisoners to be kept apart from their peers in the interest of good order and discipline or for their own interests or protection.

The Governor may, using Rule 32 place a prisoner in the CSU if that prisoner is engaging or is believed to be engaging in harmful behaviours including, violence, disruptive, aggressive or anti-social behaviour, drug seeking, taking or trafficking. Alternatively an individual may receive an award of cellular confinement in the CSU as a result of breaching prison rules.

Those placed in Care and Supervision Units undergo an initial health assessment on arrival and are visited by a nurse on a daily basis thereafter. The Independent Monitoring Board is also advised when a person is placed in the CSU and cases are regularly reviewed in the context of multi-disciplinary case conferences.

Care and Supervision Units are regularly inspected by a range of external organisations and it is encouraging to note that recent Criminal Justice Inspectorate Reports have been positive about the improvements we have made in terms of the operation and management of these units.

NIPS has been commended for promoting tailored care and interaction planning, partner agency engagement, signposting and referrals to assist in addressing the underlying issues leading to harmful behaviour. It should also be recognised that

some prisoners benefit from spending time in the CSU environment and respond well to the individual supervision and support they receive.

I am content that the arrangements for the management of NIPS Care and Supervision Units are appropriate and proportionate based on the concentration of individuals with challenging behaviours within the prison population.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the impact of the Serious Crime Act 2007 since its enactment. (AQO 720/17-22)

Mrs Long: I understand the Member is asking about Section 44 of the Serious Crime Act 2007, which creates the offence of intentionally encouraging or assisting an offence. It sets out what a person must do to commit the offence and provides further definition as to what is meant by "intention".

As the Member will understand, in any case where Section 44 has been used by the police, this is an operational policing matter, and as such I cannot comment on it.

More generally, however, I can advise that there have been 78 convictions for offences of intentionally encouraging or assisting crime, under Sections 44, 45 and 46 of the Serious Crime Act 2007, between 2008 and 2019 in Northern Ireland; 20 of those convictions relate to Section 44 of the Act.

The 2007 Act also created Serious Crime Prevention Orders used against those involved in serious crime to protect the public by preventing, restricting or disrupting involvement in serious crime. Fifty two of these orders have been obtained in Northern Ireland since their introduction in 2008 and up to the end of 2019.

Therefore, it is my assessment that provisions within the Act have made a positive contribution to criminal justice outcomes in Northern Ireland and as Minister of Justice I welcome all interventions that tackle criminality.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice what engagement she has had with the Minister of Health and the Minister of Education to better identify and protect children from child sexual exploitation. (AQO 721/17-22)

Mrs Long: I remain committed to working with all relevant Departments to further improve how cases of child sexual exploitation are handled. This includes working collaboratively to address the strategic and operational recommendations from the recent CJINI report on Child Sexual Exploitation and the Safeguarding Board for NI (SBNI) review report.

As I have advised before, my Department does not have the strategic lead for issues related to child protection, however more can always be done to enhance our strategic response, and ensure that by working closely with partners we get the best outcomes for victims.

The CJINI report recognised that it is not possible to meaningfully inspect child sexual exploitation through a purely justice lens, without recognising the vital role partners have in ensuring effective and enduring child safeguarding and protection. Therefore, our starting point has been to consider the report in line with the work being progressed by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland and other partners responsible for the operational response to Child Sexual Exploitation, and existing child protection mechanisms and protocols.

We have also established a multi-agency Task and Finish group to consider the CJINI recommendations alongside those in the recent Leonard Consultancy report on child sexual exploitation that was commissioned by the Safeguarding Board, given the cross over between recommendations. This will ensure a considered and joined up approach to both the strategic and operational recommendations contained within both reports. This will include how my Department, and our criminal justice partners, best support those elements that have a health or education lead, and vice versa. Through this a more coordinated and effective response can be secured.

In taking this forward, my officials are liaising with partners in the Department of Health, the Department of Education, the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, the Health and Social Care Board and the police and will develop a final action plan within the next few months.

More generally my Department is also considering how best we utilise existing structures to ensure a joined up approach and build on the existing cross-Departmental relationships. We have lots of good partnership working, but it is important that we ensure it all fits together and there are no gaps. Officials are considering for example how to utilise the Child Protection Senior Officials Group to take forward this work and build on the existing cross-Departmental relationships

There are also a number of key initiatives for Health and Education to better protect children under the Prevention and Early Intervention strand of the Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy.

I would like to also briefly outline some of the collaborative work that we are already progressing in this space. Since the publication of the Marshall Report in 2014, we have actioned a number of important recommendations including a review of the law on Child Sexual Exploitation, along with proposals on amendments to sexual offences law arising from this. Alongside this we have completed research into the experiences of young victims of crime with an associated action plan to improve services and work is continuing to be developed to deliver further performance improvements.

On an issue such as this I am always open as to how we can improve outcomes for young victims by working together better and more strategically and this is what we will be considering as we finalise our action plan in response to the CJINI report and seek to implement the recommendations.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Justice whether she intends to amend Part III of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987.
(AQO 722/17-22)

Mrs Long: In May 2019, the Department of Justice appointed Judge Desmond Marrinan to carry out an independent Review of Hate Crime Legislation in Northern Ireland. The Terms of Reference for the Review provides the remit to consider and make recommendations on the implementation and operation of the current legislative framework for incitement offences, in particular Part III of the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987.

As part of this Review, Judge Marrinan has sought views on this legislation relating to stirring up hatred or arousing fear, among other issues. Following a public consultation, public outreach events and meetings with stakeholders earlier in the year, he is currently analysing responses.

Judge Marrinan is due to provide his final report to me by the end of November. I will carefully consider any recommendations relating to the Public Order (Northern Ireland) Order 1987 and, if required, steps to bring forward legislative changes will be scheduled into the Department's legislation programme in due course.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Justice to outline the steps taken to protect the prison population from COVID-19 infection.
(AQO 723/17-22)

Mrs Long: Ensuring the safe operation of custodial environments is a top priority for my Department.

The Prison Service started preparing for the potential impact of COVID-19 in January. NIPS have followed the advice of the Public Health Agency and worked closely with the South Eastern Trust to implement an extensive range of precautionary measures.

These measures included the suspension of in-person visits and forms of temporary release, significantly restricting access to prison establishments, and the introduction of house based routines to support social distancing.

Through its operational recovery plan these measures will be incrementally and gradually relaxed. NIPS has already made significant progress – including in the re-introduction of in-person visits and a phased approach to pre-release testing.

Further to these specific measures there are robust arrangements in place for the isolation of individuals committed to custody or who become symptomatic, testing for prisoners and staff, and contact tracing for any potential cases.

Prisons also have very extensive arrangements for the supply and appropriate use of personal protective equipment and for handwashing.

All of this work has been supported by regular communication about the risks of infection and how these can be mitigated. Advice about handwashing, 'catch it, kill it, bin it' and social distancing is widely displayed and reinforced at establishment level and service wide.

To date one prisoner has tested positive as a result of a test carried out on his committal to prison.

Department for the Economy

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the £15 million deficit created by the multi-campus model of Ulster University; (ii) whether she has any plans to fund this deficit; and (iii) what impact this deficit will have for regional balance of higher education in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 6166/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I acknowledge Ulster University's assertion that its multi-campus model gives rise to additional costs, which it estimates to be in the region of £15 million.

Ulster University is an autonomous body and as such, its campus locations are a matter for the University. However, my Department is working on reviewing the distributive model used to fund the local institutions through the teaching grant allocation. As part of this work, my Department is looking at ways in which the distributive model can better reflect our strategic aims. Consideration may therefore be given to the development of an approach to funding allocation which also takes into account the costs of delivery.

In relation to any impact of the additional costs on the regional balance of higher education in Northern Ireland, Ulster University's finances are managed at an institutional, not campus level, and as an autonomous body, responsibility for the strategic use of these finances lies with the University.

Mr Butler asked the Minister for the Economy what measures have been put in place by her Department and the Higher Education institutions to ensure that care-experienced young people, who had applied for places within Higher Education this autumn, receive specific advice, support and guidance to navigate the A-level and other similar appeals process.

(AQW 6185/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I can confirm that the Department for the Economy's (DfE) Careers Service provides a free, impartial careers advice and guidance service to every post-primary school in NI, and is staffed by professionally qualified careers advisers.

Following results days, this careers service provides advice and support to all young people, including those who are care-experienced in relation to progression beyond school and the pathways available to them.

If any young person is unhappy with a result, they may discuss their concerns with their school or college which will have an internal appeals or complaints process.

CCEA has also published information on how appeals will work and this is available on their website as follows:

<https://ccea.org.uk/summer-awarding/examination-appeals>

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of applicants for (i) Pharmacy; (ii) Dentistry; and (iii) Medicine at Queen's University Belfast who had places on courses withdrawn as a result of initial A level grading in 2020 and are now awaiting a decision on whether the number of places on these courses will be increased to allow them entry onto their chosen undergraduate programme.

(AQW 6225/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On Friday 11 September 2020, following consultation with the universities, including Queen's University Belfast, I announced approval of additional student places for healthcare undergraduate courses at both Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and Ulster University. I have been advised by QUB that these additional places, which included medicine, but not Pharmacy or Dentistry, will enable offers to be honoured to students in the exceptional circumstances created by recent A-level re-grading decisions.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what meetings she or her departmental officials have had with the banking sector to address growing concern about the lack of banking provision in rural areas; and (ii) what proactive measures are being taken by banks to provide locally-based access to help people to set up an account in advance of the end of the Department for Work and Pensions contract with the Post Office as part of the Future Method of Payment Project.

(AQW 6230/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I appreciate the impact that rural banking services can have on local communities, business and investment in rural areas.

My Department does not have direct responsibility for banks in Northern Ireland as the regulation of financial services is a reserved matter. However, the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (CCNI), which is one of my Department's Non Departmental Public Bodies, provides advice on consumer matters including banking services.

