



Northern Ireland
Assembly

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

Volume 132

(19 October 2020 to 15 November 2020)

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Assembly Members

A

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

B

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

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

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

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

F

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

G

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

H

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

I

Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)

K

Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)
Kelly, Ms Catherine (West Tyrone) (until 3 November 2020)
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kimmins, Ms Liz (Newry and Armagh)

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Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)
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Lynch, Seán (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
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Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)

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McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
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McGrath, Colin (South Down)
McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)
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Muir, Andrew (North Down)
Mullan, Ms Karen (Foyle)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)

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

O

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

P

Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)

R

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

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Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)
Stewart, John (East Antrim)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
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Wells, Jim (South Down)
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Deputy First Minister.....	Mrs Michelle O’Neill
Minister for Communities.....	Ms Cáral Ní Chuilín
Minister for Infrastructure.....	Ms Nichola Mallon
Minister for the Economy.....	Mrs Diane Dodds
Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	Mr Edwin Poots
Minister of Education	Mr Peter Weir
Minister of Finance	Mr Conor Murphy
Minister of Health.....	Mr Robin Swann
Minister of Justice.....	Mrs Naomi Long

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

Assembly Sitings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 19 October 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Committee Membership

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

Resolved:

That Dr Steve Aiken replace Mr John Stewart as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges. — [Mr Butler.]

Executive Committee Business

Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4): Suspension

Mr Speaker: The next item in the Order Paper is a motion to suspend Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4). I remind Members that the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 19 October 2020. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2020-21 and Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 Statement of Excesses

Mr Speaker: The next two motions are to approve the Supply Resolution for the Main Estimates 2020-21 and the 2016-17 Statement of Excesses. There will be a single debate on both motions. I will ask the Clerk to read the first motion and then call on the Minister of Finance to move it. The Minister will then commence the debate on both 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. I will call the Minister to move it, and the Question will be put on that motion. If that is clear, I shall proceed.

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

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £4,757,631,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 and that resources, not exceeding £4,791,050,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3 (a) and 3 (b) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2020-21 that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020.

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £112,618,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 and that resources, not exceeding £183,290,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Part 1 of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020.

Mr Speaker: The Business Committee has agreed to allow up to four and a half hours for this debate. The Minister will have 30 minutes to allocate at his discretion between proposing and making his winding-up speech. The Chair of the Finance Committee will have 10 minutes to speak, and all other Members who wish to speak will have seven

minutes. I call on the Minister to open the debate on the motion. Gabh ar aghaidh.

Mr Murphy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. As you set out, the debate covers the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates 2020-21, which is the current financial year, and the Statement of Excesses for the 2016-2017 financial year. The Main Estimates and the Statement of Excesses were laid in the Assembly on Tuesday 13 October 2020.

I will take a few moments to remind the Assembly about the unusual steps that we took in May and June that have resulted in the Main Estimates being brought forward. The fast-evolving response to COVID-19 in the first months of this financial year meant that it was not possible to prepare and present the Main Estimates reflecting the Executive's up-to-date expenditure plans. The allocations that were made in response to the COVID-19 emergency vastly increased the planned expenditure of a number of Departments. Any Estimates document that was produced at that stage would have been obsolete before it could be brought to the Assembly. In addition, it could not have passed and received Royal Assent in time. Instead, I sought the Assembly's approval for a further Vote on Account in order to provide authority for Departments to continue to operate through the initial COVID-19 response period. That was passed by the Assembly as the Budget (No. 2) Act (NI) 2020, and it gave Departments the authority to access the cash that they would require to continue to deliver services and to respond to the developing COVID situation until the autumn.

Following the Executive's decision and allocations for economic recovery, which I announced on 24 September, the financial position has now stabilised sufficiently to allow my Department to produce the Main Estimates for the Assembly to consider together with the corresponding legislation in the form of the Budget (No. 3) Bill, which I will introduce following the debate. These Main Estimates represent the Executive's up-to-date expenditure plans and include all the allocations that I announced in response to the ongoing COVID situation. Since the COVID emergency began, the Executive have allocated over £1.7 billion in additional resources in capital. Those are unprecedented levels of allocations. The detail of those allocations are a matter of public record and are published on my Department's website.

As well as considering the Main Estimates for 2020-21, I am also able to bring the 2016-17 Statement of Excesses to the Assembly. Members may remember that it was not possible for the spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) to be passed by the Assembly in February and March 2017 following the collapse of the Assembly. One of the consequences of that was that those Departments that received in-year allocations during the 2016-2017 financial year were not able to receive legislative authority for that expenditure.

While the Department of Finance was able to use its contingency powers to ensure that the Departments were able to get access to the cash necessary for them to continue to deliver services, those powers do not remove the need for the expenditure to be regularised through a Budget Bill. With one exception, those Excesses would not have occurred had it been possible for the spring Supplementary Estimates to be passed that year. The one exception to that is an element of £2.22 million related to

the Health and Social Care pension scheme. That Excess came about due to an underestimation of current service costs because updated figures were not available at that time.

Normally, a Statement of Excesses would be brought to the Assembly the year after the expenditure was incurred, but, to do so, the matter first needs to be considered by the Assembly Public Accounts Committee, and that has been possible only this year. I am pleased to say that the Public Accounts Committee has now carried out its consideration of the 2016-2017 Excesses and has recommended that they should now be regularised through the Statement of Excesses and their inclusion in the Budget (No. 3) Bill.

This has been an unprecedented year, and we have had to adopt novel approaches to respond in an agile manner to the impact that COVID has had on our public finances. We are now in a position to bring the Budget legislation back to its normal footing. I request the support of Members for the resolution for the Main Estimates 2020-2021, which together with the Budget (No. 3) Bill — we will debate that tomorrow — will enable services to continue to be funded for the remainder of this financial year together with the resolution on the Statement of Excesses for 2016-17 in order to regularise these outstanding sums.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his statement so far. As the Minister highlighted, the Main Estimates and Budget Bill are traditionally brought forward much earlier in the financial year. However, given the unprecedented events arising from the pandemic and its impact on our associated spending, that was delayed to ensure that departmental positions are accurately reflected in the Estimates, with the most up-to-date position.

Senior departmental officials briefed the Committee for Finance at its meeting last Wednesday on the Main Estimates and the associated Budget (No. 3) Bill. In advance of the meeting, the Department of Finance provided the Committee with a briefing paper, together with advance copies of the Estimates and the Bill. In examining the Main Estimate position, the Committee questioned officials to establish whether specific business areas might be at increased risk of underspend, particularly as a result of the pandemic, including the scale of any underspend and how that may affect the overall agreed limits under the Budget exchange scheme. In response, officials clarified that the Department closely monitors the overall Budget position on a monthly basis to ensure that overall spending is within permitted limits and that Departments declare any reduced requirements as early as possible to enable those to be considered and, where necessary, reallocated in-year by the Executive. In addition, following the Minister's oral statement on 6 October that called for greater flexibility from Her Majesty's Treasury, the Committee sought an assurance from officials that any areas of underspend will be surrendered early in this financial year to safeguard against it being lost to Her Majesty's Treasury in the event that any additional flexibility is not provided.

Officials also highlighted the fact that additional flexibility could provide an option to see a more dynamic response to any last-minute changes late in the financial year and to respond to any emerging pressures. Given that the Budget exchange scheme has been operating for 10 years now, it would be helpful to hear the Minister's assessment of

whether the scheme remains fit for purpose and whether there are any plans or proposals to review it.

As Members will also be aware, financial transactions capital (FTC) is an area of borrowing that, in the past, has been challenging, to say the least, for the Executive to utilise fully. The Committee noted that some £70 million of the 2020-21 FTC provision has not yet been allocated. It therefore questioned officials to ascertain how FTC could be best utilised in order to provide loans or equity to private-sector entities as a means of driving the economy forward. In response, officials acknowledged that the Department for the Economy is aware of the available provision of FTC. However, it is not clear what plans may be in development to identify how that may be made available to private entities as an alternative source of finance.

Furthermore, members explored whether consideration may be given to utilising reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing to supplement any transfer capital in the event of Her Majesty's Treasury allowing flexibility to transfer capital DEL to resource. In response, officials outlined the position for the 2020-21 financial year, where there has been no RRI borrowing. Officials conceded that that could be an area for consideration but that borrowing would need to be balanced to take account of the repayment element of resource spending. Again, it would be helpful if the Minister outlined what the current repayment element is on RRI borrowing and whether the cost is met centrally or by the responsible Department.

The Committee also explored in detail the provisions under sole authority where spending may be allocated. The Committee was previously informed that that black-box spending occurs when it is for relatively small levels of expenditure below £1.5 million, for a relatively short period of not more than two years or to allow an urgent service to be delivered pending the development of new legislation. The Committee noted that the Main Estimates contain black-box provisions on six areas of spend that total over £58 million and sought to ensure that the criteria are being adhered to. The Committee noted that, in some instances, that expenditure either exceeds the small levels of expenditure, as in the case of welfare reform mitigation, and/or exceeds the two-year short period, as seen for supporting the operations of HMS Caroline. In response to questions from members, officials acknowledged that that was due to the inability to bring forward legislation as the Assembly was not sitting. However, in the case of Northern Ireland Screen, members questioned officials on the continued use of that provision as contained in the Main Estimates in view of the Northern Ireland Screen Commission (Funding) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020, which provides for the Department for the Economy to make grants. In response, officials confirmed that, going forward, that funding would not use the black-box provisions.

However, for this financial year, a proportion will be contained under sole authority to take account of the period prior to the order coming into effect.

12.15 pm

To gain a clearer understanding of how that process works and to satisfy itself that there are sufficient controls in place to ensure that spending under sole authority is used appropriately, the Committee requested further information

from the Department on the conditions attached to each area of spend. I had hoped to have the information in time to inform today's debate. I ask the Minister to provide that information to the Committee's office as soon as possible, so that I can update the House tomorrow during debate on the Budget (No. 3) Bill.

Turning to the Statement of Excesses, at its meeting on 16 September, the Committee considered the recent report from the Public Accounts Committee and noted its recommendation that the necessary amounts are provided by the Assembly.

The Committee also noted that the Northern Ireland Audit Office is undertaking an examination of the budgetary process. We look forward to seeing the conclusion of that work, including any conclusions or recommendations from the Comptroller and Auditor General. I also look forward to hearing from the Minister how the report will be used to inform his Department's ongoing review of the financial process.

As the House is aware, the Committee for Finance has a specific function to play when considering whether a Budget Bill should proceed under the accelerated passage procedure. I place on record my appreciation, on behalf of the Committee, for the timely receipt of information to help us to determine whether the Committee would be content to grant accelerated passage to the Budget (No. 3) Bill that is due to be introduced later in today's business. I cannot overstate how important it is that relevant, complete and timely information is provided by government to the Assembly and its Committees to help to provide for a more comprehensive dialogue and a greater understanding of what is quite a convoluted process. In that regard, the Committee and the Department are on the same page. I urge all Departments and scrutiny Committees to actively engage throughout the year. It was on that basis and on the regular and timely engagement that the Committee agreed, at its meeting last week, that it is content to grant accelerated passage, as provided for in Standing Order 42(2).

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I welcome the opportunity to outline the Committee for Infrastructure's consideration of and views on the motions before us today, specifically on how this impacts the Department for Infrastructure and its ability to carry out its responsibilities. Scrutiny of the budget for the Department for Infrastructure — one of the Executive's largest spenders — is taken seriously by the Committee. However, the Committee regrets that there are still so many unknowns, including the ongoing pressures caused by the pandemic.

The 2020-21 Main Estimates provide £1.027 billion net resource for the Department for Infrastructure and £1.139 billion net cash requirement. Those figures are up substantially, by 23%, from the previous year. As I have mentioned on similar occasions, the financial situation faced by the Department is stark and has been exacerbated by the pandemic's impact. That position was reiterated during the Committee's scrutiny of the departmental budget on 30 September and in ministerial briefings when budget pressures were also discussed.

The Department outlined that its 2020-21 resource budget allocation was £417.9 million, up by £33 million from the previous year, and capital was £558 million, up £89 million

from 2019-2020. Officials have provided the Committee with a rationale for October monitoring bids. That excludes the Department's bids for the mitigation of the impact of COVID-19, which is through a separate process.

The October monitoring bids include £3 million to fund a winter service programme in this financial year. The £3 million includes salt, fuel, overtime and shift allowances and maintenance of the gritting fleet. The other £1.6 million is for staff carrying over more holidays than usual this year due to the pandemic. Departmental officials explained that, while that is an issue across government, the significant pressures that remain in the Department mean that it cannot meet the cost from its existing budget.

With respect to capital funding, the Department has outlined its bid for an additional £9.1 million across a range of capital projects. The Department for Infrastructure has advised the Committee that COVID has created a number of accounting challenges. For many of its capital projects, the projected spend for 2020-21 was estimated down as lockdown took hold and work on many projects stalled. However, work has recommenced and, to a large extent, caught up on initial expectations. That has led to the Department having to ask for money back that it had been quick to surrender going into lockdown.

The Belfast transport hub is one such project. At the budget briefing on 30 September, officials explained that, in early April, the estimated expenditure for the Belfast transport hub project was reported as being £19.8 million to £21.4 million on the basis of projected delays of four to six months respectively due to the impact of COVID-19. The project was delayed to a lesser extent than was predicted, however, and, as a result, the estimated spend has increased to £22 million. Translink has requested additional funding of £1.6 million to meet that requirement.

Also in the Department's £9.1 million capital bid is a request for £5.5 million for structural road maintenance and safety measures. As I have said in the House previously, the cost of annual maintenance of our road network in order to maintain its structural integrity has been estimated at £143 million. For this financial year, £75 million has been allocated, which is a reduced amount, given restrictions placed on carrying out work during the pandemic. Once more, however, the impact on work has not been as significant as was thought, and the Department has made a bid for £4.5 million for remedial works following Storm Francis. The remaining £1 million bid for road maintenance is for the Department to take forward some limited minor works; local transport and safety measures, including traffic-signal upgrades; some localised road-widening works and crash barriers; and bridge-strengthening schemes.

The Department also provided the Committee with details of its scheme to replace old street lighting, outlining how it is responsible for almost 300,000 street lights, 13% of which have passed their working life of 40 years. To address the backlog, the Department has calculated that it will require £74 million. Some £14 million has been allocated this year, which will maintain the current position but not address the backlog. The Department has a bid in for £1 million to allow it to replace some 500 street lights that are past their working life.

The Department has also outlined its COVID recovery bids, which were submitted separately under the COVID

and economic recovery exercise. The Department has asked for £36.6 million to mitigate a range of lost revenue as a consequence of the pandemic, including Translink passenger revenue and parking charges.