The Consumer Council website (www.consumercouncil.org.uk) provides guidance to consumers on bank closures, a Financial Map of Northern Ireland that highlights financial services in areas affected by bank closures, and a current account comparison tool.

The issue of proactive measures being taken by banks to provide locally-based access to help people to set up an account in advance of the end of the Department for Work and Pensions contract with the Post Office as part of the Future Method of Payment Project is not within the remit of my Department. I would direct you to the Minister for Communities as the issue falls within her Department's remit.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has the power to extend maternity leave.

(AQW 6232/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for the Economy is responsible for maternity leave and has the power to extend maternity leave.

However it is a power that would not be unilaterally exercised due to the cross-cutting impact on other Departments and possible impact on certain statutory entitlements such as statutory maternity pay, the responsibility for which sits with the Department for Communities.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy (i) how she has emphasised the serious implications of the ending of the job retention scheme for the local economy to the British Chancellor; and (ii) for an impact analysis of the ending the job retention scheme for our local economy.

(AQW 6262/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

4 <https://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/consumers/rights-and-advice/financial-services/bank-branch-closures>

- (i) I am very much aware of the potential implications that may arise as a result of the ending of the furlough scheme at the end of October, in particular the potential for large scale redundancies in the hardest hit industries. In my role as Economy Minister, I have been liaising regularly with both the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on this matter and have raised the need for an extension to the scheme on the numerous occasions when I have engaged with the Secretaries of State on COVID-19 related matters.

You will be aware that the Finance Minister wrote to Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on behalf of the NI Executive urging the extension of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme beyond the end of October, in particular for those sectors unable to operate or who are operating at significantly reduced levels.

Further to this, I wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, highlighting the very real prospect of large scale redundancies as the planned closure of both the furlough and self-employment income support schemes draws closer, and urging him to look to extend these schemes to create more space for a future return to work, which would help enormously in our continued efforts to protect jobs and ensure that we do not lose the progress that we have already made to date.

- (ii) My Department's latest assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on the local economy was published on 30th June. This paper pointed to very significant job risks for the local economy from the tapering of the furlough scheme.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy to explain what business incentive schemes her Department is considering to support SME's in the promotion of their business following the period of closure due to COVID-19.

(AQW 6548/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: From the outset, my department has worked closely with Executive colleagues and delivery partners to bring forward a comprehensive suite of business interventions to support SMEs following the period of closure brought about by COVID-19.

My Department has delivered an unprecedented level of support to SMEs during this difficult time. This includes the £10k Small Business Support Grant and the £25k Retail, Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Sector Grant. To date businesses have received approximately £246m and £73m respectively, as a result of these schemes. Additionally, the Micro-business Hardship Fund has provided approximately £22.5m in much needed support to micro-businesses that were unable to access other regional and national coronavirus support measures.

SMEs have a crucial role in the NI economy and it is vital that we continue to build on existing schemes to help these businesses survive the crisis and to prosper in the future.

Invest NI has recently introduced 2 new support schemes to assist SMEs respond to a new business environment in the wake of COVID-19. A new £1m Digital Selling Capability Grant to help SME retailers and wholesalers generate business online, and a £5m Equity Investment Fund targeted at early stage and seed stage SMEs.

Other schemes currently being developed by Invest NI will help businesses, including SMEs, make improvements to operational processes and supply chain resilience, leverage the use of new technologies, and access professional business financial / recovery planning advice. These schemes will complement the extensive suite of existing Invest NI support provision that is available.

SMEs play a central, and crucial, role in operation of Northern Ireland's tourism and hospitality industry. COVID-19 has had a significant impact on this industry and in April 2020 I established a Tourism Recovery Steering Group, together with a high level Working Group, to help the industry address the challenges presented by COVID. Through these groups we have identified and delivered on a number of key priorities which enabled many tourism and hospitality SMEs to re-open and generate essential revenue. Going forward, a draft plan has been developed setting out initiatives and actions to create consumer confidence, stimulate demand and enhance business capability.

Furthermore, for cross-border traders there is access to InterTradeIreland initiatives such as Emergency Business Solutions which provides support to businesses in areas such as cash flow and accessing government support and finance; as well as the E-merge programme that provides support to help businesses implement online sales platforms and processes.

I do not underestimate the challenge ahead of us, and I will continue to work with stakeholders and delivery partners to consider what further assistance is required.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has considered increasing the number of medical students who can attend university but where denied access due to the exams results situation.

(AQW 6552/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On Friday 11 September 2020 I announced approval of up to 80- additional medicine undergraduate places at Queen's University Belfast spread across their 2020 and 2021 intakes. This will enable offers to be honoured to students in the exceptional circumstances created by recent A-level re-grading decisions.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has plans to enhance collective bargaining rights for university and college staff.

(AQW 6643/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There are no plans currently to amend trade union legislation in Northern Ireland.

Under the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1995, a union can apply to the Industrial Court to be recognised for collective bargaining if it makes a request to an employer for statutory recognition.

In order for the Industrial Court to accept an application for recognition, the employer must employ at least 21 workers or an average of at least 21 workers in the 13 weeks ending the day a trade union makes the request for recognition.

I am open to working with Executive Colleagues, the Assembly and stakeholders to ensure our employment legislation framework meets the needs of our regional economy.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy what action her Department is taking in relation to the lecturers' pay dispute. (AQW 6644/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am aware of the ongoing industrial action by members of the University and College Union over pay, workloads and pensions and I respect the right of staff to take part in mandated industrial action and recognise that these decisions are not taken lightly.

However, whilst the Department provides funding and sets the strategic direction for the sector in Northern Ireland, universities are autonomous institutions and are responsible for their own policies and procedures, including those related to pay, workload and superannuation.

Therefore, pay and pensions in the HE sector, across the UK, is a matter for the HE employers and the staff trade unions.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for the Economy what support he is considering for businesses that rent units within a building but were unable to avail of the £10,000 Small Business Support Grant Scheme as they had no specific rates account ID due to not owning the property. (AQW 6662/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I recognise that businesses that rent units within a building were unable to avail of the Small Business Support Grant Scheme. Under rating legislation, the person occupying or entitled to occupy a property is liable for rates on that property. The exception to this is properties with a NAV under £1,590 which are rented where the landlord is then liable for the rates.

The Small Business Support Grant scheme was designed to benefit the occupying business and not the landlord or managing agent who is responsible for paying the rates. A separate rental portal was launched for this purpose. Small businesses who were the sole tenant of a rented property, with either the business or the landlord receiving the rates bill, were eligible to apply for a grant.

However, if a business rented part of a property from the main occupying business (such as hiring desks within a serviced office workspace), the business ratepayer who was named on the rates account and received the business rate bill directly from Land & Property Service (LPS) was considered to be the occupying business for the purposes of the grant. Only one grant payment was payable in relation to each property.

The Small Business Support Grant Scheme closed on 20th May 2020. Businesses who rent units within a building may have been able to avail of other support including the Self Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS).

The NI Microbusiness Hardship Fund was designed to provide support to those businesses who were not eligible for either the £10,000 or £25,000 Business Support Grants. Paying rates or having a rates account did not form part of the eligibility criteria, therefore businesses who rented part of a property (such as a shared office space) could apply, subject to the meeting the eligibility criteria.

The Northern Ireland economy has been hit hard by the pandemic and significant investment will be required to rebuild and renew the economy. In considering further interventions, it will be for the Executive to collectively determine how future funding will be allocated to support economic recovery moving forward.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for an update of her Department's review of student services within further education; (ii) how her Department engaged with students as part of this review; and (iii) what improvements she envisages to better support students in further education in the context of responses related to COVID-19. (AQW 6665/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Review of Further Education (FE) Student Support was initiated as two separate consecutive pieces of work comprising of 'Stage 1: Baseline Information Exercise' and 'Stage 2: Policy Review'.

Stage 1 of the review has now been completed. Student views included were taken from the 2018/19 QDP Teaching & Learning survey, which showed that overall the work of colleges in relation to student support services is highly valued and appreciated by students.

It was intended that much of the work relating to Stage 2 would be informed by and stem from the information contained in the Stage 1 report. However, cognisant of the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and the resultant significant ongoing changes in delivery of provision by FE, it is recognised that this information may now need to be reviewed before progressing.

Accordingly, my Department proposes to include an interim step to the project; a 'Stage 1.5' to map the changes and impacts to student support resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, and better inform expectations for Stage 2 as to what improvements may be required to improve the support for students. This stage of the review is expected to commence in the next few weeks.

Input from Further Education Sector will be vital, and this will include engagement with students, student support services managers and representatives from Student Bodies or Student Unions. As part of that engagement, the Department met with NUS-USI, which represents learners at FE colleges, in February 2020 to set out the background to the review and to seek their views on how best the voice of students could be taken into account. The Department met with representatives from NUS-USI again in July 2020 during the development of the Framework for the Safe Resumption of On-site Educational Provision and Related Activity (Framework Document), and shared a draft version of it with them. Their feedback, and that of a learners' survey about the return to on-site provision commissioned by the Department, provided useful insights which were taken into consideration in the final version of the document. The Framework Document will be reviewed periodically as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves to ensure that it is kept up to date and reflects the sector's needs, and the Department intends to continue its engagement with NUS-USI throughout this process. In terms of responses to Covid-19 in recent months, the Department has made several adaptations to student financial support arrangements, including payment of childcare retainer fees during lockdown, payment of Free School Meal allowances directly into the households of eligible students and working closely with colleges and the Education Authority to ensure that Covid-19-related transport restrictions are mitigated and managed. My Department will keep student support arrangements under review in response to the pandemic.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for an update on the evaluation of the Further and Higher Education Strategy; (ii) to detail her future plans regarding the strategy; (iii) whether she will integrate the Higher Education Strategy into the Skills Strategy; and (iv) how does she plan to engage students in the Skills Strategy.

(AQW 6666/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) for an update on the evaluation of the Further and Higher Education Strategy;
- (ii) to detail her future plans regarding the strategy;

There are no plans for an independent evaluation of the FE Means Success (FEMS) strategy.

Implementation of the FEMS strategy was taken forward through eight projects which were to be delivered jointly by the Department and the six Further Education colleges. In line with the recommendations of an Independent Review of the eight projects, the Project Board agreed in December 2019 that the remaining projects should be closed and that the small number of outstanding actions should be taken forward as part of the broader programme of work on transforming the Further Education (FE) sector.

There are two Higher Education Strategies, the 'Graduating to Success Strategy' and 'Access to Success Strategy', which both came to an end in March 2020. Final reporting and evaluation of projects within these strategies have been delayed due to Covid-19. An evaluation of the strategies is planned, when all projects have completed final closure reports.

- (iii) whether she will integrate the Higher Education Strategy into the Skills Strategy;

The new Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland will establish the key policy priorities for the next decade. It will encompass all aspects of policy and programmes which impact on skills development and delivery, including Higher and Further Education. Action plans for the implementation of the Strategy's recommendations will be developed, which will be taken forward by the relevant Divisions with responsibility for these areas.

The FE colleges and higher education institutions will be key delivery agents in ensuring that the objectives in the new Skills Strategy are delivered.

- (iv) how does she plan to engage students in the Skills Strategy. The Department will carry out a public consultation on the draft Skills Strategy early in 2021, which will enable anyone to provide comments on the proposals. We will be inviting representative bodies for industry, academia and so on to provide input and this will include student representatives.

The Department had originally planned to hold meetings with groups of stakeholders, including students, to encourage engagement with the development of the Strategy, but with the advent of the pandemic, these plans have been put on hold. This will be kept under review.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for the Economy what engagement she has had with the UK Government with regards to the Internal Market Bill.

(AQW 6701/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have had frequent discussions with UK Government Ministers, including the Business Secretary and Northern Ireland Secretary, in the run up to the publication of the UK Internal Market Bill, particularly around the initial proposals contained within the White Paper.

I am now considering the detail of the Bill and I, alongside Executive colleagues, will be seeking further engagement with UK Government Ministers on its contents in the coming weeks.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for the Economy how she is helping airports to survive during the COVID-19 pandemic.
(AQW 6783/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am not responsible for the funding of airports, that work is led by the Department of Finance and the Department for Infrastructure. My responsibility is with maintaining and enhancing Northern Ireland's air connectivity, both domestically and internationally. In doing so, I fully recognise that civil aviation is a reserved matter for the UK Department for Transport (DfT).

Hence, I had a key role, alongside my Executive colleagues from Finance and Infrastructure, in securing the £5.7m support package, which was funded jointly by DfT and the Executive, for Belfast City Airport and the City of Derry Airport and those airlines still operating essential flights, to safeguard Northern Ireland's air connectivity with GB during the COVID-19 crisis period.

I have written to the UK Government requesting a deferral of Air Passenger Duty (APD), as part of a national solution to COVID-19.

I have established and lead a Tourism Recovery Steering Group in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes a sub-group tasked with identifying air and sea connectivity issues and developing policy solutions. As a direct result, I have bid for £2m to fund co-operative marketing, to be delivered by Tourism Ireland by March 2021, as part of the Executive's 2020-21 COVID-19 response.

My officials are also engaged with DfT on their Regional Air Connectivity Review, and their response to COVID-19 in respect of aviation.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to provide a breakdown of the number of university students who completed unpaid work placements for the last two academic years.
(AQW 6790/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department does not collect or hold this information.

You may wish to contact the universities directly for the information requested.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy what analysis her Department has carried out on the potential increase in costs for consumers in Northern Ireland post-Brexit.
(AQW 6830/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The outcome of EU Exit negotiations alongside the operational practicalities of the Northern Ireland Protocol and the outworking of commitments around unfettered access to the Great Britain market will greatly influence the ultimate economic outcome for Northern Ireland. However, it is accepted that the outcomes will likely have a significant impact for businesses and consumers in Northern Ireland in the future.

My Department's research has previously identified consumer reliance on products sourced from, or through, Great Britain and there are concerns that, in the shorter term, Northern Ireland consumers will experience some price fluctuations as supply chains, retailers and producers adjust to the new arrangements and costs associated with implementing the Northern Ireland Protocol.

The Consumer Council for Northern Ireland (CCNI), one of my Department's Non-Departmental Public Bodies, provides advice and support for Northern Ireland consumers and businesses. CCNI is currently developing a high level Northern Ireland price inflation tracker, which will monitor a 'basket' of like-for-like products across Northern Ireland and Great Britain and this will be a useful barometer in assessing consumer cost impacts post EU Exit.

I can assure you that my Department will closely monitor developments in relation to the outcome of EU Exit negotiations and will continue to support businesses and the interests of consumers in Northern Ireland.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has had any further discussions with airline companies to take over any of the airline routes lost due to the collapse of Flybe.
(AQW 6900/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: George Best Belfast City Airport had previously advised that negotiations with a number of carriers to take up air routes formerly operated by Flybe were underway. Clearly, the decision to establish an air route is a commercial decision made by an air carrier. I am delighted that the Chief Executive of the airport has been able to reach agreement with a number of airlines that have commenced operations on routes which were previously operated by Flybe.

Most recently, in July 2020, a new Aer Lingus Regional base was announced at Belfast City Airport, with the launch of six routes operated by Stobart Air. Flights from Belfast City to Edinburgh commenced on 27 August, services to Exeter commenced on 28 August and flights to Manchester and Birmingham started on 14 September. Flights to East Midlands and

Leeds Bradford will commence from 1 October 2020. In addition to routes operated by Loganair and Eastern Airways, this means that 12 of the 14 routes previously operated by Flybe have been reinstated.

I fully recognise that air connectivity is essential to rebuilding Northern Ireland's economy and my Department is always willing to consider any requests for support from airports/airlines that deliver value for money and are compliant with EU State Aid regulations.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has had any discussions with Ards and North Down Borough Council to purchase the Flagship Centre, Bangor.

(AQW 6902/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While officials in my Department are aware of the issues surrounding the Flagship Centre in Bangor, there have been no discussions with Ards and North Down Borough Council with regard to purchasing the property.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, following planning approval being granted for the North South Electricity Interconnector, to detail the benefits of a more interconnected Single Electricity Market for (i) the Northern Ireland consumer; and (ii) reducing the carbon footprint of energy use and generation in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6916/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The System Operator for Northern Ireland (SONI) has provided the background information for this answer.

- (i) The North South Interconnector will be a critical piece of electricity infrastructure that will benefit the Northern Ireland consumer by unlocking a green economic recovery as we emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic. It will ensure that local businesses have the power they need to expand and attract foreign investment and, once completed, will facilitate significant new job growth within the emerging green collar sector by supporting the growth of renewables. Based on recent analysis carried out by SONI it is expected to create initial savings to consumers of £20m per year. It is further estimated that there will be savings of up to £40m per year by 2030 as it removes constraints, or bottlenecks, on the grid. A more connected grid will mean a more efficient wholesale market resulting in downward pressure on prices, which is good news for consumers and businesses in both jurisdictions.
- (ii) The North South Interconnector is expected to facilitate the connection of an additional 900MW of renewable generation; enough to power 600,000 homes. It will reduce reliance on imported fossil fuels and maximise the use of Northern Ireland's abundant, clean, natural resources, such as wind and solar energy. It will help Northern Ireland to meet the expected increase in electricity demand, resulting from the uptake of electric vehicles and heat from electricity, by relieving the current constraints on the island's electricity system. It will be the backbone of the transmission system and will be critical to Northern Ireland's ability to deliver its contribution to the UK commitment to Net Zero Carbon by 2050.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether she has met with the newly formed Cross Border Workers' Coalition; and (ii) if not, whether she will commit to meeting them to discuss the problems faced by workers who live in one jurisdiction and are employed in the other.

(AQW 6989/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have not yet met with the newly formed Cross Border Workers Coalition, nor have I received a request to do so. I understand that they are particularly interested in issues relating to taxation, responsibility for which would fall to the Finance Minister, who I understand they have already met with.

I meet with a range of stakeholders and business representatives to discuss issues facing the wider economy and if a meeting request is made then it will be considered alongside existing diary priorities.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for the Economy whether the Department has commissioned any research to assess any aspect for the potential of fracking to take place in Co Fermanagh.

(AQW 7012/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department for the Economy has not commissioned any specific research into any aspect of the potential for high volume hydraulic fracturing to take place in Co Fermanagh.

The Department, however, is seeking to commission independent research into the economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and production to ensure that there is sufficient knowledge of these issues and the interactions between them, to inform the formulation of evidence-based future petroleum licensing policy options.

The planned research will look at the impacts of both conventional and unconventional petroleum exploration and development, including the impacts of techniques such as hydraulic fracturing, across the whole of Northern Ireland.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for the Economy whether there are any current active licenses for the exploration of fracking in Co Fermanagh.

(AQW 7013/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There are no active Petroleum Licences anywhere in Northern Ireland.

A Petroleum Licence is required before any oil or gas exploration can take place, therefore, I can further confirm that no oil or gas exploration by any means, including high volume hydraulic fracturing, is taking place in Northern Ireland at this time.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for the Economy whether Tamboran Resources Limited has made any application for activities in relation to the potential of fracking in Co Fermanagh.

(AQW 7014/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On 19 September 2016, the Department received an application for a Petroleum Licence (PLA2/16), covering an area south and east of Lough Erne, in Co Fermanagh, from Tamboran Resources (UK) Limited (TRUK). The accompanying Work Programme proposed the use of High Volume Hydraulic Fracturing (HVHF or “fracking”) to explore for and, potentially, extract gas from the shale.