During the Committee's budget briefing, members queried why bids had not been submitted for Northern Ireland Water, given the continuing financial challenges that it faces. Officials noted that the £27 million that Northern Ireland Water received for COVID mitigation in September monitoring covered its resource pressures at that time.

Mr Speaker, I ask your indulgence to raise the issue of a financial package that is being considered for the taxi, coach and haulage sectors. The Department has said that it is still working through the possible costs of such a scheme. There is severe hardship and concern amongst those sectors, and some clarity would help assuage fears, particularly as we move through a period of tighter restrictions. I raise that only to request that arrangements for the scheme be expedited in order to be implemented as soon as possible.

The Committee for Infrastructure will continue its scrutiny of the Department for Infrastructure budget.

Dr Archibald: This is an unusual budgetary year. Tomorrow, we will debate our third Budget Bill, and today, in October, we are discussing the Main Estimates for the year. COVID-19 has had a huge impact on our society. First and foremost, it is a human tragedy with grave implications for public health. It has also created an evolving economic crisis that is likely to be greater than any experienced in recent times. The COVID crisis has meant, in budgetary terms, that we have had to react, react and react again, and that is unlikely to change soon. The economic impact and recession that we face will now be deeper and longer than what was hoped for back in March or April.

The second wave that was predicted by clinicians and scientists is now being felt across the world and here at home. The substantial interventions that came from the British Government early in the pandemic are beginning to be switched off at a time when cases of COVID-19 are rising at an alarming rate and restrictions are being reimposed. While some will ask, "How will we pay for it?", I ask how we do anything other than try to protect businesses and jobs and workers' and families' incomes and livelihoods here and now. The ending of the furlough scheme is premature, and I know that the Minister agrees with me on that. Its replacement — the job support scheme — will not protect jobs, and, going on the numbers of people in the North who are still furloughed or partially furloughed, there will be thousands of redundancies.

The extended job support scheme announced for businesses ordered to close was a welcome intervention, but guaranteeing only 67% of the income of someone who is on minimum wage is not enough to ensure that families can put food on the table and pay their bills. The assertion from the British Chancellor, Rishi Sunak, that it can be topped up by universal credit may be technically correct but is absurd. That will put additional pressure on our social security system, which is already under pressure. It would be much better to ensure an adequate wage rather than additional administrative costs and burdens to the system.

I urge the Minister to keep the pressure on the British Treasury. I know that he has done so and will keep doing so because many businesses and families face very difficult circumstances, and, as we all know, our economy and the health of our people are interlinked. There is no trade-off: we need to do both.

The Main Estimates put DFE's budget at more than £462 million greater than last year. That is due, in part, to the huge amount that has been allocated by the Executive to date to business support and other COVID allocations. Those have been vital interventions to support business, protect jobs and support further and higher education institutes, students and research. Despite many having received support, many others have remained excluded. The Minister has previously outlined that he is open to considering any bids from Ministers to support those excluded groups, and he has urged Ministers to bring those forward. I hope that they will listen and respond to the need out there.

I want to ask the Minister about the flexibility available to Departments and Ministers in the distribution of the allocations. For example, if funding is allocated for business support for recovery and there is a need to respond to the situation that we are in now, is there flexibility to utilise that funding in a slightly different way to support businesses in meeting the immediate need that people face? When officials briefed the Committee for the Economy on Wednesday, they indicated that they had been engaging with Department of Finance officials around that and that that would be the case. I would like the Minister to address that point.

According to the Main Estimates, Invest NI, which usually has an annual budget of around £100 million, has been allocated £430 million this year. That is a huge allocation, and it is vital that we see real, effective results. Frankly, Minister, I have some concerns in that regard. Economic development needs to be about the whole economy and not just cater for a select few. I put it to Invest NI in Committee, a couple of weeks ago, that there is a lack of information forthcoming about what shapes the business supports that we have seen. There are numerous support schemes, but why do they target the ones that they do? Why have other groups been missed out? The sole traders, for example, had their hopes raised that they would be able to access the Invest NI-administered hardship fund, only to have those hopes dashed. To date, there has been no support forthcoming for that group.

Social enterprise is another category that did not pique the interest of Invest; instead, the Minister for Communities had to pick up that group, despite it not being her remit. Similarly, taxi drivers and coach operators are of no interest to Invest. One of the latest schemes, which was announced about a fortnight ago, will see consultants pick up about £8,000 to help businesses make financial plans. I can tell you, Minister, that I hear from businesses that they do not want support for consultants; they want cash support.

There needs to be a real conversation about the role and remit of Invest NI as our economic development agency. If we look at the measure of effectiveness of Invest over the past decade, the fact that we have the lowest economic growth and productivity across these islands speaks for itself. If we want to shape a truly transformative economic recovery that will address the structural issues in our

local economy, it needs to be about the whole economy, supporting our SMEs during these difficult times, developing local supply chains and supporting indigenous businesses to develop new and innovative ways to create a greener, fairer and more equal economy. It needs to do more than pay lip service to addressing regional imbalances and inequalities.

Finally, I want to touch briefly on Brexit. Most people across the North were utterly dismayed by the comments of the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, on Friday, when he suggested that we were heading for a no-deal outcome to the future arrangements negotiations. You will agree — I am sure that most here will — that having no trade deal will be disastrous for individuals, businesses and communities across the North. The prospect that, in 73 days, businesses will be expected to operate in an as yet unknown trading environment, with assistance for VAT, labelling requirements, checks and tariffs having not yet been worked out, is deeply concerning.

12.30 pm

Business representatives have consistently called for certainty and highlighted the need for a trade deal to minimise trade friction. The Minister has been in discussions with, and made representations on Brexit funding to, the British Government. However, if we are heading towards a no-deal outcome, it is important that additional support will be forthcoming from the Treasury to help our businesses and communities to prepare and respond to the immediate impact that will hit in January. People here did not choose Brexit and should not have to foot the bill for the Tories' disastrous, short-sighted folly.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): In April, the Committee heard evidence from departmental officials on the pressures that the Executive Office had identified and the budget allocation made by the Executive. It also heard evidence from officials on the June and October monitoring rounds.

Budget scrutiny is one of the statutory responsibilities of a Committee, and we take it seriously. Throughout the budgetary process, we need to look in detail at the spend, the pressures and the easements. However, to do that, the Committee needs to be provided with the right information at the right time. The Committee experienced some issues in getting budgetary information on time. This matter was raised by the Finance Committee, and we welcome the commitment of the First Minister and deputy First Minister to endeavour to adhere to the Department of Finance's guidelines on providing timely financial responses in future.

The Committee appreciates that the budget process can throw up issues that require political engagement and take time to resolve. However, for the Committee's part, budget scrutiny must be robust and timely. We do not need a rerun of the renewable heat incentive (RHI) debacle. The Executive Office received an uplift in its 2020-21 budget of over 72% on the previous year, primarily due to the inclusion of ring-fenced funding of £37.5 million for historical institutional abuse payments. We now know that, due to a delay in getting the redress panels into full operation, an easement of £10 million has been identified in the October monitoring round. The Committee hopes that £1.5 million of that easement can be used to meet the

non-ring-fenced COVID-19 pressures being faced by the Department.

Funding for the redress of victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse continues to be a priority for the Committee. The redress board has made excellent progress, and, by the end of September, determinations totalling £4.1 million had been made. We need to see similar progress being made to secure a commitment from the institutions and religious orders to contribute to the cost of compensation. Estimates of the cost of the scheme range from £149 million at the lower end to £668 million at the upper end. There simply is not scope to fund the scheme entirely from the block grant. Apart from that, these institutions and religious orders have a moral duty to help to compensate the victims and survivors, who have waited all this time to get redress for the dreadful abuse that they experienced and for their continued suffering. The First Minister and the deputy First Minister are to meet with the institutions and others, and I hope that we will see financial commitments being made very soon.

That leads me to another area where we do not have the means to meet the costs. In the June monitoring round, the Executive Office received £2.5 million for the administrative costs of victims' payments. That was welcomed, and it allowed work on the administration structures to commence. As we all know, the Department of Justice will administer the scheme. We cannot get away from the costs that might or might not lie ahead of us. The truth of the matter is that we do not know how much the victims' payment scheme will cost, and, even more worryingly, we do not know how the costs will be met.

The story of the victims' payment scheme is similar to that of the historical institutional abuse payments, in that there are wide-ranging cost estimates. The estimated cost in year 1 ranges from £25 million at the lower end to £60 million at the upper end, and the scheme is estimated to cost £109 million in its initial three-year period. The figures are staggering, but, no doubt, they will become even more staggering once the further financial modelling has been completed. Officials are working hard to try to estimate the likely costs, and the Committee appreciates that it is a tough job because of the many variables. Members are absolutely clear that Westminster should foot the bill. That is not a departure from normal practice; it is in line with the Treasury's policy that the Department that makes the policy should bear its cost. The Committee welcomes the dialogue between Ministers here and in Westminster to try to get the funding needed for the scheme. I sincerely hope that it is resolved sooner rather than later for the sake of the victims, who have already waited far too long.

Despite identifying pressures, the Executive Office did not receive an allocation for COVID in the budget. However, it received £0.5 million in the June monitoring round to cover the cost of work with the press. Following the June monitoring round, the residual COVID pressure stood at £2.2 million, but, in October, that had increased to £3.4 million because of consultancy costs for data analytics. Whilst we appreciate that data analytics are crucial in the fight against the pandemic, there is a concern that consultants are being paid huge amounts of money because there is not the capacity in the Civil Service to deliver that work, and that is something that should be addressed going forward.

I will now make a few remarks in my capacity as an SDLP MLA. I wish to highlight that lots of the spending in Northern Ireland in the past period has been focused on coronavirus, and rightly so, but much of the spending through COVID has been bits and pieces and could be characterised as reactionary, haphazard and devoid of a strategy. That needs to be addressed, especially with the Minister's Executive colleague the Economy Minister. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that there are many other priorities that need to be addressed as well. We have the impending doom of Brexit and the almighty harm that it will unleash on businesses here in the North. That will be a double-edged sword if there is no deal, and, from the soundings over the weekend, that looks altogether more likely. However, I note that we really are the experts on elongated negotiations and pushing matters to the wire.

Many of the budget lines and commentaries in these Estimates reference pressures due to Brexit and income loss as a result. Many communities and organisations across the North urgently require clarification and guidance. There is a real task ahead of us rebuilding our economy after COVID and Brexit and shaping it into the type of economy that delivers for local businesses in the context of the global neighbourhood and utilises our excellent natural resources as well as our skills base.

The Department for the Economy needs to be strategic and planned in its interventions, not just reactionary. To set that in context, we now have, at long last, the commitment to the Magee school of medicine in Derry. I hope that it will be delivered soon, with fewer young people leaving our shores for their degree pathway and more medics staying here and having greater opportunities for advancement in their careers here at home. That work must begin with the Executive Office delivering a strategy. It is the Department that is supposed to drive the institutions of government here and ensure genuine cohesion of purpose.

I look forward to hearing the contributions from other Members, but let us not lose sight of putting the people of the North at the heart of our discussions. A firm resolve to work in unity for all our people is our primary objective and, ultimately, our role in this Chamber.

Mr Muir: I speak today in my position as finance spokesperson for the Alliance Party. I am conscious that we have the Budget (No. 3) Bill tomorrow, so I will try not to be repetitive about issues that will be raised tomorrow. I thank the Minister for bringing the motions before the Assembly today. I also thank and pay tribute to the officials across all the Departments who have worked to produce the Main Estimates. I appreciate the amount of work that has gone into the process this year more than ever.

I recognise the context behind the 2016-17 Excesses, and the Chair of the Finance Committee mentioned some key issues pertaining to those. The reasons why these institutions collapsed have often been debated, and I do not intend to add to that debate today.

In respect of the 2020-21 Main Estimates, it is vital that Northern Ireland Departments have the legal authority to spend. They must spend to support our health service, the economy and wider public services that continue to be battered by COVID-19. The Main Estimates cover the period to the end of March next year. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions are likely

to be with us throughout that time, pending the successful roll-out of an approved vaccine. The majority of the £2.4 billion that Northern Ireland has thus far received from Westminster in response to COVID-19 has already been spent. Much of what the Executive have distributed thus far has been a lifeline to businesses and individuals across Northern Ireland, as well as maintaining vital public services. Spending by Departments must be targeted so that support gets to where it needs to go.

I welcome the assistance announced for businesses that are experiencing loss of trade due to the latest set of restrictions, funded from additional Barnett consequentials. I am, however, deeply concerned that the same group that was excluded from support in the spring could be excluded once again. The Minister for the Economy must urgently bring forward measures to assist those who are excluded from the Land and Property Services (LPS) scheme announced last week. That includes sole traders and businesses that pay domestic rates or do not operate out of rateable premises. Those firms have been failed once already; it would be utterly unacceptable if they were failed again. We heard this morning from private coach operators about the support that they require. They belong to one of many different sectors that need that assistance. I agree with the Chair of the Economy Committee that businesses need assistance — not consultants to tell them how bad it is.

Secondly, Ministers must pick up the pace when it comes to rolling out support schemes. We appreciate the speed with which the LPS scheme was brought forward last week. However, I am deeply concerned that Northern Ireland still does not have a Kickstart scheme to support young people, given that such schemes were announced over three months ago in England, with the resultant Barnett consequentials. Talking of Barnett consequentials, my party and I are increasingly concerned that we could end up surrendering some of the additional Barnett consequentials at the end of the financial year, as a result of Departments' inability to bring forward bids and to spend the money allocated.

Finally, £2.4 billion is a colossal sum of money, but it is a drop in the ocean in comparison with the damage being wreaked by COVID-19. I continue to support the Minister of Finance in calling on the UK Government to give the Northern Ireland Executive the additional financial firepower required to enable us to fund further COVID-19 interventions. Allowing the Executive to borrow would enable additional financial flexibilities to provide the much-needed support to our NHS, the economy and vital public services. The devolved Administrations must be given the tools to respond to what has already been a tough autumn and what is likely to be an even more difficult winter.

I ask the Minister of Finance to provide an update on his conversations with Her Majesty's Treasury regarding borrowing powers for the Northern Ireland Executive. Furthermore, can he confirm whether, in addition to working with the Finance Ministers of the devolved Administrations, he has been in contact with regional leaders in England, who are also calling for further support from Westminster?

In conclusion, my party supports the motions today. Future spending by the Executive needs to be quick, targeted and sufficient to meet the scale of the challenges that we are presented with. The public in Northern Ireland need

to feel confident that their Government have the tools and the willingness to do everything in their power to see us through these unprecedented times.