In March 2020, following the Department’s 2019 public consultation on PLA2/16 application, TRUK formally submitted a request to revise their Work Programme. The revised Work Programme no longer proposes the use of hydraulic fracturing; proposing instead to use other techniques to target the shale gas.

Given the significant change to the Work Programme, the Department is in the process of scrutinising the revised proposal and is awaiting further information from TRUK, before identifying the next steps in the assessment of PLA2/16.

It should be noted, however, that the use of hydraulic fracturing is only one of a number of significant issues identified during the 2019 consultation. I remain committed to ensuring that all issues are fully addressed before I make any recommendation to the NI Executive on any final decision on the award, or otherwise, of PLA2/16.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for the Economy to detail what discussions she has had with the universities in relation to recent breaches of COVID-19 regulations in the Holylands area, Belfast.

(AQW 7106/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The universities have provided me and my officials with ongoing information regarding the advice and guidance that they have provided to students on how they should conduct themselves during the pandemic, both on and off campus.

Following a recent meeting convened by the Executive Office in light of behaviour in the Holylands, both Queen’s University and Ulster University have now advised of new approaches to how they will deal with any students in breach of the Covid-19 Regulations. Any students who have been issued with a PSNI ticket for breach of the Regulations will face an immediate 2-week suspension from the university, and will be instructed to stay at home and self-isolate. They will not have access to any university facilities. If they subsequently receive a further PSNI ticket, then they will be immediately expelled.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy, without an assessment of the issues raised in the public consultation, whether she can confirm (i) there are no legal grounds for her Department to approve petroleum licence applications (a) PLA1/16; and (b) PLA2/16; and (ii) that, in effect, the licencing application process is paused until the research has been completed.

(AQW 7150/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department is the legal licensing authority for Petroleum Licensing in Northern Ireland and, under powers conferred by the Petroleum (Production) Act (Northern Ireland) 1964, may grant Petroleum Licences “to explore for, bore for and get” petroleum in Northern Ireland. Regulations set out the arrangements for determining applications, permissible terms and conditions for granting a Petroleum Licence and the Model Clauses which may be incorporated in a Petroleum Licence.

In 2019, in fulfilment of obligations in regards to the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on access to information, public participation in decision making and access to justice in environmental matters, the Department consulted on PLA1/16 and PLA2/16. The consultation process highlighted a number of significant issues that require further consideration and assessment.

The research being commissioned by my Department into the impacts of petroleum exploration and development has been designed to help inform future petroleum licensing policy in Northern Ireland including any decision to be made on whether or not to grant the two current petroleum licence applications, PLA1/16 and PLA2/16.

I can confirm that I do not intend to proceed with the decisions on the two applications until I am more fully informed by the outcome of the research; the question of whether or not there are legal grounds to take the decision before that is, therefore, not material.

Additionally, due to the crosscutting and controversial nature of petroleum licensing, I intend to take the recommendations for future petroleum licensing policy and the decisions on the award or not of the two licences to the NI Executive.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy to detail how fracking can achieve Northern Ireland’s carbon reduction targets.

(AQW 7154/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The process of extracting gas from shale via high volume hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”) is known to contribute to carbon emissions via fugitive emission of methane and through the burning of natural gas which produces carbon dioxide. Northern Ireland is currently entirely reliant on imported natural gas.

Although significant progress has been made to decarbonise the electricity sector in Northern Ireland, both the heat and the transport sectors still rely heavily on fossil fuels and in some instances natural gas (derived from imported or indigenous sources) could play a part in reducing carbon emissions.

Carbon reduction targets are enshrined in UK law by the Climate Change Act 2008 and it is Government policy to reduce the burning of fossil fuels such as natural gas and to progressively replace their use in the energy sector by the use of renewable or low carbon energy resources. The Department is producing a new energy strategy which will set out the pathway towards a green economy and net zero. Different energy sources and the roles that they will play will be considered as part of this strategy.

There are currently no Petroleum Licences in place in Northern Ireland that would allow the use of 'fracking'. My Department is currently considering one petroleum licence application, which at the outset proposed the use of this technique, but has been modified to replace 'fracking' with more conventional drilling techniques. This amendment is currently being scrutinised by my officials.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on Strabane Business Park.
(AQW 7207/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The development of Strabane Business Park by Invest NI was a long-term investment in the economic infrastructure of West Tyrone.

To date two businesses have chosen the Park as the location to bring forward their new investment projects. Discussions with other interested parties are continuing and I am hopeful that these will lead to further investment for Strabane in the near future.

Invest NI will continue to market Strabane Business Park to businesses, both indigenous and external to Northern Ireland as an attractive investment location.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy (i) when the altered work programme for PLA2/16 will be published; (ii) whether she will publish details of when her Department were notified of changes to the work programme; and (iii) when the work programme was re-finalised.

(AQW 7238/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) My officials are currently scrutinising the proposed change to the Work Programme for PLA2/16 by the applicant. If the Department accepts the change and agrees a revised Work Programme, it will be published on the Department's website.
- (ii) My officials were first notified of the proposed change on 14 February 2020.
- (iii) The proposed change to the Work Programme for PLA2/16 is still being scrutinised by my officials.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will intervene to support asylum seeker Arezki Yachir obtaining a student loan or other finance, to enable him to take up his place at Queen's University Belfast to study criminology.
(AQW 7245/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Education Authority are responsible for the assessment of applications for Higher Education student support, and for advising students of their eligibility. All applications are assessed in line with the Education (Student Support) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009 (as amended). These regulations allow for a person who has an appeal pending (within the meaning of section 104 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002) to be considered as eligible for support under Paragraph 5 (Persons with Leave to Enter and Remain) of Part 2 of Schedule 2 of the Regulations.

It is my Department's understanding that Mr Yachir is such a person, however it is a matter for the Education Authority as to what evidence is required to establish the necessary facts in this regard and with respect to any other relevant eligibility requirements.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has received any explicit or implicit recommendation from her Department on whether or not to grant any of the two current Petroleum Licence Applications PLA1/16 and PLA2/16.
(AQW 7265/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have not received any recommendation, either explicit or otherwise, from my Department on whether or not I should grant the two Petroleum Licence applications PLA1/16 and PLA2/16.

I can assure you that my officials are intent on using the responses to the consultations on the two petroleum licence applications, as well as the findings of the planned independent research into the impacts of petroleum licensing to develop an evidence base that will inform a recommendation to my Executive colleagues and I on future petroleum licensing policy for Northern Ireland which will underpin any final decisions on PLA1/16 and PLA2/16.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission to detail the annual cost of storing Assembly artefacts and artwork off-site. (AQW 6766/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The annual cost of storing Assembly furniture, artefacts and artwork off-site along with associated transportation costs (where applicable) for the last three financial years are as follows:

Year	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Cost	£11,597.72	£13,748.34	£12,881.72

Due to the area required in the storage facility, a significant portion of these costs relates to the storage of furniture. It should be noted that the figures in 2018/19 included costs associated with the retrieval and temporary display of some of the artefacts.

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission when artefacts held by the Assembly were last valued. (AQW 6768/17-22)

Mr K Buchanan (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission's assets are valued with sufficient frequency so that their value, as recorded in the Commission's Annual Report and Accounts, remains current. The Commission has appointed an expert valuer who is affiliated with the Sotheby's auction house.

The expert has advised that valuing such assets once a mandate (that is, once every 5 years) is sufficient frequency to ensure the Commission meets its financial reporting requirements and that the valuations are accurate and current.

Each year as part of the year-end accounting processes, the expert valuer is consulted regarding prevailing market conditions and if these have changed significantly, an interim valuation is undertaken.

Therefore, the Commission undertakes a full valuation of the artefacts once a mandate, with the last valuation having been completed on 24 January 2017. The next valuation will take place early in 2022.

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission whether it will place Assembly artefacts and artwork currently in storage on public display to mark the centenary of the formation of Northern Ireland. (AQW 6769/17-22)

Mr O'Dowd (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly Commission agreed an approach in 2012 in relation to how anniversaries within the decade of centenaries would be officially marked within Parliament Buildings, including those that fall within 2021. This approach established a comprehensive set of agreed principles including that all events will be inclusive, of a sensitive tone and respectful of our shared history and differing views on it.

In October 2018, the Commission agreed the anniversaries which would be marked in this mandate. These include both the centenaries of the creation of Northern Ireland/ partition and the first sitting of the Northern Ireland Parliament in 2021. In line with the agreed approach, the Commission is required to decide by consensus by early next year the nature of the events it will organise to mark these centenaries. The Commission will therefore commence discussions and have the opportunity to consider a range of options in the time ahead and will do so in the context of the events which have already been held.

At its meeting in February 2019, the Commission agreed that it would return to consider the display of artefacts at a future meeting and that officials should consider options to address the balance of artefacts to be displayed to reflect the diversity of the Assembly, including approaching other institutions regarding the possible loan of artefacts, in order to balance the artefacts displayed.

This work was paused to prioritise the resumption of Assembly business in January and then the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is expected that the Commission will return to it by the start of next year.

Revised Written Answers

This section contains the revised written answers to questions tabled by Members. The content of the responses is as received at the time from the relevant Minister or representative of the Assembly Commission, and it has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process or changed.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Revised Written Answers to Questions

14 August 2020

Department of Health

In Bound Volume 129, page WA 192, replace the answer given for AQW 5031/17-22 with:

Mr Carroll asked the the Minister of Health to outline the reasons for lifting capacity restrictions for nurseries but not for childminders.

(AQW 5031/17-22)

Mr Swann: Although there will be no operating restrictions in terms of minimum or maximum numbers of children daycare and school-age childcare settings can provide childcare to from 15 June, a number of measures have been put in place to make sure, as far as possible, that safety is maintained in infection control terms, including the implementation of play pods in settings. Settings have been asked to organise children and staff in small groups (12 children maximum, although smaller pods are advised where possible, particularly in connection with younger children). Mixing of play pods within settings is not permitted at this stage.