Mr Irwin: Mr Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to speak on this matter today. Indeed, I had hoped that, since the last discussions about expenditure, the economic outlook for the Departments, not least DAERA, would be discussed in a new era where restrictions around the COVID-19 virus were a little less stringent. However, that is not the case, and we in the Chamber and in the wider community must redouble our efforts to suppress the virus and allow a degree of normality to return within the shortest possible time frame, while, of course, having every regard to the health of people, in particular the health of our most vulnerable.

These are difficult times; we all recognise that. Once again, we find ourselves in the middle of a four-week restricted period. With that, come further significant financial pressures on our economy and, indeed, on Stormont budgets. These are unprecedented times, and they call for unprecedented measures. There certainly have been unprecedented measures delivered over the past few months through the furlough scheme, the various well-received COVID-19 grant schemes, be those the rating grants or sports grants, and the various measures for the provision of welfare benefits. That assistance has been absolutely crucial, and many, many hundreds of businesses are operating today because of it. I thank the Westminster Treasury and our Departments for that support.

The unknown factor is the length of time for which any such measures will be required, and that makes the issue of looking to the future and budgeting very difficult at this time. That having been said, it is vital that our government services continue and that we ensure that the process of governing continues across all Departments.

With regard to DAERA, I want to say that I am very proud of the agri-food industry and how it has operated under immense pressure throughout the pandemic. The resilience and energy shown by everyone involved in agriculture, both on the ground and in the industry and the Department, have meant that the Province's food requirements have been met and more.

12.45 pm

I thank and pay tribute to the AERA Minister, Edwin Poots MLA, who has shown an acute understanding of the industry and its needs throughout his tenure and, more importantly, throughout the current pandemic. There was significant pressure on him and his officials to come up with support schemes for agriculture, and those have been delivered and well received across the sectors. It is welcome that the ornamental horticulture grant scheme is up and running, and I know that that will be of further assistance to the industry.

As I highlighted in a contribution earlier in the year, the House is clear that our agri-food industry has shown tremendous resilience throughout the pandemic. I salute all those in the industry who have kept the wheels of food production turning in difficult circumstances. That has been noted and appreciated.

DAERA staff also continue to work hard and have done so throughout the pandemic. The processing of basic farm

payments has been another important and significant job of work. Something that is worthy of note is that the basic farm payments will, for the first time, be made in full this month. That is a significant achievement, especially in these days. Also important is that over 94% of payments, totalling £265.7 million, had been made by Friday past. I know that administration costs have always been a focus for DAERA, and I believe that important progress has been made in streamlining processing payments and the use of online systems, which have had tremendous uptake in the farming community. It certainly has assisted with this drive.

As I said, the future remains unclear, especially in the shorter term. On Brexit, the ongoing discussions regarding our Department and the European Union provide an element of uncertainty; however, I believe that brighter days are ahead and that farming outside the EU will bring opportunity. I have made my views well known at the Committee about the need for the legislation that will help to maintain and operate agriculture post Brexit to be dealt with in a timely and positive manner. I hope that Members who still harbour a dislike for the democratic result of the referendum will work for the good of the industry rather than against it. I support the motion.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): The Committee has been considering the DAERA budget on and off for the past eight or nine months. When we started our consideration, we could never have imagined something like COVID-19 and the impact that it would have on all parts of our society. That includes the impact on our agri-food industry and how DAERA has used its budget to respond to and deal with it.

I will start by referring to the additional agri-food COVID-19 funding that DAERA bid for and was successful in obtaining. We have every reason to be proud of our agri-food industry. It has kept operating and kept the food supply chain running seamlessly during the worst of the lockdown and into this new phase, and we have every confidence that it will continue to do so in the coming months. For some, however, particularly the farmers, it has not been easy. We have an industry here that produces high-quality food that is exported all over the world. It has also been supplying the hospitality and catering industries, and it is that aspect that has taken a direct hit. Be it seafood, our grass-fed cattle and hill sheep or our local potatoes, the farmers have taken a body blow as the markets for their produce — the export and the home markets — have just disappeared. The AERA Minister made a bid for and received an additional £25 million for the agri-food sector. As I indicated, that was with the full support of the Committee. We, as a Committee, also took a specific interest in that funding and have helped to shape how it is distributed. We made a quick call for evidence and heard in writing from a large number of farmers and stakeholder groups about what was happening on the ground and what support was needed.

There are two schemes for the distribution of the £25 million support. The first, with the bulk of the money, is for the dairy, beef, sheep and potato farmers and accounts for £21.4 million. The dairy sector gets up to £11 million, while the beef sector gets £7 million. That scheme is now closed. The Committee was clear with the Department that the funding should be targeted at those who were most in need and had suffered most loss and that it should

be equitable in its distribution. Some members still have concerns about the funding for beef cattle and whether enough was given to sheep farmers. However, we are all aware that we are not out of the woods when it comes to the financial impact on farmers. Further support may yet be needed in this financial year.

The second scheme is aimed at the ornamental horticulture sector and accounts for £1.6 million. That is the sector from which many of our vegetables, soft fruits and garden plants come. When the secondary legislation to provide authority to the Department to spend that money came to the Agriculture Committee, it had concerns with the requirement for those businesses to be VAT-registered. The ornamental horticulture sector has lots of small businesses, many of which are not VAT-registered and would not, therefore, be eligible to apply. I am glad to say that we, as a Committee, made strong representation to DAERA on that aspect and that the requirement for VAT registration has now been removed. That funding scheme opened recently, and applications are now being received by DAERA.

An additional £1.5 million is being made available to the fisheries sector. Recently, the Committee wrote to the Department to get an update on that funding.

The Main Estimates and Supply resolution will also show that some £3.8 million of COVID-19 funding has been allocated towards waste. Most of that was to help local authorities to cope with the closure of public amenity sites during lockdown and the resultant increase in fly-tipping.

The Committee was aware that the aquaculture sector was also suffering, so it was pleased to hear that £368,000 had been secured for it, with 80% of that coming from the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund.

I will move on to the next major area of financial concern for the Committee and one to which we have recently turned our attention: the financial impact on DAERA of preparing for and delivering EU exit at the end of the transition period. In written briefings to the Committee, DAERA noted that it needed an additional 456 staff to support the wider delivery of Brexit and was actively working to fill those posts. However, there is no baseline funding for those staff. The Department, therefore, has flagged up to the Department of Finance a requirement of £25.6 million resource DEL to cover the full-year costs of those staff in 2021-22. Additional staffing may be required depending on the need for contingency arrangements.

Under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and the protocol, DAERA is required to implement the EU Official Controls Regulation. That includes sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks on regulated goods arriving at points of entry into the jurisdiction. The preparedness work includes physical facilities as well as IT systems and trained staff. It also requires reprioritising DAERA work programmes and the staff resource required to deliver post-transition official controls. DAERA had submitted a business case to the Treasury. In August, its business case to procure facilities for physical checks, with the aim of reducing the need for documentary and ID checks of goods to be carried out at points of entry, was successful. The costs for its preferred option are approximately £45 million, with £38 million required for upfront capital expenditure. Around £6 million of revenue will be required

for recruiting, employing and training additional personnel and programme implementation costs.

Yet another major issue with EU exit is the future funding to replace current EU funding. As Members are aware, the bulk of EU funding that comes to DAERA is paid out as direct payments to farmers. While the Committee welcomes the fact that funding of £293 million has been secured for 2020-21, it still has concerns about what will happen beyond that date. Recently, payments began to be issued to farmers, and DAERA was able to get some 94% of payments, totalling £265.7million, out on the first day. The payments will include a 4.3% linear increase on basic payment entitlements.

I also note that Penny Mordaunt MP, the Paymaster General, wrote to the devolved Administrations on 13 July 2020 confirming the British Government's manifesto commitment to maintain the current annual budgets for farming and fishing for the duration of the Parliament. That confirmation is welcomed as a starting point. However, the Committee recently received a letter, which it will consider this week, from the Minister of Finance to the Chair of the Finance Committee on EU funding. In that letter, the Finance Minister notes with regard to replacements for agriculture funding that, while the guarantee has been received from the British Government, there are concerns about how elements of the funding for that guarantee have been calculated and that that could result in a cut in support for rural communities. As I said, that is new information, and the Committee will have to decide how it wishes to take that forward.

The Committee has also expressed concerns about replacement funding for rural development —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr McAleer: Thank you for the opportunity to make this speech. In the Budget debate, I will speak in my capacity as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs.

Mr Humphrey (The Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee): As Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, I will address the Supply resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 Statement of Excesses.

On 2 July and 8 July of this year, the Public Accounts Committee considered the reports by the Comptroller and Auditor General on the resource accounts of Departments that had exceeded the limits of expenditure authorised by the Northern Ireland Assembly. That is part of the Northern Ireland Assembly's control framework over government spending. It is the role of the Public Accounts Committee to scrutinise the reasons behind each Department's excess of allocated resources and to report to the Assembly on whether it has any objections to making good the reported excesses.

The Committee reported to the Assembly on the Excess Votes (Northern Ireland) 2016-17 on 8 July 2020. I will outline the Committee's consideration of those Excess Votes. First, it is important to note that, due to the dissolution of the Assembly in January 2017, the process of considering the approval of the 2016-17 spring Supplementary Estimates by way of a Budget Bill could not take place. As a direct consequence, a number of

Departments incurred resource and cash excesses. Specifically, in 2016-17, nine Departments incurred Excess Votes. Seven Departments incurred resource excesses totalling £183.12 million and six Departments incurred cash excesses totalling £112.62 million. There were no Excess Votes in 2015-16. The Committee noted that eight of those excesses were technical in nature, as the mechanism to regularise revised resource and cash requirements was not available to Departments. The Public Accounts Committee notes that, in the majority of cases, if the Assembly had been sitting, those Excesses could have been regularised in-year through the Supplementary Estimates process. The remaining case involved other budgetary issues that would have resulted in an Excess Vote even if the Assembly had approved the spring Supplementary Estimate.

The specific case was the Department of Health's Health and Social Care (HSC) pension scheme, which incurred a resource excess of £2.22 million because the current service cost figure used in the budgetary process had been underestimated as a result of the actual payroll details not being available at the time. We understand that the Department has advised the Comptroller and Auditor General that it will continue to liaise with the Government Actuary's Department to determine what further reviews can be carried out when the spring Supplementary Estimate forecast is being prepared. They will continue to work closely together to scrutinise forecasts to ensure that they are as robust as possible.

Having considered the reasons for the Excess Votes, the Committee recommends that the Assembly provides additional resources, as summarised for each Department or other public body in part 1 of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020. However, it is important to stress that the scale of some of the excesses suggest to the Public Accounts Committee that there is room for greater precision in budget setting. We, therefore, welcome the fact that the Comptroller and Auditor General is conducting a separate investigation of the operation of the budgetary process in Northern Ireland. We look forward to the outcome of that work.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I welcome the opportunity to reflect on the Committee's considerations. Further to briefings that we received in April and June, the Health Committee was updated last week by departmental officials on this year's financial situation in Health and Social Care. Once again, our briefing was couched in terms of the ongoing uncertainty of the situation given the rising and ongoing COVID-19 pressures.

By way of overview, while the budget for 2020-21 saw a rise of 4.7% and the Department has benefited from subsequent in-year allocations, Members will be aware that significant pressures remain. Our lengthy waiting lists are well documented, most New Decade, New Approach transformation commitments remain unfunded, and the pressures on the system continue to rise.

1.00 pm

I will speak first about the resource budget. The 1%, or £50 million, savings target for trusts, previously flagged as risky, remains a significant challenge, not least in the context of coronavirus but also because of assumptions

that previous savings would be recurrent, despite the Department's acknowledgement that there was little evidence to back that up. The Committee has now been advised that the Department is bidding for £15 million of additional resource to address around half of the projected unmet financial pressures in trusts. Officials did state, however, that there can at times be reduced demand towards the end of the financial year, and that may alleviate remaining pressures somewhat.

Upon the return of the Assembly, we were advised that £30 million was required to address red-flag and urgent cases of elective care, plus a further £50 million to clear the backlog of long-waiters, yet the Department sought and received only £10.3 million in June for that purpose, because of COVID pressure on capacity. It is now seeking a relatively small additional amount of £1.5 million.

The Committee has sought an updated projection of waiting times and hopes that the dedicated day-procedure centre at Lagan Valley Hospital will help ease some of the pressures. Pressures from staff costs have resulted in a further £6.7 million bid for resource for an inflationary pay increase being implemented across here, England, Scotland and Wales.

The Committee has been advised that, owing to a failure to secure end-year flexibility on funding for the Encompass project, the resulting requirement to absorb the £48 million cost from this year's capital budget has created unmet pressures for estate maintenance, equipment and fleet. The Department is therefore bidding for additional resource in that area. Officials acknowledged that current uncertainties create major risks to projects at or near building stage, where the Department may not be able to spend as planned.

The Department now expects to spend around £94 million on transformation projects. Although that is a tiny fraction of the £6 billion budget, it is significantly more than the Department expected to have available at the start of the year. It exceeds, although not by much, the £81 million projected requirement to stand still, but officials also stated that transformation has become an element of all services, not just the dedicated transformation projects. Transformation remains key to safeguarding the future of our health and social care system. That level of funding is simply incapable of delivering the scale of change required. Nevertheless, some comfort can be drawn from the undoubted innovation and determination seen in continuing efforts to transform services even while we are in the midst of a pandemic.

It is clear that the entire budgetary discussion is dominated by COVID-19 pressures. Those pressures impact on capacity, irrespective of how much money could be allocated in the coming months. Pre-existing workforce shortages have been exacerbated, and that is an issue that takes years to solve, given the long lead-in times, despite a touchingly positive response to the workforce appeal, which has brought hundreds of workers out of retirement at a time of need and at a time when we deeply appreciate that effort.

The current estimated cost of the crisis is around £900 million. In addition to previous allocations, the Department hopes to draw down a further tranche of £526 million of funding from a centrally held pot now that it has completed a required needs assessment. The Department has

identified unmet capital pressures of £33 million to deal with COVID pressures and has submitted a bid for further resource in that area. The resources are required to cover PPE, the Nightingale hospital, surge planning, testing, staff costs, rebuilding services and the digital rebuild, which is a range of IT solutions to enable HSC to resume services in a way that is safe for patients and staff.

Needless to say, there remains much uncertainty about the further costs of the pandemic in the months to come. The Department has therefore advised us that its capacity to rebuild services will depend on the nature and severity of the pandemic over those coming months.

I conclude my remarks as Health Committee Chair there and will contribute as Sinn Féin's health spokesperson in tomorrow's debate.

Mr McCrossan (The Chairperson of the Audit Committee): I will speak first as Chairperson of the Audit Committee. The main role of the Audit Committee is to scrutinise and agree the budgets and Estimates of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO), and to lay the Estimates before the Assembly. The Committee also undertakes a budget scrutiny role for the Assembly Commission, although my contribution today will relate solely to the Estimates for the Audit Office and ombudsman, given that the functions in respect of the Commission are yet to be codified. The Committee recently agreed to take advice to progress this matter.

The Audit Committee fulfils its Estimates role in place of the Department of Finance in recognition of the independence of these non-ministerial bodies, although the Committee has regard to the advice of DOF — and the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) in respect of the Audit Office — in carrying out this role.

The Audit Committee's 'Report on the Estimates of the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman 2020-21' was laid in the Business Office on 10 September 2020. The contents of that report reflect the factual position on the Committee's scrutiny and deliberations relating to the evidence from both the Audit Office and the ombudsman on their draft budgets for 2020-21. That position was reflected in a Committee report published on 5 March 2020.

It was anticipated that the Main Estimates giving legal effect to those budgets would follow in June. However, given the impact of the public health pandemic, that process was postponed. Instead, what followed was a Budget (No. 2) Bill and further Vote on Account, allowing the Main Estimates to be taken forward at this time.

When considering the Estimates for both bodies, the Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance, which indicated that the figures included in the Main Estimates for 2020-21 would be those figures included in the Committee's report on the draft budgets, published on 5 March 2020. The Committee was also informed that the cash, resources and accruing resources, for which the Assembly's approval will be sought in the corresponding Budget (No. 3) Bill, will also be written to that position. On that basis, the Committee was content to agree its position by way of Standing Order 115(9).

In its report published on 10 September, the Committee noted that the Estimates were consistent with the figures

set out in the Executive's draft Budget document, as explained in correspondence from the Department of Finance and accompanying reconciliation information, which is provided as part of the Committee's report. We also noted that PAC agreed that its view, reached on 20 February 2020, remained unchanged and that it had no further comment to make in that regard.

The consideration of the draft Estimates and associated correspondence formed the basis of the Committee report, which gave legal effect to the Audit Committee's statutory function of laying the Estimates for the NIAO and NIPSO before the Assembly. Those were submitted to the Department of Finance for inclusion in the Main Estimates.

Given the connection between the figures in the Estimates and draft budget reports, I would like to highlight some of the Committee's deliberations concerning the budgets for the NIAO and NIPSO. Members questioned officials on the Audit Office's new business model and transformation work undertaken in recent times. The Committee also sought clarification on the capital budget to refurbish the NIAO's accommodation, and members recently received an update on the increased costs for that project.

Despite its relatively small budget, Committee members were struck by the wide remit of the NIPSO, as well as the growing numbers of complaints considered since the office's inception in 2016. Members have taken an interest in the NIPSO's role in relation to the Complaints Standards Authority in respect of potential savings by reducing the number of complaints finding their way to the NIPSO in the first place. Now that a permanent ombudsman appointment has been made, we look forward to productive engagement in the coming months.

As I have said before, the Committee would be supportive of a multi-year budgetary framework, enabling an improved strategic budgetary focus. The Committee has noted that any changes to the budget allocations for the Northern Ireland Audit Office or the NIPSO during the 2020-21 financial year will be handled through the spring Supplementary Estimates. We will examine those with appropriate diligence in due course. That concludes my comments as Chair of the Audit Committee.

I will now make a few comments as an MLA for West Tyrone and my party's education spokesperson. The times that we are in are, obviously, unprecedented, and we are all learning as the days arise. It is also very clear that, throughout our respective constituencies and in absolutely every facet of life, our people are being impacted upon as a result of the virus.

When schools reopened, after months of closure, we saw the huge and crippling consequences of the pandemic on our teaching and non-teaching staff. It is vital that, as far as possible, our schools are fully and absolutely resourced to ensure that our teachers and school leaders can cope with the incredible pressures that have arisen as a result of the pandemic.

It is also important that the allocations made are relative to the crisis that we face in our economy. Many businesses out there have fallen between stools of late and will undoubtedly do so again on this occasion. It is important that the Assembly works collectively to ensure that no person is left behind and that whatever financial interventions are available are sought and delivered to them.

We are in very difficult times. We face a tsunami of challenges in the Assembly and in society. People are finding it extremely tough. They have to make decisions about how to protect the health of their family and, at the same time, how to feed them. It is a very complicated and difficult situation for us all, but it is very important that the Minister consider making as many interventions as possible, with the help of the British Government in Westminster, to ensure that we support businesses as much as possible. We should also ensure that we match the support that is available elsewhere, even the £500 isolation fund that is available in England. That should be available here to support our people and ensure that they can make informed and correct decisions to protect them and their families at this time.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the A5. I have mentioned it at every possible hurdle when we have been speaking about finances in Northern Ireland, and I would like to see it fully delivered. The SDLP has the Ministry, and I have every confidence in our Minister, but I hope that the Finance Minister will allocate the funds necessary to deliver that project. It will transform the lives of the people in my constituency and throughout the north-west.

Mr Nesbitt: I want to make two general points and one specific point. I declare an interest as a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. It is clear that the Chief Constable is on a mission to transform the Police Service: its numbers, its estate and through the use of the IT and digital technology that are available to him. It is also clear that he wishes to change the uniform. We learned today that he has initiated a pilot scheme in which 150 officers are road-testing what we might call a more relaxed and modern uniform, certainly one without a shirt and tie, which is creating much feedback on social media.

If we look back 21 years, we see that Chris Patten and his Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland made two key recommendations. Number 44 was:

“Policing with the community should be the core function of the police service and the core function of every police station”

Recommendation 45 was:

“Every neighbourhood (or rural area) should have a dedicated policing team with lead responsibility for policing its area”.

To achieve those recommendations, we must honour the commitment in New Decade, New Approach to increase the complement of police officers to 7,500. That is a key challenge for the Minister of Finance, because, this day last week, the Minister of Justice stood in the Chamber and told us that her priority was dealing with “inescapable pressures”, which she defined as dealing with:

“just standing still” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 131, p260, col 2].

not to deliver on any commitments under New Decade, New Approach.

The specific point that I want to mention is one that has been raised by the Police Service: funding for EU exit. The police believe that they are just over £4 million short — I believe that it is £4.1 million — of the money that should be delivered to them for that purpose. I am not aware whether that money

rests with the Department of Finance or is still with the Treasury in London. However, if the Minister has the power to sign off on that, I urge him to do so. If not, I urge him to use whatever influence he has to ensure that the money is released as soon as possible from London and made available to Simon Byrne and his senior team of officers.

The other general point that I would like to make is about multi-year Budgets. I know that the Minister favours those, and I am sure that he is frustrated that, to a certain extent, we have to follow the lead from London, which has broken down somewhat and is not following the expected route. I want to approach it from the point of view of users on the ground and put on record the experience that I had in the two years during which I helped to set up the Commission for Victims and Survivors of the conflict.

That put us in direct contact with up to 100 voluntary and community groups, all of which existed to help provide services for those who had been injured and hurt during the course of our long conflict.

1.15 pm

There were two things that I discovered with regard to annual budgeting. The first was that a group might identify a new service that it could offer and which might be of benefit to many of its members. After securing funding, it might employ a key worker to deliver that service, but that key worker might be on a one-year annual contract, and after six, seven or eight months that worker would be thinking about the fact that they had a mortgage to pay, a car to run and a family to look after, so they would become concerned about whether that contract would be renewed. However, when they asked the organisation, the organisation was not able to give them a solid answer, because it was waiting to see what the Executive were going to do with regard to next year's Budget. What would often happen is that that key worker would then see a job advertised in the statutory sector, and off they would go. The net effect on the people who that worker was providing the service for was that they had been taken up a nice ladder to a better place, but were now down the long snake and in a worse place because they knew that there was better to be had.

The second problem with annual funding is that the voluntary and community sectors are therefore disinclined to share best practice. Sharing best practice is surely exactly what we want them to do, to ensure that we get the best return for our investment. However, if you are competing on an annual basis for a budget, then you are not going to share best practice for fear that the person who you are sharing with is going to put in the better bid for next year's budget, which means that you may end up losing out.

I hope that the Minister retains his drive and desire to see multi-year Budgets, and that this is the last time that we will have this debate in these terms in the House. It is not just about the quantum of money that we allocate but the manner and conditions with which we allocate it.

Mr Frew: I will say at the outset that these are unique times. It is a strange year, not least for the officials in the Department of Finance. I have a certain sympathy for officials — it may sometimes not seem like it in the Committee — who have had to work extremely hard on the budgetary process this year, and of course for the next year, with all of the unknowns that that brings. However,

this difficult year has brought with it an influx of money and whilst I am certainly not blaming the officials on this, it is clear that we seem to be struggling to spend the additional Barnett consequential money. It is very clear, not least in the last week, that we need more strategic thought injected into the Executive's decisions, and the Finance Minister is at the heart of that. It has been stated here, even by the last Member to speak, that we should have multi-year Budgets. I think that all of us recognise the advantage of having multi-year Budgets. That is how we deliver our budgets at home — of course it is — so why would that not be the case in a Government and in a devolved Assembly like this?

However, you can have all the multi-year Budgets that you like, but unless you bring strategic thought to those Budgets then one year will roll into the next, one error will roll into the next error, and instead of having errors on a yearly basis, we will have them on a three-yearly basis and nothing will change. So again, yes, the cry should be heard loudly about multi-year Budgets, but unless you have strategic thought injected into that by the Executive, it will count for absolutely nothing.

One query I ask of the Minister for when he is preparing his statement — I know that his officials will be listening — is about table 1.3, which is a summary of total amounts. With regard to the Vote on Account, the resources do not match up, bar two, with the Vote on Account which we passed months ago in the Assembly. I am asking this genuinely because again, I do not know: why are they different? Is it due to injections of money that they have had over the months? If so, why are they based in table 1.3? Why not start off with the Vote on Account sums and then build up the balance and total provision? I am seeking clarification on that from the Minister and the officials.

Here we are, having to go through what will be called the Budget (No. 3) Bill and the uniqueness that that brings with it; it is really, really strange. Yet out on the ground, after all the months that we have had to cope with this crisis, there are sectors that have still received no support. Haulage companies, travel agents, taxi services, the newly self-employed, social enterprises and the supply chains of businesses that no longer need their supplies have not been supported as they should have. Of course, there were the big-ticket issues that came down from on high. There was the furlough scheme and the rates holidays, which were gratefully accepted because they were, without doubt, game changers; they were the big-ticket issues. However, we seem to have struggled to spend all the other money that has come down, and there is a central pot yet to be allocated. The Minister says that he is waiting for bids and Ministers say that the bids have gone in, yet here we go along.

Mr Catney: I thank the Member for giving way. I commend the Member's effort on the Committee and what we try to do on it. However, when we speak about big-ticket ideas to help the Finance Department, we, as a Committee, should be bringing forward ideas. That is our role as well. I hope that the Member agrees with me that our job is not just to scrutinise figures. Collectively, we should be trying to bring forward ideas that will help the Finance Department to get us out of this.

Mr Speaker: The Member does not have an extra minute.

Mr Frew: That is fine, Mr Speaker. Thank you for your judgement.

I agree with the Member entirely. That will have to be a vital cog, especially when we move to multi-year Budgets, and, of course, this year's Budget, with all the uncertainty that it brings.

You can have all the big-ticket issues and ideas in your head that you like, but the best way to support businesses at this time is to allow them to trade safely. The Health Minister talked in biblical terms at the start of this crisis, so let me talk in biblical terms: it is a God-given right for a person to endeavour to earn a living to provide for his or her family. It is a God-given right, yet the Executive removed that right without having any idea about the support mechanisms that will be in place.

I met businesses last week, and none of them is in a good place. This week, some of them will be making the decision to close shop forever. I know of a hairdresser's that employs 18 people — six at any given time in the shop — that has been cutting hair safely, with all the measures that it invested in. Yet none of the staff knows where their next pay cheque is coming from or whether they have a job. That is a sad state of affairs that should not be. The Executive will say, "We are doing this for your own protection. It is for your own good. We are here to protect you". Who is here to protect the people from the very Executive making those decisions? I see no rhyme nor reason for closing businesses that have put in place measures to safeguard staff and customers. I have yet to see any evidence to suggest that those businesses were the places where the virus was contracted.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Frew: It is an absolute shame and disgrace that an Executive can make a decision like that.

Ms Mullan: I speak as my party's education spokesperson. At the beginning of this financial year, the Department of Education received an 11% increase on last year's resource budget. That was the first significant increase in the Education budget for 10 years. That increase in funding to the Department of Education made it possible to make long-awaited pay awards to our teachers and to invest further resources in areas like improving special educational needs provision. The onset of COVID-19 has brought with it much tragedy and uncertainty. I pay tribute to our teaching and non-teaching staff, our youth sector, childcare services, unions and the wider education sector for the way that they have adapted in order to continue to deliver.

Like every Department, Education has had to make changes to its initial budget plans and bid for extra resources in order to deal with the emergency that we find ourselves in. I commend the leadership and initiative shown by the Finance Minister throughout the crisis, particularly in the context of education and, more recently, in my constituency. The Minister also ensured that our most disadvantaged children and young people were supported over the summer months with free school meals direct payments. In a very short period and in what were very difficult circumstances, the Finance Minister not only delivered a much-needed increase to the Education budget but made real-term increases to all Executive budgets.

We now need to see the financial commitments that were made in New Decade, New Approach by the British and Irish Governments delivered. Pre-COVID, Education pressures still existed, and, with those in mind, it is important that we deliver on the basis of objective need. I am extremely concerned by the disruption that the pandemic is causing for our young people's education. We must strive to create the environment in our education system where every child, regardless of their background, gets the best start in life and is given the ability to reach their maximum potential.

We must seek to enshrine a culture of collaboration and joined-up thinking across the Executive. Departments should be able and should be encouraged to share costs in achieving common outcomes. We are now entering an economic crisis that is like none that we have seen before. Those are the circumstances in which the Finance Minister and our Executive are operating. Our budgetary processes have operated in an unusual way this year, but we are in extraordinary and unprecedented times. I encourage all Members to acknowledge that and to support the motions.

Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I welcome the opportunity to speak as the Chairperson of the Education Committee. I will also take this opportunity to pay tribute to and thank teaching and non-teaching staff across Northern Ireland for the innovative and courageous way in which they have responded to the pandemic.

As the Minister indicated, the debate would, ordinarily, happen in June and the balancing amounts would be expected to be a lot higher. Instead, due to the COVID crisis, the Executive sought and secured an additional and larger Vote on Account in May. Those changes were necessary, but they make it difficult for Committees to track the financial progress of their respective Departments.

The extra-large Vote on Account for Education was deemed necessary to cover a significant number of additional pressures, including the provision of free school meals payments and support schemes for childcare provision. The first of those was, regrettably, poorly delivered, but the second, thankfully, was more successful. There was also a scheme to support substitute teachers.