It is difficult to make a direct comparison between a childminder's household and a daycare setting. They are different spaces, with different dimensions, with different numbers of staff. The aim is to increase capacity gradually within childminding. This will be kept under review and greater easing could be applied more quickly if medical and scientific evidence indicates that it can.

Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 18 August 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

Mr John Hume

The Speaker acknowledged the passing of the late John Hume. He informed Members that he had written to Pat Hume and her family to express the condolences of the Assembly, and that his office was liaising with the SDLP directly on the timing of formal tributes to John Dallat and John Hume when business resumes in September.

3. Private Members' Business

3.1 Motion: AS and A Level Grading Crisis

Proposed:

That this Assembly is deeply concerned that the modelling used to calculate grades for AS and A levels has awarded incorrect results for students across Northern Ireland; and calls on the Minister of Education to award students the highest of their AS, teacher-predicted or CCEA grades for A levels, AS levels and GCSEs due to exceptional Covid-19 circumstances.

Mr Daniel McCrossan

Mr Chris Lyttle

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Karen Mullan

Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'Northern Ireland' and insert:

“; welcomes the Minister of Education's decision to reverse the unfair model used for awarding grades to ensure students now receive the higher of their teacher-predicted or CCEA grades for A levels, AS levels and GCSEs due to exceptional Covid-19 circumstances; recognises the immense stress, anxiety and disruption this has caused many students; further recognises the resultant implications for local colleges and universities; and calls on the Minister to work urgently with Executive colleagues to provide clarity and guidance to students and educational institutions.”

Mr Daniel McCrossan

Mr Justin McNulty

Debate ensued

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

4. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 2.34pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

18 August 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 29 July 2020 to 18 August 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

Parole Commissioners for Northern Ireland Annual Report for 2019/20 (Department of Justice)

HSC South Eastern Health and Social Care (SEHSCT) Charitable Trust Fund Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Health)

HSC Northern Health and Social Care (NHSCT) Charitable Trust Fund Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Health)

Report on Workforce Planning for Nurses and Midwives (Northern Ireland Audit Office)

Northern Ireland Medical and Dental Training Agency (NIMDTA) Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Health)

Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCCT) Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Health)

Northern Ireland Ambulance Service Health and Social Care Trust Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Health)

HSC South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 Amendment (Department of Health)

HSC Southern Health and Social Care Trust Charitable Trust Fund Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Health)

Northern Ireland Social Care Council Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Northern Ireland Audit Office)

Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) Retention and Disposal Schedule (Public Records Office Northern Ireland)

Patient Client Council (PCC) Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Health)

Northern Ireland Water Group Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department for Infrastructure)

HSC Western Health and Social Care (WHSCCT) Charitable Trust Fund Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Health)

Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) Charitable Trust Fund Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Health)

Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Health)

Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service (NIBTS) Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Health)

Northern Ireland Blood Transfusion Service Charitable Trust Fund Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Health)

National Crime Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Justice)

5. Assembly Reports

Report on the Legislative Consent Memorandum on the Immigration and Social Security Co-Ordination Bill (EU Withdrawal) Bill (NIA 35/17-22) (Committee for Communities)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/117 The Northern Ireland Screen Commission (Funding) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2020/152 The Edible Crabs (Conservation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/153 The Edible Crabs (Undersized) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/160 The Rates (Automatic Telling Machines) (Designation of Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)

SR 2020/161 The Valuation (Telecommunications, Natural Gas and Water) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)

SR 2020/162 The Pension Protection Fund (Moratorium and Arrangements for Companies in Financial Difficulty) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/163 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No.5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/164 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/167 The Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) (No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR2020/168 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/170 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/177 The Ormeau Road, Belfast (Footway) (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/178 The Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 (Coronavirus, Calculation of a Week's Pay) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)

SR 2020/179 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel and Public Health Advice for Persons Travelling to Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/180 The A29 New Road and B30 Newry Road, Silverbridge (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/181 The Whitla Street, Belfast (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/182 The Railway Avenue, Newry (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/183 The Back Street at Duncairn Gardens Belfast (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/184 The Footpath to the rear of Albert Street, Quadrant Place and Cullingtree Road, Belfast (Abandonment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

For Information Only

SR 2020/156 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Ballyclare) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/157 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Kilkeel) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/158 The Taxis (Magherafelt) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/159 The Parking Places on Roads and Waiting Restrictions (Magherafelt) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/169 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Commencement) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/171 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Newtownards) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/172 The Parking Places, Loading Bay and Waiting Restrictions (Portstewart) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/173 The Roads (Speed Limit) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/174 The Parking and Waiting Restrictions (Newtownabbey) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/175 The Parking Places on Roads and Waiting Restrictions (Newry) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/176 The Road Races (Cookstown 100) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation on the Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)

9. Departmental Publications

Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties Notice (No.10) 2020 (Department of Education)

The Civil Service Injury Benefits Scheme (Amendment) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 18 August 2020

2017-2022 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)	24/02/20	25/02/20	/	/	02/03/20	03/03/20	09/03/20	26/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	15/10/20					
Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA 5/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/	01/06/20	02/06/20	02/06/20	17/06/20
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA 6/17-22)	26/05/20	01/06/20	/	/	16/06/20	23/06/20	30/06/20	
Pension Schemes Bill (NIA 7/17-22)	23/06/20	07/07/20						
Executive Committee (Functions) Bill (NIA 8/17-22)	06/07/20	06/07/20	/	/	21/07/20	27/07/20	28/07/20	

2017-2022 Mandate**Non-Executive Bills**

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17- 22)	03/02/20	16/03/20	02/12/20					

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 18 August 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 18 August 2020:

Andy Allen	Naomi Long
Martina Anderson	Gordon Lyons
Caoimhe Archibald	Séan Lynch
Clare Bailey	Chris Lyttle
John Blair	Nichola Mallon
Cathal Boylan	Declan McAleer
Sinéad Bradley	Fra McCann
Paula Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Pam Cameron	Patsy McGlone
Pat Catney	Colin McGrath
Stewart Dickson	Philip McGuigan
Linda Dillon	Maolíosa McHugh
Diane Dodds	Sinead McLaughlin
Jemma Dolan	Justin McNulty
Gordon Dunne	Andrew Muir
Mark Durkan	Karen Mullan
Sinéad Ennis	Conor Murphy
Arlene Foster	Robin Newton
Órlaithí Flynn	Carál Ní Chuilín
Colm Gildernew	Michelle O'Neill
Paul Givan	Edwin Poots
Deirdre Hargey	George Robinson
Harry Harvey	Emma Rogan
Cara Hunter	Pat Sheehan
William Irwin	Emma Sheerin
Declan Kearney	Christopher Stalford
Catherine Kelly	John Stewart
Dolores Kelly	Robin Swann
Gerry Kelly	Peter Weir
Liz Kimmins	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 7 September 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

Royal Assent

The Speaker advised Members that Royal Assent had been signified on 25 August 2020 to The Executive Committee (Functions) Act, and that Royal Assent had been signified on 28 August 2020 to The Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020.

Assembly Business

The Speaker recorded formally his gratitude to the Principal Deputy Speaker, Deputy Speaker Beggs, and the Temporary Speakers for conducting Assembly Business during his period of shielding.

Accelerated Passage for Executive Bills

The Speaker advised Members that, after discussion with the First Minister and deputy First Minister, he had made a new ruling that if Ministers seek to shorten the passage of a Bill through the Assembly, separate to the accelerated passage procedure for Committee consideration, they are required to provide a statement when submitting the Bill for introduction.

Ad-Hoc Committee on COVID-19 Response

The Speaker informed Members that, as the Assembly intends to resume two sittings each week, it should provide sufficient opportunity for Ministers to make statements and, therefore, there would be less need for sessions of the Ad Hoc Committee on COVID-19 response. He also indicated that the Ad Hoc Committee will continue to be available in emergency circumstances.

Correspondence

The Speaker informed the Assembly that he had written to all Members setting out the issues he had raised with the Executive, including the courtesies and conventions expected from Ministers towards the Assembly, and their being available on sitting days and bringing major announcements to the Chamber to take questions from Members as appropriate.

3. Matter of the Day

Implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland

Mr Matthew O'Toole, under Standing Order 24, made a statement on the Implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

4. Assembly Business

4.1 Motion: Appointment of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards

Proposed:

That this Assembly, in accordance with Section 19(1) of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, appoints Dr Melissa McCullough as the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards.

*Mr John Blair
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr John O'Dowd*

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** without division.

5. Private Members' Business

5.1 Motion: Custodial Sentences for Attacks Against Emergency Workers

Proposed:

That this Assembly supports tougher custodial sentences for those convicted of attacks against emergency workers in Northern Ireland, including police officers, prison officers, firefighters, search and rescue workers and frontline health care staff; welcomes the campaign led by the courageous widow of PC Andrew Harper in favour of whole life sentences, which reflects widespread public frustration with the current outcomes in such cases; acknowledges the recent UK Government commitment to increase penalties applicable under the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018; notes that in the Republic of Ireland there exists a set tariff of forty years for the murder of a police officer, whilst, in Northern Ireland, the starting tariff in equivalent circumstances is between fifteen and sixteen years; and calls on the Minister of Justice to bring forward, as a matter of urgency, a revised sentencing framework which better reflects the seriousness of these crimes.

*Mr Paul Givan
Mr Mervyn Storey*

Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'Assembly' and insert:

'recognises the seriousness of attacks against emergency workers in Northern Ireland, including police officers, prison officers, firefighters, search and rescue workers and frontline health care staff; further recognises the important contributions by victims, campaigners and respondents to the Sentencing Review Consultation which closed in February of this year; and calls on the Minister of Justice to bring forward proposals for a revised sentencing framework after consideration both of the outcome of that important consultation and sentences available for equivalent offences in other jurisdictions in these islands.'

*Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr John Blair*

Debate ensued

The debate stood suspended for Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 1.48pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

6. Question Time

6.1 Infrastructure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon.

6.2 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long.

7. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

7.1 COVID-19 at Craigavon Area Hospital

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr John O'Dowd.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

8. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

8.1 Motion: Custodial Sentences for Attacks Against Emergency Workers (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

8.2 Motion: Future Support for Businesses and Workers during COVID-19

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the significant impact that the COVID-19 crisis has had on the public; notes that Department for the Economy projections show more than 100,000 people could be unemployed by the end of 2020; acknowledges that COVID-19 has continued to spread and may result in further restrictions on workers and businesses; expresses deep concern at the political decision to end the furlough scheme in October; and calls on the British Government to extend the furlough scheme to provide future support to businesses and workers during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic as a critical lever to economic recovery.

Mr Colin McGrath

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Ms Sinead McLaughlin

Ms Nichola Mallon

Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after second 'workers' and insert:

' and to amend the scheme deadlines to allow for new entries to the scheme including where businesses are forced to close as a result of clusters or further lockdowns.'

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Mr John O'Dowd

Mr Maoliosa McHugh

Debate ensued

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

9. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.10pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

07 September 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 19 August 2020 to 7 September 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

The Executive Committee (Functions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020

The Housing (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

HSC Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSC) Charitable Trust Fund Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Health)

Charity Commission Northern Ireland (CCNI) Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department for Communities)

Overview of the Northern Ireland Executive's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic (Northern Ireland Audit Office)

Office of the Discretionary Support Commissioner Annual Report 2019/20 (Department for Communities)

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees First Report of Session 2020 - 2021 (NIA 40/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/185 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/186 The Statutory Sick Pay (General) (Coronavirus Amendment) (No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/187 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/188 The Motor Vehicles (Driving Licences) (Amendment) (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/189 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/190 The Taxi Licensing (Amendment No. 2) (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/191 The Agricultural Commodities (Coronavirus) (Income Support) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation on Public Services Pensions: Changes to the Transitional Arrangements of the 2015 Scheme (Department of Finance)

Transposition of the EU Electricity (Recast) Directive 2019 – Consultation (Department for Economy)

9. Departmental Publications

Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.10) Cancellation Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Education)

Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Disapplication of Education Duties (No.11) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Education)

Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.12) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Education)

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 7 September 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Monday 7 September 2020:

Martina Anderson	Liz Kimmins
Caoimhe Archibald	Naomi Long
Kellie Armstrong	Gordon Lyons
Clare Bailey	Séan Lynch
Roy Beggs *	Chris Lyttle
Cathal Boylan	Nichola Mallon
Sinéad Bradley	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradley	Fra McCann
Pam Cameron	Daniel McCrossan
Pat Catney	Patsy McGlone
Stewart Dickson	Colin McGrath
Linda Dillon	Philip McGuigan
Diane Dodds	Maolíosa McHugh
Jemma Dolan	Sinead McLaughlin
Gordon Dunne	Justin McNulty
Mark Durkan	Andrew Muir
Sinéad Ennis	Karen Mullan
Arlene Foster	Conor Murphy
Órlaithí Flynn	Robin Newton
Colm Gildernew	Carál Ní Chuilín
Paul Givan	Michelle O'Neill
Deirdre Hargey	Edwin Poots
Harry Harvey	George Robinson
David Hilditch	Emma Rogan
Cara Hunter	Pat Sheehan
William Irwin	Emma Sheerin
Declan Kearney	Christopher Stalford
Catherine Kelly	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir
Gerry Kelly	

*Roy Beggs indicated that his proxy was in place up until 3pm on 7 September 2020.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 8 September 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Private Members' Business

2.1 Motion: Local Economy and Post-Brexit Preparedness

Proposed:

That this Assembly notes with concern recent comments from the Northern Ireland Business Brexit Working Group regarding the lack of technical and operational details available to local businesses concerning the changes that will come into force post-Brexit; recognises the very complex and unique characteristics of the local economy; is concerned by the precariousness of many of our small and medium enterprises at this time; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to establish urgently educational and training opportunities to enhance the capacity of local businesses to prepare for post-transition trading arrangements.

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Mr Declan McAleer

Ms Martina Anderson

Ms Liz Kimmins

Amendment

Proposed:

At end insert:

'and, along with her Executive colleagues, to bring forward urgently details of legislation this Assembly will be required to pass before the end of the transition period, in order to give businesses certainty.'

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Mr Colin McGrath

Mr Mark Durkan

Ms Cara Hunter

Debate ensued

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the chair.

2.2 Motion: Public Inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital

Proposed:

That this Assembly calls on the Minister of Health to establish a public inquiry, under the terms of the Inquiries Act 2005, into Muckamore Abbey Hospital in support of the families of residents who have campaigned for justice; and, in the interim, further calls on the Minister of Health to progress urgently the recommendations of the recent review of leadership and governance at Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

Ms Paula Bradshaw

Mr John Blair

Amendment

Proposed:

Insert after 'Urgently':

'a bespoke plan to stabilise and support the current delivery of services, as well as implementing'

Mr Colm Gildernew

Mr Pat Sheehan

Ms Órlaithi Flynn

Debate ensued

The sitting was suspended at 12.58pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Edwin Poots.

3.2 Communities

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Communities, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín.

3.3 Assembly Commission

Questions were put to, and answered by, Members of the Assembly Commission.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

4. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

4.1 Motion: Public Inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

5. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

Ms Emma Rogan spoke to her topic regarding Recurring Flooding in the Newcastle Area.

The Assembly adjourned at 5.22pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

8 September 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 8 September 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
NILGOSC Annual Report and Accounts 2019/20 (Department for Communities)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
SR 2020/192 The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 8 September 2020

2017-2022 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)	24/02/20	25/02/20	/	/	02/03/20	03/03/20	09/03/20	26/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	15/10/20					
Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA 5/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/	01/06/20	02/06/20	02/06/20	17/06/20
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA 6/17-22)	26/05/20	01/06/20	/	/	16/06/20	23/06/20	30/06/20	28/08/20
Pension Schemes Bill (NIA 7/17-22)	23/06/20	07/07/20						
Executive Committee (Functions) Bill (NIA 8/17-22)	06/07/20	06/07/20	/	/	21/07/20	27/07/20	28/07/20	25/08/20

2017-2022 Mandate**Non-Executive Bills**

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17- 22)	03/02/20	16/03/20	02/12/20					

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 8 September 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 8 September 2020:

Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Kellie Armstrong	Séan Lynch
Cathal Boylan	Chris Lyttle
Sinéad Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradley	Declan McAleer
Pam Cameron	Fra McCann
Pat Catney	Daniel McCrossan
Stewart Dickson	Patsy McGlone
Linda Dillon	Colin McGrath
Diane Dodds	Philip McGuigan
Jemma Dolan	Maolíosa McHugh
Gordon Dunne	Sinead McLaughlin
Mark Durkan	Justin McNulty
Sinéad Ennis	Andrew Muir
Arlene Foster	Karen Mullan
Órlaithí Flynn	Conor Murphy
Colm Gildernew	Robin Newton
Paul Givan	Carál Ní Chuilín
Deirdre Hargey	Michelle O'Neill
Harry Harvey	Edwin Poots
David Hilditch	George Robinson
Cara Hunter	Emma Rogan
William Irwin	Pat Sheehan
Declan Kearney	Emma Sheerin
Catherine Kelly	Christopher Stalford
Dolores Kelly	Robin Swann
Gerry Kelly	Peter Weir
Liz Kimmins	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 14 September 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Assembly Business

2.1 **Motion: The draft Flags (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) (No 2) Regulations 2020**

Proposed:

That this Assembly takes note of the proposed changes to the Flags Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 as set out in the draft Flags (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) (No 2) Regulations 2020.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** without division.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

3. Private Members' Business

3.1 **Motion: Living Over the Shops Scheme**

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the role that repurposed and attractive residential space above retail premises can play in promoting the success of town centres across Northern Ireland; notes that making high streets high-quality locations to live as well as work can aid the economic recovery from COVID-19; and calls on the Minister for Communities to consider establishing a living over the shops grant scheme to assist landlords to convert space above retail premises into residential accommodation.

Mr Jonathan Buckley

Ms Paula Bradley

Amendment**Proposed:**

Leave out all after 'repurposed' and insert:

'and accessible space above commercial properties could potentially play in revitalising town and city centres by providing additional affordable, accessible and high quality accommodation; further recognises this potential to increase the supply of homes to meet demand; acknowledges that increasing this type of housing in high streets can help assist in the social and economic recovery from COVID-19; and calls on the Minister for Communities and her Executive colleagues to explore this option to reduce housing demand based on objective need.'

Ms Sinéad Ennis

Mr Fra McCann

Ms Karen Mullan

Mr Cathal Boylan

Debate ensued

The debate stood suspended for Question Time.

The Speaker took the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 The Executive Office

Questions were put to, and answered by, the First Minister, the Rt Hon Arlene Foster.

4.2 Economy

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds.

5. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

5.1 COVID-19: Local Restrictions

The First Minister, the Rt Hon Arlene Foster, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Colin McGrath.

5.2 COVID-19: Testing

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Colm Gildernew.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

6. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

6.1 Motion: Living Over the Shops Scheme (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Amendment was **negatived** (Division).

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** without division.

7. Assembly Business

7.1 Motion: Extension of Sitting on Monday 25 January 2021 under Standing Order 10(3A)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 14 September 2020 be extended to no later than 8.00pm.