The Department of Education has advised that the cost of restarting education in schools will be just over £100 million in the current financial year and that it sought £57 million and received £42 million for the autumn term. The additional funding will include £12 million for PPE, £6 million for school cleaning, £12 million for substitute teacher cover and £3.3 million for blended learning in schools. That spending, as well as known pressures and obligations relating to New Decade, New Approach, including teachers' pay, which we welcome, appears to have driven the Department of Education's budget from around £2.1 billion in 2014-15 to £2.67 billion in the 2020-21 Main Estimates.

The Main Estimates also include references to capital spending. The COVID lockdown may well have had an adverse impact on the Education Department's capital spending programme for this year, so perhaps the Minister will indicate in his response whether he believes that capital spending on new school builds and on other works will resume in this financial year.

Perhaps the Minister will also clarify the position on Fresh Start capital.

The Department of Education has advised that there is uncertainty around spending on the Strule project. Will he confirm whether the Treasury has agreed to allow the Executive to access all of the significant unspent Fresh Start money and to profile it over the next few years?

1.30 pm

In my position as an Alliance MLA, I draw to the Finance Minister's attention reports that funding from the Department of Education Engage programme has been used to procure access to private transfer test tutoring or tutoring applications for some pupils in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister and his Executive colleagues ensure that there is an assessment of the appropriateness of the use of that Executive-provided public fund?

It is unacceptably clear that the structure and financing of our education system is in crisis. I ask the Finance Minister that, in addition to financial support for education, he supports the urgent establishment of the independent review of education to inform the transformation that we need to deliver equal educational opportunity for all children and young people.

Ms Dillon: As has been outlined by, I think, all the Members who have spoken, we are in a difficult year and in difficult times. That is not simply down to COVID. The House must recognise that we already had challenges: not only Tory austerity and their approach to how they would finance any Department or any public body but the Brexit debacle. In my role as justice spokesperson, I say that there are challenges in the justice family, particularly for the PSNI and how it will police what could come our way as a result of Brexit and how it will police the current regulations and all that they bring with them.

There are many competing justice priorities, and we would love to see the delivery of all the things that are important to us. We particularly need to see the implementation of all the Gillen recommendations. We have just completed the Committee Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, which has the potential to be transformative. I say "potential" because, if it is not properly resourced and proper training is not put in place, the legislation will not be worth the paper that it is written on. It is important that the Minister looks at her priorities and works with the Committee in moving forward. We have many challenges.

One of the main concerns will be the victims' pension payment and how that will be resourced. I was happy that the Executive approached the British Government in a united way to ensure that they are held to account. This is their legislation; they brought it forward. I have many difficulties with the scheme, and I intend to challenge them. People will be excluded, and that should not happen. Victims are victims: end of story. Victims deserve to be supported, but the fight is not theirs. They deserve to be paid; they do not need to wait any longer for the payments. People are dying as they wait for the payments, and we need to ensure that they get them. The British Government need to accept their responsibility and put proper resources in place. Bringing forward legislation without resources is an atrocity in itself.

As I said, there are many challenges in the justice sector. I want to raise some issues from my constituency. Over the past weekend, many businesses and self-employed people have raised issues with me. Mr Frew referred to businesses and sectors that were not supported during the previous restrictions. I hope that he will use whatever influence he has with the Economy Minister to address that, because I have raised it numerous times in the House. Sectors that were not helped in the last lockdown have no assurances about what will happen this time.

I thank the Finance Minister for his speedy response in putting in place the grants for rateable businesses, but we have no assurances for the self-employed or for those who do not have rateable businesses. I want to see those assurances from the Economy Minister and Ministers with responsibility for other sectors. I met a number of sectors last week, including the coach industry, which has had no financial assistance either. We want to see that coming forward. That is not only for the Economy Minister, but it is the main responsibility of the Economy Minister. We have to acknowledge that. She needs to take responsibility. I urge you to use whatever influence you have to ensure that those sectors' needs are met.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. There are issues with the new scheme that the Finance Minister produced last week. First, it is nowhere near enough money. Secondly, it is based on the rates base, which is a very blunt instrument. Thirdly, given that it is not enough, the people who obtain that money are worried that they will disqualify themselves from further support in the future.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for his intervention. The Minister can deal only with rate-based businesses; it is the Economy Minister's responsibility to deal with the rest. If we knew what was coming forward from the Economy Department, they would know whether they will be excluding themselves. It is important that we get the information from the Economy Department on how those issues are dealt with.

I could go into the detail of many spheres that will be affected, particularly in the justice family, but we would be here all day. Everybody knows that we face serious challenges. I want to see all our Ministers working together to ensure that we face those challenges realistically. The biggest concern of the businesses that I met on Friday was about Brexit. They said that they believed that they would get some financial help for COVID and that, eventually, we would come out of it but that Brexit would be a long and painful process.

Mr O'Toole: Here we are again. Today and tomorrow, we debate the Main Estimates on departmental spending for the financial year 2020-21. That is a few months after we were due to do so, given the extreme extenuating circumstances. It has been, to put it mildly, an unusual year in budgeting terms. We have had lots of opportunity to debate spending plans, but, unfortunately, we have had little by way of spending strategy. We have had retrospective approvals of spending that happened while the Assembly was not sitting, including the excesses that we are voting on today. We have had hurried Votes on Account to authorise spending brought forward by the pandemic. We have also had a Budget document that was, by the Executive's own account, mostly obsolete by the time that it was published.

It is worth saying that most of that is not the fault of the Department or the Executive. When the Assembly and Executive re-formed in January of this year, no one expected the first year back to be dominated by managing a pandemic and the subsequent economic turmoil. Given that the UK Government helped to coordinate New Decade, New Approach, it was to be assumed that they would take seriously the promises in it around multi-year budgeting. They have not, and we know that there will be nothing approaching a comprehensive spending review this year. Nevertheless, there are real questions about how the Executive have approached budgeting over the past number of months and what their approach will be in the months to come; in particular, it is important to understand exactly what is being done to produce a joined-up economic recovery package for the sectors most directly affected by the ongoing pandemic. That relates not just to the Finance Minister but, as others have said, to the Economy Minister. Publicans, cafe owners, hairdressers, taxi drivers and countless others are struggling for existence; they are struggling to see a way through the next few weeks, let alone the next few months. Given the severity of the crisis that we face, they will want to know that we are doing absolutely everything in our toolbox to help them. It is not clear at the moment that we are. I will elaborate on a few points on that, but, first, I have a couple of specific points on the Main Estimates document and the broader picture around budgeting.

A couple of weeks ago, the Minister told us about his intervention with other devolved Finance Ministers. It would be helpful to understand precisely what flexibility he has asked for. There was a degree of strategic vagueness in the statement; I understand that there may be reasons for that. He specifically talked about the Budget exchange scheme, which allows devolved Administrations to carry forward underspend of 0.6% of resource and 1.5% of capital. It would be helpful to know precisely what he is asking for. Is it just that those shares should increase, or is it something more complex? Moreover, in the same statement to the Assembly, the Minister said that his requests were limited and logical. I am sure that I will agree with him that they are necessary, but what are they? Given the gravity of the situation that our workforce and small businesses, in particular, face, it would be helpful to understand exactly how those flexibilities will be used.

On those flexibilities specifically, can the Minister explain to us what is being done to convert underspent capital into in-year resource funding that we can get out the door to small businesses and their staff? That is really critical. As we know — we have talked a bit about it today — historically it has been a challenge for us to spend capital quickly enough, specifically financial transactions capital. I would like to see us make full use of FTC, but what are we asking the Treasury for in order to convert any underspend to resource spending and get it out the door? The Finance Department acknowledged to the Committee that the Executive might struggle to get all £100 million of FTC out the door in this financial year. Are officials working on schemes that could aid our recovery from COVID by making urgent FTC allocations? If not, how much of the unallocated funding do they think that the Treasury will convert into conventional funding or resource spending?

There is also the question of reinvestment and reform initiative borrowing power, in which we have £200 million of headroom. In May, I asked the Minister whether he was

looking at that. He said then that he was looking at it in general, but we have not heard anything about it since. Given the dire situation that we face, people watching today will want to know that we are not just waiting for Barnett consequentials. It is right to push London for further allocation, but, given the London Government that is in it, as it were, we need to demonstrate to the people that we are pulling out every stop that we have at our disposal.

The risk is not that we do too much but that we do too little. Those are the words of Jay Powell, the chair of the US Federal Reserve. They are also the words of Pearse Doherty, Sinn Féin's finance spokesperson in Dáil Éireann. He is right: now is not the time to be precious about borrowing costs. The IMF said last week that Governments around the world, whether they are sovereign or, as in our case, devolved, should not think about the cost of borrowing. Costs are at historical lows. We should do absolutely everything to spend money where we need to, because not only do we face the unprecedented challenge of COVID-19 but we face the looming cliff edge at the end of the Brexit transition period.

I will not labour arguments about the specifics of Brexit — most Members know what I think about that — but every Department in the Main Estimates document specifies that EU exit costs are a specific pressure this year, but there is not a line from the Department or the Executive explaining in an overarching sense what those costs are. What precisely is EU exit costing us? Declan McAleer, the Chair of the AERA Committee mentioned the pressures. Mike Nesbitt mentioned them in relation to policing, as did Linda Dillon. It would be helpful to get a sense, by Department and globally, of precisely what EU exit is costing us. I know that the Minister is putting pressure on the Treasury in that regard, but it would be helpful to know exactly what we face in the cost of implementing the protocol, the loss of funding and, more broadly, the administrative implications.

No one thought that we would be dealing this year with the biggest pandemic in anyone's lifetime, but our citizens were certainly entitled to expect that the economic and financial response to the crisis would be ambitious and comprehensive. Unfortunately, it has not yet been either. While much of the responsibility sits with the Economy Department, it is true that, in the absence of an agreed Programme for Government or even a coherent crisis response plan, our in-year budgeting process has become the de facto strategic policy driver for the Executive. If it has to be that way, let us at least ensure that we show maximum ambition and maximum effort on behalf of our workers and our small businesses as we plot our way through the crisis. We may not have a road map or a GPS for the unprecedented period ahead, but surely we can do better than simply wait for people to shout directions from the side of the road.

Mr McGuigan: I am conscious that the debate today about the North's Main Estimates and the Budget debate tomorrow come a week after a similar debate on the Budget of the Twenty-six Counties. The two Budgets and the two debates expose the stark nature of partition and its impact on the island. In the South, there is a Government inefficiently using public money and failing to direct it to where it is most needed; in the North, the Finance Minister is dependent on the British Exchequer and is being hamstrung from making better financial decisions

because he does not have the necessary financial tools at his disposal.

In the midst of the global health pandemic in which we find ourselves, I wonder what different decisions we could have taken on behalf of the citizens whom we represent if we had done so on an all-island basis and if countless Southern Governments and right-wing Tory Governments had not imposed years of austerity Budgets that have resulted in a lack of investment in our health service, education, infrastructure and every other public service.

1.45 pm

Ireland as a whole has suffered from the effects of partition, but no part has suffered more, particularly economically, than the northern six counties. Minister, I look forward to the day — I hope that it will be soon — when I can watch you or our colleague Pearse Doherty set out a fair Budget as Finance Minister on behalf of all the people of this island. It will be a Budget fair to workers, families and small business owners, that builds up the capacity of our health service and addresses the damage that partition has done to the prosperity and wealth of the island of Ireland and its population.

Ach ba mhaith liom mo bhuíochas a ghabháil leis an Aire as an obair ghasa atá déanta aige lena chinntiú gur tugadh amach an t-airgead go héifeachtach le linn na paidéime. All that being said, and dealing with the current reality, I thank the Minister for his efforts and the work of his Department throughout this extremely difficult period, for showing leadership and initiative and for acting speedily to ensure best use of the public finances within his remit.

This is not a normal year, and therefore this is not a normal Budget process. In the context of the current pandemic, protecting lives and livelihoods must, of course, be the priority. I welcome that the Health Department will receive an extra £1.4 million in the Minister's Budget.

I also note the work that the Minister has done to ensure that businesses are protected. Swift action at the beginning of the pandemic included the cessation of business rates, allocation of money to other Departments and the recent financial support scheme to help affected businesses. It is clear that not only should businesses be protected but we need to protect wages. As others have said, the new furlough scheme is nowhere near enough to protect workers. I note, Minister, that you are engaging with the British Treasury on that issue on behalf of employees in the North.

Other Members have commented on the businesses and workers that have had no protection throughout these difficult past few months. That issue needs to be addressed urgently. It is vital that some way is found to ensure that we protect the maximum proportion of our population. Like other MLAs, I have listened, over the past months, to many difficult accounts from constituents who are worried about protecting their businesses, jobs or their families. The Minister recently met some of those groups and individuals. I welcome his comments on the subject and, in particular, his request to other Ministers and Departments to quickly bring forward proposals that will address the situation.

Notwithstanding the challenges that the Executive face in dealing with coronavirus and its implications for the public purse, we still have the spectre of Brexit hanging

over our heads. That presents entirely separate economic difficulties. Unlike COVID-19, Brexit is a conscious and deliberate political act, driven by right-wing English nationalism against the wishes of the people in the North.

Against the background of all those financial challenges, I commend the Minister for the management of our public finances. I also welcome his commitment to multi-year Budgets, which will provide greater certainty and long-term planning. We now face an economic crisis that will be greater than anything that we have faced before. Economic recovery will be an enormous challenge in the time ahead, but the lessons that we need to learn from the last 10 years include the importance of investment in public services and green growth in the way forward. There should be no tolerance for the disastrous austerity agenda, which has been imposed on us by Tory Governments and has caused so much damage.

Mr Boylan: I want to say a few words as the Sinn Féin infrastructure spokesperson. I reiterate some things that the Chair and my colleague Linda Dillon mentioned already in relation to support for the taxi industry, coach operators and hauliers. They have waited far too long for recognition, and I hope that the Infrastructure Minister will bring something forward.

The Finance Minister is bringing this Budget forward amid the unprecedented COVID-19 health crisis and all the economic and social impacts that have followed. It would be an understatement to say that our financial position before the pandemic did not help our response to COVID. The effects of 10 years of Tory austerity on our public services, on our health service in particular, have undoubtedly impacted on our response to the current challenges. Our public services, such as those within the Department for Infrastructure, also suffered financially from that destructive Conservative financial policy, despite infrastructure having a vital role to play in connecting communities and driving balanced and sustainable economic growth.