*Mr Keith Buchanan
Mr John O'Dowd
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Robbie Butler
Ms Kellie Armstrong
Ms Clare Bailey*

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

8. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

8.2 Motion: Race Equality

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises that the Racial Equality Strategy 2015 - 2025 was not fully implemented and is now significantly outdated; acknowledges the commitment contained in New Decade, New Approach to the publication of a new and updated racial equality strategy within 100 days of the restoration of the Assembly; further recognises the positive contribution made to society by those from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds; deplores the discrimination Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities face regularly; condemns racism in all its forms; commits to act urgently on the forthcoming report on the review of hate crime legislation; calls for the promotion of an anti-racism ethos in our schools; and further calls on the Executive to formulate and implement urgently a meaningful racial equality strategy.

*Ms Emma Sheerin
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Colm Gildernew
Ms Linda Dillon*

Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after second "further calls" and insert:

'on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to set up a working group with members of the Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities to co-design and co-produce an updated racial equality strategy and to publish a timetable for the implementation of the strategy.'

*Ms Paula Bradshaw
Ms Kellie Armstrong*

Debate ensued

The Question being put, the Amendment was **made**.

The Question being put, the motion, as amended, was **carried** without division.

9. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.38pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

14 September 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

14 September 2020

Division

Living Over the Shops Scheme - Amendment

Proposed:

Leave out all after 'repurposed' and insert:

'and accessible space above commercial properties could potentially play in revitalising town and city centres by providing additional affordable, accessible and high quality accommodation; further recognises this potential to increase the supply of homes to meet demand; acknowledges that increasing this type of housing in high streets can help assist in the social and economic recovery from COVID-19; and calls on the Minister for Communities and her Executive colleagues to explore this option to reduce housing demand based on objective need.'

*Ms Sinéad Ennis
Mr Fra McCann
Ms Karen Mullan
Mr Cathal Boylan*

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 40

Noes: 41

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Bailey, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin.

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Boylan, Ms Ennis.

NOES

Mr Allen, Ms Armstrong, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr Beggs, Mr Blair, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mr Dickson, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mrs Long, Mr Lyons, Mr Lyttle, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Muir, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Mr Buckley, Mr Newton.

The Amendment was **negatived**.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Mr Blair voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mrs Cameron, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton [Teller, Noes], Mr Poots, Mr Robinson and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Mr Boylan [Teller, Ayes], Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis [Teller, Ayes], Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ni Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGlone, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 9 September 2020 to 14 September 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Second Report of Session 2020 - 2021 (NIA 42/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/193 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/194 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/195 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2020/193 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 14 September 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Monday 14 September 2020:

Andy Allen	Liz Kimmins
Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Kellie Armstrong	Séan Lynch
Cathal Boylan	Chris Lyttle
Sinéad Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradley	Declan McAleer
Pam Cameron	Fra McCann
Pat Catney	Daniel McCrossan
Stewart Dickson	Patsy McGlone
Linda Dillon	Colin McGrath
Diane Dodds	Philip McGuigan
Jemma Dolan	Maoliosa McHugh
Gordon Dunne	Sinead McLaughlin
Mark Durkan	Justin McNulty
Sinéad Ennis	Andrew Muir
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William Irwin	Pat Sheehan
Declan Kearney	Emma Sheerin
Catherine Kelly	Christopher Stalford
Dolores Kelly	Robin Swann
Gerry Kelly	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 15 September 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Private Members' Business

2.1 Motion: Hardship Fund for Businesses Excluded from Existing COVID-19 Support Packages

Proposed:

That this Assembly is deeply concerned at the significant impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the local economy; acknowledges the substantial financial support package put in place by the UK Government to support employers, employees and the self-employed; recognises that thousands of sole traders and micro-businesses in Northern Ireland have not been able to access financial support; and calls on the Minister for the Economy to establish a new fit for purpose business hardship fund targeted at those businesses that have so far been excluded from existing support packages.

Mr John Stewart

Dr Steve Aiken

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

2.2 Motion: Mental Health Crisis Support

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the importance of collaborative and well-resourced services which support those in mental health crisis across Northern Ireland; notes with concern a COVID-19 survey conducted by the Stress, Trauma and Research Conditions (STARC) laboratory at Queen's University Belfast which found that one third of people locally met the criteria for depression; highlights the success of the Multi Agency Triage Team (MATT) partnership between the health and social care sector, the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service in providing on-the-spot mental health support to people in emotional crisis; and calls on the Minister of Health to commit urgently to the expansion and funding of this project to all Health and Social Care Trusts.

Mr Alex Easton

Ms Paula Bradley

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.53pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir.

3.2 Finance

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy.

The Speaker took the Chair.

4. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

4.1 North/South Electricity Interconnector

The Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Cathal Boylan.

4.2 GP Services: Public Accessibility

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mrs Pam Cameron.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

5. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

5.1 Motion: Mental Health Crisis Support (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Speaker took the Chair.

6. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

Mr Gary Middleton spoke to his topic regarding Funding for the Crisis Intervention Service in Londonderry.

The Assembly adjourned at 5.50pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

15 September 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 15 September 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Disposal of Documents Order 1925 – Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry Retention and Disposal Schedule (Department for Communities)
 - BBC Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (BBC Northern Ireland)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
7. Written Ministerial Statements
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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.

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Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 15 September 2020

2017-2022 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)	24/02/20	25/02/20	/	/	02/03/20	03/03/20	09/03/20	26/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	15/10/20					
Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA 5/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/	01/06/20	02/06/20	02/06/20	17/06/20
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA 6/17-22)	26/05/20	01/06/20	/	/	16/06/20	23/06/20	30/06/20	28/08/20
Pension Schemes Bill (NIA 7/17-22)	23/06/20	07/07/20	01/10/20					
Executive Committee (Functions) Bill (NIA 8/17-22)	06/07/20	06/07/20	/	/	21/07/20	27/07/20	28/07/20	25/08/20

2017-2022 Mandate**Non-Executive Bills**

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17- 22)	03/02/20	16/03/20	02/12/20					

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 15 September 2020

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Andy Allen	Liz Kimmins
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Cara Hunter	Pat Sheehan
William Irwin	Emma Sheerin
Declan Kearney	Christopher Stalford
Catherine Kelly	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir
Gerry Kelly	

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 21 September 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

The Speaker took the opportunity to send the Assembly's best wishes to both Christopher Stalford MLA, who had become ill during the previous day's business, and Daniel McCrossan MLA, who was in isolation having tested positive for COVID-19.

3. Matter of the Day

Death of David Cook

Mrs Naomi Long, under Standing Order 24, made a statement on the death of Mr David Cook. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

4. Assembly Business

4.1 Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr John O'Dowd be appointed as a member of the Committee on Procedures.

Ms Sinéad Ennis

Ms Linda Dillon

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

5. Executive Committee Business

5.1 Statement – North South Ministerial Council Plenary Meeting

The deputy First Minister, Mrs Michelle O'Neill, made a statement to the Assembly regarding the North South Ministerial Council Plenary Meeting, following which she replied to questions.

6. Committee Business

6.1 Motion: Extension of Committee Stage: Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 07/17-22)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 33(4), the period referred to in Standing Order 33(2) be extended to 29 January 2021, in relation to the Committee Stage of the Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 07/17-22).

Chairperson, Committee for Communities

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

7. Private Members' Business

7.1 Motion: Honouring the EU Withdrawal Agreement Protocol

Proposed:

That this Assembly acknowledges that the majority of citizens voted to reject Brexit; recognises that the departure from the EU gives rise to substantial political and economic challenges for our society; further recognises that while the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland is imperfect, it guarantees that, whatever the circumstances, there will be no hard border on the island and will protect the Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions, North-South cooperation and the all-island economy; believes it would be entirely unacceptable if the British Government sought to abandon these safeguards and mitigations, as this would amount to a serious betrayal of an existing international treaty; and calls on the British Government to honour its commitments, and to ensure, now, the rigorous and full implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, prioritise peace and stability, and work to secure a future economic partnership with their EU colleagues now and in the weeks ahead.

Dr Caoimhe Archibald

Mr Declan McAleer

Mr Maoliosa McHugh

Ms Martina Anderson

Debate ensued.

The debate stood suspended for Question Time.

The Speaker took the Chair.

8. Question Time

8.1 Health

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann.

8.2 Infrastructure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

9. Private Members' Business (cont'd)

9.1 Motion: Honouring the EU Withdrawal Agreement Protocol (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** (Division).

The sitting was suspended at 4.22 pm and resumed at 4.25 pm.

9.2 Motion: Promoting Dementia-Friendly Policy

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the need to prioritise and enhance the health and wellbeing of every person living with dementia, and that of their carers, in Northern Ireland; highlights the importance of earlier and better diagnosis, effective community and home-based support, as well as high-quality inpatient and residential care in realising better outcomes; notes that transforming public understanding and ending stigma about dementia is integral to ensuring local services and activities are more accessible, and everyday life made easier and more enjoyable, for those affected; acknowledges the role that the devolved institutions can play in embedding cultural change to this end; and calls on the Minister of Health to work with his Executive colleagues to implement a dementia-friendly approach to their responsibilities and decision-making moving forward.

Ms Paula Bradley

Mr Colin McGrath

Mr Colm Gildernew

Mr Stewart Dickson

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Speaker took the Chair.

10. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

10.1 COVID-19: Outbreak Daisy Hill Hospital

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Justin McNulty.

10.2 COVID-19: Restrictions in Holylands

The Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Doug Beattie.

11. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.40pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

21 September 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

21 September 2020

Division

Motion: Honouring the EU Withdrawal Agreement Protocol

Proposed:

That this Assembly acknowledges that the majority of citizens voted to reject Brexit; recognises that the departure from the EU gives rise to substantial political and economic challenges for our society; further recognises that while the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland is imperfect, it guarantees that, whatever the circumstances, there will be no hard border on the island and will protect the Good Friday Agreement in all its dimensions, North-South cooperation and the all-island economy; believes it would be entirely unacceptable if the British Government sought to abandon these safeguards and mitigations, as this would amount to a serious betrayal of an existing international treaty; and calls on the British Government to honour its commitments, and to ensure, now, the rigorous and full implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, prioritise peace and stability, and work to secure a future economic partnership with their EU colleagues now and in the weeks ahead.