Infrastructure, such as trunk roads, rural roads and our water and sewerage system, is essential to everyday life and is a bedrock of the economy and society as a whole. Public and community transport help to tackle rural isolation and provide equal access to opportunities and services. The importance of infrastructure is acknowledged in this year's Budget, as demonstrated by the fact that, despite our block grant being £360 million — in real terms, that is below pre-austerity levels — the Department for Infrastructure received an 8.6% increase in resource funding. DFI has also received a capital allocation of £558 million, the largest ever made to the Department and by far the largest capital allocation to any Department. Over the course of the pandemic, over £100 million has been allocated to the Department to alleviate pressures. Therefore, although pressures remain across all Departments, I commend the Minister for his management of our public finances in these difficult and challenging times, and against the background of all these financial challenges.

Moreover, these challenges have not gone away. Brexit, COVID and the climate emergency continue to loom over us. Infrastructure has a big role to play in helping to respond to these challenges. Capital projects can help to kick-start the economy. Therefore, the commencement of projects like the A5 must follow as soon as possible.

Meanwhile, North/South projects committed to in New Decade, New Approach, such as the Narrow Water bridge and the Ulster canal, must be realised in order to enhance connectivity and improve the economic fortunes of this island. I look forward to continuing to work and engage with the Department and the Minister to address these vital issues.

Mr Speaker: Members, pending Question Time, which will start at 2:00 pm, I will suspend this item in the Order Paper.

Mr Sheehan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I draw the Speaker's attention to the remarks made by the AERA Minister, Edwin Poots, on Friday, when he accused the nationalist/Catholic community of having spread this virus. He also called into question the collective decision-making of the Executive. Those comments were unbecoming of any Executive Minister, and I ask the Speaker to investigate the remarks and report back to the Assembly.

Mr Speaker: On that point of order, the Member will be aware that it is not within the bailiwick of the Speaker to deal with or address such comments. In fact, some of the comments might be described as touching on a breach of the ministerial code. Again, it is not the responsibility of the Speaker to adjudicate on that. The Member has made his point on the record.

We all know that, last week, the Executive and their colleagues, the Chief Medical Officer and so on, all worked very, very hard. Whatever we think, collectively or individually, about the outcome, people worked very hard last week and brought that message to the Chamber. All the party leaders called for a collective response and for people to put their shoulder to the wheel and work together. It is regrettable that, towards the end of the week, the calls for collective action and for people to stand shoulder to shoulder on this issue were, perhaps, undermined by some people's remarks.

When Members are commenting, especially on something as critical as the pandemic — people are trying to deal with this, and it involves very complex issues — it is important that they are mindful of how their comments sound and how they might be interpreted by others. The Member has made his point on the record. As I said, they are not matters for the Speaker to adjudicate on. However, I regret that, by the end of a week in which we saw a Trojan effort by the Executive to get an agreement, that agreement was, in some ways, and in the view of many out in society, undermined by a breach of the solidarity that had been expressed by the Executive.

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Can I draw to your attention the actions of the Minister for Communities? On Friday, before the relevant legislation was even made, the Minister issued a misconceived direction to sporting bodies that misrepresented what would be in the regulations and caused untold confusion and upset, not least at the Showgrounds in Coleraine. Should the House not expect the Minister to know what is in the law and whether it has or has not been made?

Mr Speaker: The only comment that I will add to my last remarks will be directed at all Ministers, and, indeed, at all Members: people need to be mindful of how they conduct their business. As I said, it is not for the Speaker to adjudicate on the remarks of individual Members or Ministers. Again, as I say, it is essential that the good

work of the Executive, the various Departments and all Members of the House in their own respective way not be undermined by the actions or words of any Member. Thank you.

I ask Members to take their ease while we prepare for Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Education

IT Equipment

1. **Mr McCann** asked the Minister of Education whether he is considering expanding the criteria for the provision of laptops and other IT equipment to pupils. (AQO 907/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for his question. Just looking down the list today, I think that it might have been quicker if I had done an education ard-fheis with the party opposite to cover all the topics.

The provision of devices and Wi-Fi for those pupils who need them has been a priority. I have invested significantly in the provision of laptops and other IT equipment. However, as with any finite budget, resources have to be targeted where there is greatest need. Therefore, priority has been given to children in year groups 12, 14, 7 and 4, in that order, who are entitled to free school meals and have either special educational needs, are newcomer or looked-after children or are otherwise vulnerable.

Where devices are available, there is no bar to young people from outside those year groups that I have identified and who are entitled to free school meals from applying for a device. The Education Authority (EA) is working with schools to manage that process.

Mr McCann: The Minister will know that many families that are in difficult circumstances fall just outside the qualifying criteria and that many of them have now had their employment and incomes impacted by the pandemic. Given the prospect of increasing levels of remote learning, does the Minister agree that the need for IT equipment is greater now than the initial scheme had anticipated?

Mr Weir: We continue to roll out devices. As of September, 5,500 devices had been rolled out. The latest figures that we have, which are up to 9 October, indicate that that figure is now 7,865. Additionally, 8,000 Chromebooks were purchased, 6,760 of which have been built to date, and just under 4,000 have been delivered to schools.

The Member makes an important point. We are working, first of all, with the EA to see whether its capital resources will be fully utilised this year and whether, if there is any underspend because of the practicalities of coronavirus, any additional money can be diverted to devices. If that proves insufficient, we will work with the Department of Finance to identify whether any other capital money can be diverted to digital devices. The Member is right: it is important that we ensure as much as possible that there is that level of provision.

I should make it clear that, early in the situation, we sought indications from schools. Where we find the greatest problem is not specifically with a household not having a digital device, but it is probably most pertinent where there is one device in a household with a number of people trying to share it. Allied to that is a need to retain, as much

as possible, face-to-face learning to minimise pressure. However, I am cognisant of the needs that are out there.

Mr Buckley: Will the Minister elaborate on how he and his Department plan to cater for children in rural areas, particularly with greater concern surrounding technology and, indeed, broadband access?

Mr Weir: In May, I announced the scheme to lend digital devices to pupils. That included devices that were in the system, as there was initially a misunderstanding that devices in the system could not be easily adapted. However, they could be, through C2k.

In addition, that scheme included the procurement of additional devices, and, also, critically for some rural areas, remote broadband connectivity solutions. In July, I announced that free Wi-Fi and mobile connectivity would be provided to children and young people, including those in rural settings, who did not have access to digital technology.

My Department carried out a rural needs impact assessment in relation to access to broadband and digital devices. With the level of broadband across the country, there is a barrier, some of which is entirely beyond the control of the Department. I have been working with the Education Authority to provide, in partnership with BT, a range of solutions to address connectivity problems for pupils, particularly those in rural settings, so I have given consideration to rurality. That includes supporting the provision of an initial quantity of up to 2,500 Mi-Fi devices, which is a mobile connectivity solution to support children who are not in a BT Wi-Fi hotspot, and the provision of 8,300 Wi-Fi vouchers for disadvantaged children *[Interruption]* with up to eight months —. There seem to be restrictions on technology in rural areas, but they do not seem to have pervaded the Chamber. *[Laughter.]* There will be the provision of 8,300 Wi-Fi vouchers for disadvantaged children, with up to eight months of internet access. The public-sector shared network project that is being delivered by BT — that contract was awarded by the Department of Finance, so we are, obviously, trying to work in a joined-up fashion — is in the pilot phase, but once it has been completely rolled out, it will see broadband connectivity increased in almost all schools.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I remind Members of the importance of devices being turned off. Also, questions should be brief and answers should not run over two minutes.

Schools: COVID-19-related Absences

2. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Education to outline the number of COVID-19-related absences among pupils and teaching staff. (AQO 908/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department publishes information on school attendance on the Department website on a weekly basis. That information provides the overall picture on school attendance but does not specify which absences are related to COVID. We have been working with the Public Health Agency (PHA) and the Department of Health — the figures on COVID-related absences are held by them, not the Department of Education — to ensure that the information is produced on a sensible, informative basis.

While we have been monitoring management information internally to get an indication of the trend, it is difficult to

give definitive figures on absences. However, let me give the figures that we have. The overall pupil attendance rate has fluctuated from 91.6% to 95%. The lowest attendance was in the week commencing 7 September, when it fell to 91.6%. The latest figure, for week commencing 5 October, is 93.7%. As a result of the way in which the data is captured, the pupil attendance rate also includes those who are self-isolating and learning remotely. As set out in a circular, a child will be marked as absent if they are ill or do not engage with remote learning.

To put that into context, the figures prior to this year, which were recorded only on an annual basis, show an attendance rate of about 94%. That suggests that, while COVID has had some impact, it has been limited. Similarly, for teachers, the latest data from 6 October suggests that 92% of teaching staff were on-site in schools. Overall, those figures show a high level of school attendance. I have some other figures that I might draw out in answer to a supplementary question, but I appreciate the point about the two-minute rule.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat. Thank you for that answer. What lessons have been learnt over the past eight weeks in order to improve support for schools with high absences and to help schools to keep functioning when they return from the extended break?

Mr Weir: Support has been on the basis of the money that has been made available through the Executive, particularly for substitute cover. There have been both preventative and responsive measures. The Executive as a whole allocated just under £26 million, I think, for the full financial year for PPE. When we talk about PPE, we tend to think of gloves and physical equipment, but PPE is principally that used for cleaning and for hygiene products. There has been that level of production.

It is important that I give the scale of this. I appreciate that I was not in a position to give all my previous answer. On the initial information from the PHA — it is important that it breaks this down — cumulatively, a total of 1,491 individuals in schools have tested positive from 24 August to 13 October. I advise people that that is a cumulative figure. That represents about 0.4% of the school population. In most of the cases where there was an incident at a school, it was a single individual who tested positive. From that period, I think that a total of 10 schools out of over 1,000 have had more than one incident. The PHA is working on being able to provide more definitive information. It is important, therefore, that we get the PHA and DOH to produce information in a useable and accurate way as we move forward.

Mr Lyttle: What contingency plan is in place for children who are unable to sit transfer tests due to a COVID-19-related absence?

Mr Weir: I would rarely be accused of being bilingual, but this is very much a case of “plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose” from the Member: the more things change, the more they stay the same.

The transfer tests are set by independent organisations, and, to that extent, the onus for the arrangements is on them. We have been in contact with the schools that use academic selection. It is important that they develop alternatives should they be needed, and there will be ongoing discussions. Academic selection and transfer tests are ultimately the responsibility of AQE and PPTC.

There is no requirement on a school, for instance, to use that. Consequently, we will make sure that, whatever actions are put in place, we monitor the matter to ensure that anything that is done is done safely.

Mr M Bradley: Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, I apologise for that noise intervention. Only a Chelsea fan like me would know what it was.

Minister, with regard to absence among teachers, how will schools replace teachers who are self-isolating?

Mr Weir: I did not realise that the Member is a Chelsea supporter. In that case, he has to double-apologise to the House.

A great deal of good work has been done on remote learning, so there is that provision. Schools should continue to fill positions to replace teachers in the normal manner. There is a Northern Ireland substitute teacher list. To help to support many of the new pressures arising out of COVID, I outlined a significant package of funding to help to support the safe reopening of schools. That includes £17.5 million towards the costs of substitute teachers and other school expenditure. Further work has been done on that. In addition to that, the Executive have, through their COVID funding, released an additional £9.2 million. Again, we will look at the distribution of that. The fund for substitute teacher costs is being centrally managed by the Education Authority, and funding will be allocated to schools on a needs basis of verified cost. It should mean that, within reason, there is a provision for substitute teachers.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, what is the total number of teachers who have tested positive across schools in Northern Ireland? How many teachers have self-isolated since the schools reopened?

Mr Weir: As I said, those figures are held by the PHA and DOH, and we are working on those being revealed. The figures that I have currently are for a combination of the 333,000 students and 19,000 staff. The PHA has the breakdown of positive cases among students and staff. The total of 1,491 positive cases is from the overall school population of 352,000. I hope that the PHA will be in a position fairly soon to be able to give more detailed figures. I reiterate that that is a cumulative figure over a period of six or seven weeks rather than an individual breakdown for a particular week.

Mr Butler: It is good to get a figure, and the First Minister gave us that information last week. The Committee has been asking for that information for a number of weeks. Will the Minister give us a commitment that he will produce something akin to the Department of Health's dashboard to keep parents, teachers and pupils aware of the weekly figures throughout this crisis?

Mr Weir: I certainly will try to do all that I can. The reason that DOH can produce the dashboard is that it is, regarding anything COVID, the central receptor of information. We depend on getting that in a format that can then be used by the Department.

To some extent, I have no problem with that as a general concept. However, we are dependent on getting those figures directly from DOH. The figures that we have, which are monitored by the Department directly, relate to the percentage of teachers in schools and also to pupils' attendance. Those are, if you like, two separate elements

of the statistics that are monitored on a slightly different timescale but can, effectively, give an answer in each individual week. I am happy to publish those as well.

2.15 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 3 has been withdrawn. Before I call Ms Ennis, I want to say that I allowed four supplementary questions to be asked about COVID because, obviously, it is a significant issue. Members should not take that as a precedent. There will not be four supplementaries to every question.

Irish-medium Education: Newry

4. Ms Ennis asked the Minister of Education how he will meet the demand for Irish-medium education provision in the Newry area. (AQO 910/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her question. It is a matter for the Education Authority, working with the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools and other sectoral support bodies, to bring forward proposals to meet the needs of children and young people. As the Member may be aware, meeting a particular demand is an area-planning consideration, which then becomes a development proposal and is published by the Education Authority. As such, the Department's role and, specifically, my role is then to give a verdict on a particular development proposal. Therefore, I cannot bring forward a development proposal or comment on one until it has reached that final stage. Legally, that would leave me in difficulties. Currently, there are no published development proposals for Irish-medium provision in the Newry area beyond what is provided at present.

Ms Ennis: I take on board the Minister's answer. Newry and Mourne has the highest percentage of Irish speakers in the whole of the North. However, the only bunscoil, Bunscoil an Iúir, in Newry city is wholly inadequate and in dire need of major capital investment. I want to put that on the Minister's radar and say that I would appreciate his visiting the school, speaking to the school community, principal and board of governors, and seeing how we can work together collaboratively to improve the provision of Irish-medium education in the Newry area.

Mr Weir: I would be very happy to do that. I have been to schools in different sectors. The Member's colleague Karen Mullan facilitated four visits in one day to Irish-medium schools up in the north-west. I have been to a number of others, including the largest post-primary Irish-medium school in Northern Ireland, Coláiste Feirste, roughly a month ago. Therefore, I would be more than happy to accept an invitation to see what is happening on the ground.

One issue in looking at a longer-term project has been the requirement for development proposals. As with lots of issues with COVID, the development proposal process has been delayed in the EA, sectoral support bodies and the Department, where not only financial but human resources have had to be shifted towards dealing with COVID. I am glad to say that there is some movement now to restart development proposals. Obviously, Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta has a critical role to play to give its thoughts to sustainable Irish-medium provision in the Newry area. However, I cannot comment on individual

proposals until the point at which a development proposal is put forward directly for a decision.