Dr Caoimhe Archibald
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Maoliosa McHugh
Ms Martina Anderson

The Question was put and the Assembly divided.

Ayes: 48

Noes: 36

AYES

Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald, Ms Armstrong, Ms Bailey, Mr Blair, Mr Boylan, Ms S Bradley, Ms Bradshaw, Mr Carroll, Mr Catney, Mr Dickson, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Mr Durkan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Ms Hunter, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mrs D Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mrs Long, Mr Lunn, Mr Lynch, Mr Lyttle, Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGrath, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty, Ms Mallon, Mr Muir, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mr O'Dowd, Mrs O'Neill, Mr O'Toole, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan, Ms Sheerin, Miss Woods.

Tellers for the Ayes: Ms Anderson, Dr Archibald.

NOES

Dr Aiken, Mr Allen, Mr Allister, Mrs Barton, Mr Beattie, Mr M Bradley, Ms P Bradley, Mr K Buchanan, Mr T Buchanan, Mr Buckley, Ms Bunting, Mr Butler, Mrs Cameron, Mr Chambers, Mr Clarke, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mr Easton, Mrs Foster, Mr Frew, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Humphrey, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Miss McIlveen, Mr Middleton, Mr Nesbitt, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford, Mr Stewart, Mr Swann, Mr Weir.

Tellers for the Noes: Dr Aiken, Mr Middleton

The motion was **carried**.

The following Members' votes were cast by their notified proxy in this division:

Mr Blair voted for Ms Armstrong, Mr Dickson, Mrs Long, Mr Lyttle and Mr Muir.

Mr K Buchanan voted for Ms P Bradley, Mrs Cameron, Mrs Dodds, Mr Dunne, Mrs Foster, Mr Givan, Mr Harvey, Mr Hilditch, Mr Irwin, Mr Lyons, Mr Newton, Mr Poots, Mr Robinson, Mr Stalford and Mr Weir.

Mr Butler voted for Mr Allen and Mr Swann.

Mr O'Dowd voted for Ms Anderson [Teller, Ayes], Dr Archibald [Teller, Ayes], Mr Boylan, Ms Dillon, Ms Dolan, Ms Ennis, Ms Flynn, Mr Gildernew, Ms Hargey, Mr Kearney, Ms C Kelly, Mr G Kelly, Ms Kimmins, Mr Lynch,

Mr McAleer, Mr McCann, Mr McGuigan, Mr McHugh, Ms Mullan, Mr Murphy, Ms Ní Chuilín, Mrs O'Neill, Ms Rogan, Mr Sheehan and Ms Sheerin.

Mr O'Toole voted for Ms S Bradley, Mr Catney, Mr Durkan, Ms Hunter, Mrs D Kelly, Ms Mallon, Mr McCrossan, Mr McGrath, Ms McLaughlin, Mr McNulty.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 16 September 2020 to 21 September 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Further Education Sector (NI) Retention and Disposal Schedule (Department for Communities)

Office of the Attorney General for Northern Ireland Retention and Disposal Schedule (Department for Communities)

The Department for Communities Social Fund Account for the year ended 31 March 2019 (Northern Ireland Audit Office)

MRDE Limited Directors' Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 March 2020 (Department for the Economy)

Bedford Street Developments Limited Director's Report and Financial Statements 2019-20 (Department for the Economy)

Invest NI Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department for the Economy)

The Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner's 2019-20 Annual Report (Department of Justice)

2019-20 Annual Report and Accounts - Department for the Economy (Department of Finance)

Legislative Consent Memorandum - Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill (Department for Communities)

Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency)

Legislative Consent Memorandum: Fisheries Bill (Supplementary LCM) – (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

2019-20 Annual Report and Accounts - Department of Finance (Department of Finance)

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Third Report of Session 2020 - 2021 (NIA 43/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/196 The Goods Vehicles (Testing) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/197 The Motor Vehicle Testing (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/198 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/199 The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Amendment of Certain Relevant Periods) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Justice)

SR 2020/200 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 11) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

For information only

SR 2020/194 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Explanatory Memorandum only)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

COVID-19 Localised Restrictions (Minister of Health)

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation on a Draft Cross-Departmental COVID-19 Vulnerable Children and Young People's Plan (Department of Health)

9. Departmental Publications

Fees and Charges to Recover the Cost of Processing Discharge Consent Applications and the Regulation of Discharges under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

A Scheme of Fees and Charges to Recover the Costs of Processing Licence Applications under the Water Abstraction and Impoundment (Licensing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

The Greenhouse Gas Emissions Charging Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

The Pollution Prevention and Control (Industrial Emissions - NIEA) Charging Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

The Radioactive Substances (Fees and Charges) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2019 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

Waste Management Charging (Northern Ireland) Scheme 2019 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

10. Agency Publications

Ulster Supported Employment Limited Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2020 (Ulster Supported Employment Limited)

11. Westminster Publications**12. Miscellaneous Publications**

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 21 September 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Monday 21 September 2020:

Andy Allen	Liz Kimmins
Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Kellie Armstrong	Séan Lynch
Cathal Boylan	Chris Lyttle
Sinéad Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradley	Declan McAleer
Pam Cameron	Fra McCann
Pat Catney	Daniel McCrossan
Stewart Dickson	Patsy McGlone
Linda Dillon	Colin McGrath
Diane Dodds	Philip McGuigan
Jemma Dolan	Maoliosa McHugh
Gordon Dunne	Sinead McLaughlin
Mark Durkan	Justin McNulty
Sinéad Ennis	Andrew Muir
Arlene Foster	Karen Mullan
Órlaithí Flynn	Conor Murphy
Colm Gildernew	Robin Newton
Paul Givan	Carál Ní Chuilín
Deirdre Hargey	Michelle O'Neill
Harry Harvey	Edwin Poots
David Hilditch	George Robinson
Cara Hunter	Emma Rogan
William Irwin	Pat Sheehan
Declan Kearney	Emma Sheerin
Catherine Kelly	Christopher Stalford
Dolores Kelly	Robin Swann
Gerry Kelly	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 22 September 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 **Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister of Health

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister of Health

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister of Health

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister of Health

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister of Health

A single debate ensued on all five motions.

The sitting was suspended at 12.58pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long.

3.2 Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Edwin Poots.

The Speaker took the Chair.

4. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

4.1 COVID-19 Restrictions

The Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Ms Claire Sugden.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

5. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

5.1 Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (cont'd)

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (cont'd)

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (cont'd)

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (cont'd)

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (cont'd)

Debate resumed on all five motions.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was **carried**.

The Speaker took the Chair.

6. Private Members' Business

6.1 Motion: United Kingdom Internal Market Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises that a trade deal between the United Kingdom and the European Union is critical in protecting the interests of everyone living in Northern Ireland; expresses deep concerns about the UK Government's approach to negotiations and the terms of the United Kingdom Internal Market Bill; rejects any argument that the Bill is necessary to protect the Good Friday Agreement; further rejects the unilateral move to undermine the authority of the devolved institutions contained in this Bill; affirms its commitment to upholding international law; mandates the First Minister and deputy First Minister to take a formal position opposing the UK Internal Market Bill; and calls on the Prime Minister to respect the will of the people of Northern Ireland and the principles of devolution.

Mr Matthew O'Toole

Mr Colin McGrath

Ms Sinead McLaughlin

Mr Patsy McGlone

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

7. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

Mr John O'Dowd spoke to his topic regarding a COVID-19 outbreak in Craigavon Area Hospital.

The Assembly adjourned at 6.55pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

22 September 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 22 September 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 22 September 2020

2017-2022 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)	24/02/20	25/02/20	/	/	02/03/20	03/03/20	09/03/20	26/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	15/10/20					
Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA 5/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/	01/06/20	02/06/20	02/06/20	17/06/20
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA 6/17-22)	26/05/20	01/06/20	/	/	16/06/20	23/06/20	30/06/20	28/08/20
Pension Schemes Bill (NIA 7/17-22)	23/06/20	07/07/20	29/01/21					
Executive Committee (Functions) Bill (NIA 8/17-22)	06/07/20	06/07/20	/	/	21/07/20	27/07/20	28/07/20	25/08/20

2017-2022 Mandate**Non-Executive Bills**

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill (NIA Bill 01/17- 22)	03/02/20	16/03/20	02/12/20					

/ Bills progressing by accelerated passage

Proxy Voting Notices – Tuesday 22 September 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 22 September 2020:

Martina Anderson	Liz Kimmins
Caoimhe Archibald	Naomi Long
Kellie Armstrong	Gordon Lyons
Cathal Boylan	Séan Lynch
Sinéad Bradley	Chris Lyttle
Paula Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Jonathan Buckley	Declan McAleer
Pam Cameron	Fra McCann
Pat Catney	Daniel McCrossan
Stewart Dickson	Patsy McGlone
Linda Dillon	Colin McGrath
Diane Dodds	Philip McGuigan
Jemma Dolan	Maoliosa McHugh
Gordon Dunne	Sinead McLaughlin
Mark Durkan	Justin McNulty
Sinéad Ennis	Andrew Muir
Arlene Foster	Karen Mullan
Órlaithí Flynn	Conor Murphy
Colm Gildernew	Robin Newton
Paul Givan	Carál Ní Chuilín
Deirdre Hargey	Michelle O'Neill
Harry Harvey	Edwin Poots
David Hilditch	George Robinson
Cara Hunter	Emma Rogan
William Irwin	Pat Sheehan
Declan Kearney	Emma Sheerin
Catherine Kelly	Christopher Stalford
Dolores Kelly	Robin Swann
Gerry Kelly	Peter Weir