Mr McNulty: Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí. The principal, parents and board of governors are passionate about the philosophy of educating young people through the medium of our indigenous Gaelic language. The Minister knows that, previously, I have asked him a number of questions about the school and the ongoing work towards its enrolment of 105 and qualification for inclusion in the capital works scheme. Can the Minister advise the House on whether the Department has agreed a site for any new build? Will he take the opportunity, when public health guidelines permit, to visit the school and see the incredibly positive work that is going on there?

Mr Weir: Obviously, in my response, I have given the more general position with regard to the Newry area. As I said, I am happy to visit any school. I cannot comment on the specific details of the school about which the Member has asked. However, I am happy to write to the Member and give him details on the issue that he has raised.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Question 5 has been withdrawn.

COVID-19 Support: Derry City and Strabane

6. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Education, in the light of the impact that COVID-19 will have on school attendance, what support and resources his Department has directed to the Derry City and Strabane District Council area to support education. (AQO 912/17-22)

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for his question. An updated version of 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland' was published on 29 September 2020. The guidance provides a framework for how schools and education settings can operate in an ongoing COVID-19 environment. Given that we are in a moving situation, guidance will be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure that it remains in line with the wider health position.

Designated link officers from the Education Authority are working closely with school leaders to ensure that individual issues are resolved promptly and to identify what more can be done to provide support. The EA has a dedicated COVID-19 helpline, and there is an FAQ section on the EA website.

On 24 August 2020, I announced a significant package of funding to help support the safe reopening of schools. That was supported by the Executive. That funding will help schools address some of the new pressures arising out of the COVID-19 pandemic and, in doing so, will protect our children and young people and those working in education settings.

The Engage programme is helping pupils across the country who missed out, particularly between March and April. Some £1.26 million from that financial package has gone to 79 schools in the council area. The programme will enable primary and post-primary schools to provide additional teaching support for pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. That will help pupils to engage with learning, following lockdown, by enabling schools to provide child-centred, one-to-one, small group and team-teaching support by qualified teachers.

Mr McHugh: What contingency has the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) proposed for the delivery of examinations next year, given the fact that many people's education experience will be vastly different, owing to the sheer level of disruption and the unevenly distributed nature of that disruption? Surely we cannot expect students to be examined in the usual way.

Mr Weir: I will make three points about that. It is important that, if possible, examinations go ahead, because they are the most equitable and fair assessment of an individual's ability. Any other mechanism is always going to be second best to a certain extent.

The Member asks whether we can expect everything in 2021 to be done on exactly the same basis as it was done beforehand. No, that is not the case. That is why I took the decision that we have made on examinations. A range of mitigations has to be put in place. For instance, a range of assessment units has been removed from specific courses, largely for health and safety reasons. We have also asked the CCEA to explore optionality, in order to try to ensure that that is one other device through which things could be on a more level playing field for pupils. We also need to ensure that examinations are comparable with those in other jurisdictions. Our students will be competing with students from other jurisdictions, principally at A level and to a lesser extent at GCSE, so we have to ensure that we are on a similar pathway. Part of that will involve discussions across jurisdictions on the level at which we pitch the examinations, because simply to return to the level at which they were pitched in 2019 would be very difficult to sustain, given the issues with grade boundaries, for instance, and the level of disruption that there has been.

The Member mentioned contingency plans. I have also asked the CCEA to bring forward a range of options for contingencies for 2021. That request is less about whether there will be exams than it is about the likelihood that some individuals may not be able to sit an examination, depending on how we move forward, and those individuals will have to be catered for within the system.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, you rightly mentioned the Engage programme, which has provided a vital intervention for schools. Will the Minister explain how two schools in the same town — one with 750 pupils and one with 250 pupils — received the same sum of money? The allocation equates to £100 a child for the school with 250 children and to £36 a child for the school with 750 children, even though the school with fewer pupils has fewer children on free school meals.

Mr Weir: The system that was adopted was not relatively straightforward, because it was largely about purchasing teacher resources. We therefore could not have a situation in which 1,000 schools in Northern Ireland had differential amounts of financial support. That would not have made sense. From an administrative point of view, it would have been hard to put together in a short space of time.

Two criteria were produced. It is important that we get the greatest level of support where there is the greatest level of social deprivation, so there was a higher level of funding for schools that qualified as having above the average level of free school meals. Within that, there were, off the top of my head, four bands of funding according to numbers. You

could have disaggregated that to each individual pupil, but it is not necessarily about the individual application; it is about providing a level of support.

Below that, to ensure that there was a level of support for other schools, there was a smaller pot of money, which has been allocated, roughly speaking, equating to 0.2, 0.3 or 0.5 of a full-time-equivalent teaching post. In any system, whether it is on a school's level of funding or social-security-type funding, where there is banding, you are always going to get anomalies.

It was important that we ensured that there was a distribution of money to schools, and do not forget that that is all additional money. I appreciate that some schools will have felt that they got a good deal, others less so, but it is all additional support.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr O'Toole is not in his place.

School Closures: Contingency Plans

8. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Education what contingency planning is under way for the possibility of further school closures due to the rising COVID-19 infection rate. (AQO 914/17-22)

Mr Weir: Just keeping the Sinn Féin bandwagon rolling on in relation to that.

The Member will be aware that schools have closed for a two-week period from today for an extended half-term break until Monday 2 November. The proposal that was put through the Executive was that schools will reopen on 2 November. Everything to do with COVID is always under review. As we move ahead, there will be individual disruptions to schools. We have given guidance on that. It is important that the level of disruption is kept to a minimum. That is why it is important that we do see that resumption of face-to-face teaching on 2 November and beyond to ensure that we give the best possible support to all pupils.

Mr Lynch: Go raibh maith agat, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. We are subject to an ever-changing public health crisis, which could require further closures if that is the medical and scientific advice. Does the Minister agree that, in these uncertain times, he should be preparing for the real possibility of further closures?

Mr Weir: No, I am not planning for failure. On that basis, it is important that we keep schools open. It is noticeable what has happened in other jurisdictions. Generally speaking, I do not look nostalgically across the border to the South, but they have obviously prioritised schools to make sure that they are kept open. It is vital that we ensure that our schools are kept open. The principal focus is on support for children. It also plays a key role for parents, the economy and for the future. We have to have a situation in which we do not damage the education of our young people.

I will be working with Health and the Chief Medical Officer. Where there have been issues around schools, they have not been within the schools themselves. Let us call them the more-peripheral aspects, so, for example, I will be talking later to the Infrastructure Minister on any actions that can be taken around school transport. There is also a

clear message for parents. One issue has been collecting pupils at school gates. We will need to look at all that.

The safest place for pupils, academically and from a public health point of view, is within schools, where there is a strongly controlled environment where education and health can be maintained.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: There is less than a minute remaining, so if Mrs Rosemary Barton keeps it short and sharp, and the Minister does as well, we will get through it.

Mrs Barton: What reassurance and guidance can the Minister give to parents about children wearing masks on school buses? I am getting a lot of complaints about that.

Mr Weir: I understand that. I will be bringing a paper to the Executive and talking to the Infrastructure Minister about that in an hour's time.

The problem is not simply what happens on the buses, and this is where cross-departmental work is needed. One of the biggest areas of complaint that I have heard about is the congregation of young people when they are waiting to get onto buses. Also, we should not forget that, whatever happens in a broad school environment, the biggest problem is the socialising that happens at a distance from schools. That socialising, rather than what happens in the more controlled environment of work or school, is part of the problem that we have in trying to control things in wider society.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We now move on to topical questions.

Youth Facilities: Skeoge, Derry

T1. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Education, in light of the fact that the Skeoge area of Derry has a high level of young people and a chronic shortage of community services, whether he will consider repurposing the H1C land that his Department owns there, which is not big enough to build schools on, for youth facilities instead. (AQT 541/17-22)

Mr Weir: I will be happy to look into specific problems in an area. If the Member writes to me with greater detail, I will get back to her. I will certainly look at that but am conscious that, presumably, I will be bound by what I can do legally. I will take all that into consideration, but I want to ensure that we have the maximum number of facilities for all our young people.

Ms Anderson: Minister, I appreciate that response. During the week, Karen Mullan, who, as you know, is a fantastic education spokesperson for Sinn Féin, and I facilitated a meeting between officials from the Department and the Education Authority and a community organisation in the Skeoge area called the Greater Shantallow Area Partnership (GSAP). One of the things that I would like you to consider when looking at that H1C land is helping us to develop a business case. I ask that, if you can help to take that forward, you assist with the business case process.

Mr Weir: Again, we will try to be of whatever assistance we can within the limits of what we are allowed to do legally. I am due to your speak to your colleague via a Zoom call on Wednesday. That will probably be about the wider

context of youth settings, but this may well come up. I do not know whether that call will deal with this specific issue or whether it will be more about wider youth provision, but I will certainly be happy to look at anything.

Young People: Emotional Health and Well-being

T2. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Education what support he can give to children and young people, especially for their emotional health and well-being at this time, given the fascination that other parties have with closing schools and, ultimately, the detrimental impact that that has on young people who have to stay at home and on family life. (AQT 542/17-22)

Mr Weir: This is important. The focus has been on the academic impact of closure and rightly so. However, there is also a danger that children being off school, both in the spring and now, will have a devastating effect on their mental health. If things are followed through in the way that they are supposed to be, it will lead to isolation among young people.

Two levels of support will be made available. I will take forward a broader mental health and well-being framework that was being developed pre COVID and has funding, which would be on an annual, ongoing basis. Obviously, there is also an immediate need. As well as the Engage programme that is dealing with academic catch-up, some one-off mental health support is needed to address the COVID situation. As part of the overall restart package for schools, the Executive agreed a £5 million funding package. We have made proposals, which, I think, just need final business case approval, and we hope to move on that relatively soon, probably in early November.

As with the Engage programme, that will make support available to schools, and they will be able to determine where, they feel, the best interventions should take place. I am conscious that we should not do everything on a simple top-down basis, because that would be trying to put square pegs into round holes.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you for the answer, Minister. You referred to November: is that when the package will be in place, or is it when schools will see the beneficial impacts of that money on the ground?

Mr Weir: The quickest way to distribute the money is through direct funding. Schools get a proportion of that money and are able to decide. It is also the case that, leaving everything else aside, because individual circumstances will vary, areas will vary. For example, a school in the middle of Belfast may take a different view from a school in a rural setting in, say, County Tyrone. Similarly, the interventions that you would make for a seven-year-old would be very different from what you would make for a 17-year-old. That level of flexibility will be produced. As I said, we are also looking at additional work, some of which will be in the form of pilot programming when we have the mental health and well-being framework. We will need Executive sign-off for that, but that level of support will be mainstreamed into the future.

CCEA Proposals

T3. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister of Education whether he accepts that the recently announced CCEA proposals,

which came a week before schools were closed for an extended mid-term break because of COVID, need to be reconsidered, especially because many school leaders and students have been left disappointed and frustrated and to take into account the likelihood of further disruption to the school system this year. (AQT 543/17-22)

Mr Weir: No. There will be a slight degree of adjustment, and exams that were planned for November in the autumn series will have a slight degree of delay. As I said, having a situation in which examinations take place is the best possible solution, albeit with the range of mitigations that have been put in place. We are not yet at the final point of those mitigations. It is also appropriate that there is a situation in which individual contingency plans are worked out.

At times, there are a lot of advantages to devolution in terms of individual things that we can do, but I suspect that one thing that we cannot do as a society, although we may see ourselves, often with a level of justification, as a place apart or a special place, is go on an entirely solo run when it comes to examinations and qualifications and risk a situation in which what we put in place for our young people is either more difficult than anywhere else, which would disadvantage our pupils, or is simply not regarded by universities or employers as robust compared with other jurisdictions. We must make sure that, across a range of local jurisdictions, there is a level of comparability and portability of those qualifications. Otherwise, we may produce very nice results for one year, but, in the long run, those pupils will be disadvantaged. It has to be about that level of compatibility.

Mr Lynch: I thank the Minister for his answer. He mentioned contingency plans, but we were aware that the decision to close schools in March would have consequences for this year's academic work. Here we are, nearly at the end of October, and we do not have comprehensive contingency plans or scenario planning. Will the Minister advise when those plans will be completed?

Mr Weir: I hope that they will be completed as soon as possible. It is also important that we get it right. CCEA produced initial proposals, which went out to consultation. Beyond that, a level of discussion took place between the Department and CCEA. That also involved the trade union side and stakeholders; for example, this was discussed with the reference group of school principals. There was then a level of discussion with other jurisdictions to make sure that nothing that was done would be so out of kilter with other countries that it would disadvantage our students. If I have my time frame correct, that meant that an announcement about the overall position was not made until about a week and a half ago. As part of that, we instructed CCEA to look at getting options for continuity, which is important.

To some extent, we were in a position that decisions in the spring had to be made quickly, and it may be argued that not everything was done right and that we moved too quickly. We have to make sure that, where we have contingency plans, they are robust in all circumstances and are thought through. I hope that those plans will be produced as soon as possible.

Home-to-school Transport: Assessment Criteria

T4. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Education to explain the system used by the Education Authority (EA) to compute the distance between homes and schools for the assessment of entitlement for free home-to-school transport. (AQT 544/17-22)

Mr Weir: Without getting into the technicalities, although I am happy to write to the Member with the details, attempts have been made over the years to ensure uniformity, but there have been challenges. Having been involved at local level, I have seen it happen with schools where there was divergence in how the distance was calculated, whether it was the nearest, if you like, physical route or as the crow flies. Where things have been wrongly applied, that has led to successful appeals. I think that a uniform system is produced, but I will write to the Member with the details of precisely how it is calculated.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for that answer. Does the Minister accept that a uniform approach does not take into consideration the unique characteristics of different geographical areas or the difficulty and safety of some routes and that, therefore, this is not the ideal way to approach the issue?

Mr Weir: I understand the argument. However, if there is a range of situations where this is judged almost case by case, it becomes entirely inequitable, both administratively and from the point of view of fairness. You might find yourself trying to make judgements about, for example, a pupil having to walk to school. What are the pavements like? What support do you give in connection with that? What is the level of rurality? How busy are the roads that the pupil has to cross to get to school? All those factors would make it incredibly difficult to find a fair system, as it could always be argued that somebody had missed out or that someone else should have got more and vice versa. Let us remember that this is a situation where there is universal free transport. Every year, about 80,000 pupils get a free bus pass, so it is one of the more generous systems. It would be impractical to take every individual factor into account when a child is trying to get to school.

We must also recognise that, nowadays, the vast majority of children are taken to school by their parents. When I was at primary school — I do not want to venture a guess at just how old the Member opposite is — large numbers of children simply walked to and from school, but the numbers using active travel have greatly reduced. All that has to be taken into account. There will always be reviews of the right way to do things in school transport, but tailoring a decision according to the individual will inevitably create disparities and inequities between individuals.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I have two minutes. I call Ms Pam Cameron.

Flu Vaccine: Schoolchildren

T5. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Education, given the Public Health Agency's (PHA) statement about delays with flu vaccinations, whether he foresees any difficulty with the roll-out of the programme in schools, albeit that the statement was released during Question Time and he

likely will not be aware of it and the PHA has stated that children will not be affected because the delay relates to the adult dose rather than the child dose. (AQT 545/17-22)

Mr Weir: We will be happy to work with the PHA on the issue. Prior to the decision to extend the half-term holiday, we had intended to put a large number of children through this week. However, that would have been fairly impractical, given the fact that the schools are closed. The best way of doing it with children is probably by organising it class by class so that you ensure that the bubble is there. Even with that, we had, I think, worked with the PHA to see whether alternative arrangements could have been made over the next couple of weeks with regard to, for example, almost a drive-by situation; indeed, from that point of view, I think, a common position had largely been reached with the PHA. From what the Member has said, it appears that that has largely been overtaken by events and that we will see an overall delay. I assume that the PHA will be able to factor that in to ensure that children get the flu vaccination and that the Department will continue to work with the PHA to ensure that that is the case. However, it is a lot easier to do that in a school environment when schools are fully functioning, which would, at least, mean that there was an alignment between the time that the vaccination takes place and schools being fully operational.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Education. The next item on the agenda is questions to the Minister of Finance. I ask the House to take its ease for a few moments to allow Members to come in and out of the Chamber.

2.45 pm

Finance

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I ask those Members who are leaving the Chamber to do so. Question 1 has been withdrawn, and questions 5 and 9 have been grouped.

Small Business Rate Relief Scheme: Newspaper Sector

2. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Finance to outline any plans to extend the 12-month rate relief support scheme to the local newspaper sector. (AQO 922/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I am very aware that the local newspaper sector is struggling to survive given the significant loss of income that it has experienced over recent months. I confirm that, back in June, I put plans to Executive colleagues to extend the 12-month rate support to the local newspaper industry. That was in line with similar relief that had been provided in Scotland. I remain keen to see the matter agreed by the Executive.

In response to representations from the local newspaper sector, I am also seeking an increase in the Executive's advertising in that area.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answer and efforts to date. We welcome the Minister's support for the newspaper sector, which plays a key role in our local communities. It is vital that it gets support, especially with rates. I urge the Minister to do what he can to encourage public-sector advertising in local newspapers in order

to increase, in particular, awareness of the public health issues that need to be highlighted.

Mr Murphy: I agree with the Member, which is why, as I said, I put a proposition to the Executive in June. That has not received support yet, but I am still hopeful about it. After meeting a cross-sectoral group from the local newspaper industry, I engaged with the Executive information service on its advertising campaign. It seems that not much of that advertising trickles down to the local newspaper sector, even though it is, of course, vital to business and community life in the areas that it covers.

Through advertising, the sector also hits a demographic that social media and electronic media do not, and it gets to some of the people who most need to hear the public health message about protecting themselves and whatever vulnerabilities that they might have. I am keen that such an advertising campaign is stepped up and, as was done in Scotland, targeted through local newspapers so that we can get to the demographic that is not getting its information from social media.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Minister for his words of support. There is another action in his gift that would be of long-term benefit to local media, namely, supporting libel reform. He will recall that Sammy Wilson, as Finance Minister, not only did not bring forward a legislative consent motion on the Defamation Act 2013 but did not even consult with his Executive colleagues on it.

Mr Murphy: I am happy to look at that. It is not something that has been brought to my attention since I came into post. Obviously, we very quickly had to deal with COVID and all the issues that it has thrown up, but I am happy to go back to the Department to see where that issue has been sitting and what can be done on it.

Ms Sugden: Given the new restrictions and the challenges that are presenting themselves, is the Minister considering whether to extend the 12-month rate relief scheme to any other sectors?

Mr Murphy: I have not had specific requests from other sectors. The work to identify the sectors that were most in need of targeted rate support was done by Ulster University's economic team. Since then, it has looked again at the newspaper sector and, given the drop-off in entertainment that is, obviously, a big source of advertising income for the local press, it has recognised that it had been particularly badly hit and has advocated that it should be supported in that way. If there are other particular sectors that feel that that is the case, I am more than happy to look at them. The initial support was based on research that we undertook that identified particular sectors.

Mr O'Toole: I have engaged with the Minister in the past on this matter and have been campaigning on it. He said that a bid had gone into the Executive for extending relief for local newspapers, but will he be specific? Is there an outstanding bid and have Executive Ministers not agreed to it, or is it just that it is waiting for a future bids process? Where exactly is it?

Mr Murphy: We quantified the cost of a rates holiday for that sector for the rest of the financial year. The Member will know that quite a lot of local newspapers have a shopfront, and some of them have their own printing facilities, which would qualify them under manufacturing

rate relief. We quantified that cost but it has not got on to the Executive agenda. That is a matter of regret, and I hope that it will do so very soon.

Aviation Sector: Support

3. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Finance to outline any recent discussions he has had with Executive colleagues on targeted support for the aviation sector. (AQO 923/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I secured Executive agreement to a package of time-limited support measures for the aviation sector in April 2020, as the lockdown resulted in significant reductions in passenger numbers. That package was developed in conjunction with the Economy and Infrastructure Ministers, who have policy responsibilities for aviation. The package provided up to £5.7 million for Belfast City Airport, City of Derry Airport and those airlines that operate the essential flights that help to keep the air bridge open with Britain.

In May, I also announced 100% rate relief for Belfast International Airport, Belfast City Airport and City of Derry Airport until 31 March 2021. That additional package was worth £2.2 million. In June, the Executive agreed to further support for the airports given the material losses that they are suffering, including continuing to support City of Derry Airport until March 2021. My Department is actively considering what further support might be required to maintain local connectivity, and I understand that other Departments are doing the same.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for his answer. In relation to the help that is available to the aviation sector and, in particular, to Belfast International Airport in my constituency, will he detail any discussions that he has had with the Treasury about the possible removal of domestic air passenger duty?

Mr Murphy: No, that has not arisen in our discussions with the Treasury. As the Member will understand, we have focused on some of the schemes that the Treasury offered, including the job retention scheme and the job support scheme that will replace it, as well as some of the loans issues. We are continuing the discussion and have had quite a lot of dialogue with all three airports, collectively and individually, over the past while. We are ascertaining what the key issues are for them and where their key costs lie, including for Belfast International Airport, and we will attempt to put together further support for them based on their needs and requirements at this time.

Dr Aiken: It looks as if Belfast International Airport will no longer be able to operate on a 24-hour basis. I am afraid that the Economy Department has been rather laggardly in putting forward bids to support the airport. Will the Minister encourage his Department, which seems to be more capable of getting money for the airports and airlines, to look at the situation and endeavour fairly quickly to make sure that we have at least one aviation facility in Northern Ireland that is fully capable of 24-hour operation?

Mr Murphy: As I said, we have had regular and ongoing dialogue with the airports since the start of the pandemic. We recognise very clearly that all three airports are key to connectivity, which in turn is key to our local economy. We are happy to continue that dialogue with Belfast International Airport. Issues that affect the timing of flights

are probably beyond my Department's scope, but we have acted, if you like, as a kind of conduit between other Departments in understanding the airports' immediate requirements. We have been talking not only to the Treasury but to the Department for Transport in London about our airports, and we are making sure that local Departments are responding to their needs.

Mr Dunne: Can the Minister give us an assurance about the manufacturing industry, especially Bombardier, due to the impact from the drop-off in aircraft flights and the risk of the loss of jobs in manufacturing to Bombardier and other suppliers in the supply chain that work tirelessly for manufacturing in Northern Ireland?

Mr Murphy: It would primarily be up to his colleague the Minister for the Economy to bring forward propositions and to engage with those sectors to understand what their losses may be. I understand — the Minister has mentioned it on a number of occasions — about the broader aviation and aviation support industry being very much challenged in the time ahead because orders will drop off and there will be a much longer comeback for them than perhaps for other sectors that might be able to respond more quickly.

I am more than happy to hear from Departments about where they think the critical issues are that need to be addressed. Of course, they will have to quantify that with a bid, and I will be happy to analyse that in order to do some due diligence and present that to the Executive for support.

COVID-19: Targeted Rate Relief 2020-21

4. **Mr Muir** asked the Minister of Finance whether he will offer targeted rate relief in 2020-21 to those business sectors affected by the pandemic. (AQO 924/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In the current 2020-21 rating year, I am pleased that over 25,000 businesses are benefiting from the targeted 12-month rate relief or holiday that was introduced to help businesses particularly impacted by COVID-19. This initiative, which is providing £213 million of rates support, is acknowledged by local businesses to have been essential. This targeted support builds on the £100 million provided in the four-month rates holiday provided earlier this year to all businesses and demonstrates our continued determination to help businesses to get through the pandemic.

You will have heard my response to the Member for North Down concerning the newspaper sector. I consider that this would be a small but suitable extension to the scheme.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for his response. The assistance given in this financial year is to be welcomed and should be extended to cover industries affected by the further restrictions now in place. What work is being done to look at relief for the next financial year, 2021-22? I ask that because I know that a number of businesses will continue to suffer a downturn in trade as a result of the pandemic.

Mr Murphy: I agree with the Member in his last point that it is unlikely that we will be through the economic consequences of the pandemic, whatever about the health consequences, by the end of the financial year. We sincerely hope that there will be some end to the pandemic and that solutions will be found, but, undoubtedly, economic damage will continue. We have already begun

the exercise of looking at next year's commercial and non-domestic rates, and we will begin to engage with some business sectors on that.

The piece of work that we undertook to target more rates support beyond the first four months that benefited all businesses was undertaken by Ulster University. We have asked it, again, to give assistance in looking forward into next year. The Member will understand that it is very difficult, given how unpredictable the virus has been and the consequences of further restrictions having to be introduced. We are undertaking that work, and we will again engage Ulster University to assist us in looking at the specific sectors that will continue to struggle in the new financial year.

Mr Allister: I ask the Minister to look at one particular sector in business that has not been provided for in rates relief, namely the B&B sector. Its businesses primarily pay domestic rates, yet they seek to operate businesses that have been devastated. Would it not be fair and appropriate, in that niche, to provide rates relief for B&B operators?

Mr Murphy: I am certainly content to look at rates relief for them. It is timely because, in our consideration of the scheme to support businesses that are forced into closure, we have been able to include the smaller bed and breakfasts. It was on the basis of a conversation with them that, as the Member quite rightly identifies, it was identified that they come in under the domestic rating and, therefore, Land and Property Services (LPS) was unable to distinguish between them and ordinary households. LPS advised us that the Tourist Board gives them a certificate of accreditation. It was simply a matter of getting a list. That could have been done earlier in the pandemic, and I regret that it was not, because we could have got support to that sector more easily.

We have now been able to include B&Bs in the support package for businesses that are obliged to close down under the new restrictions. It is not the rates relief question that he raises, but it is something. It points out the necessity not just of Departments collaborating but of arm's-length bodies bringing information in to assist.

I have asked Departments to adopt a can-do attitude, and the same applies to arm's-length bodies. The sector is vital to the tourism industry here, and some 400 businesses are affected. That should have been picked up on earlier in the year, but I am glad that it now has been.

3.00 pm

Ms Dolan: Minister, do you agree that the business rate policy for the next financial year needs to be set as soon as possible in order to give businesses time to plan?

Mr Murphy: Yes. It should be. We have budgetary issues that we have to get clarity on. We are pressing very hard to get that clarity. We want to set policies against the budgets that are available to us. We are planning on the basis that we are into a multi-annual Budget of three years for resource and a four-year one for capital. We have yet to get absolute confirmation from Treasury in that regard. The spending review has begun. We, as well as Scotland and Wales, are very keen to get some information from Treasury on how that is being conducted. I agree with you that the planning should be done as early as possible, but

being uncertain about the funding envelope that we have makes it much more difficult to plan.

Mr Catney: Consideration is being given to extending targeted rate relief to the local arts sector. Does the Minister agree that it is irresponsible to continue to rely solely on the ad hoc handouts from Westminster to address the structural challenges to Northern Ireland's economy that have been thrown up by COVID? What discussions has he had with the Minister for the Economy around developing an economic intervention programme to address the long-term impacts on job and business creation?

Mr Murphy: The Executive have discussed the broader issue of economic support, and I have had discussions with the Minister for the Economy as well about support in the here and now. The difficulty, as I identified in my previous answer, with longer-term economic input and providing longer-term support — this is undoubtedly going to be a protracted economic recovery — is in knowing the funding envelope that we have for the years ahead. That is why we need some certainty from the ongoing Whitehall comprehensive spending review (CSR) process. As I said, we need to find out the time frame in which we are operating and the sum that we have attached to that. That is not to say that we should not be engaging with the business sectors and formulating plans, but putting something concrete in place requires us to know the time frame of the Budget and the funding envelope that we have.

Business Support Grants

5. **Mrs Cameron** asked the Minister of Finance, in instances where additional regional restrictions are introduced, what funds have been ring-fenced for geographical areas that may require a new business grant scheme. (AQO 925/17-22)

9. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister of Finance how many businesses in the Foyle constituency will benefit from the business support package announced on 7 October 2020. (AQO 929/17-22)

Mr Murphy: With your permission, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, I will group questions 5 and 9 for answer.

The Executive agreed a support scheme for businesses in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area that were directly affected by the health regulations announced on 1 October. Following the Executive receiving an additional £200 million, I moved swiftly to double the payments that were previously announced for Derry and Strabane and to extend the support package to eligible businesses that were subject to the new restrictions across all council areas from Friday evening. As Finance Minister, I want to use the levers at my disposal to make a difference quickly. The £35 million scheme enables us to put payments in place promptly. We estimate that around 430 eligible businesses in Derry and Strabane may benefit from the support. Applications opened last Wednesday. As of this morning, I think that there have been in and around 400 applications.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answer. This is a fast-moving situation, so your response has almost already exceeded the question. Has the Minister made any

assessment of the budgetary needs, particularly for the Department for the Economy, should the current four-week restrictions on many business sectors be extended further or extended in a more localised context?

Mr Murphy: I had a conversation with the Minister for the Economy prior to Thursday's Executive meeting. The scheme that I have outlined picks up businesses with rateable premises that are forced to close. That is probably most of them, but it is certainly not all. Many people who provide close-contact services operate from their own home, travel to provide services to people or hire a chair in another person's premises. I spoke to the Economy Minister about coming in quickly on the back of the scheme that we had. We were able to get it on the ground quickly because the Land and Property Services (LPS) data had been tried and tested on the £10,000 and £25,000 schemes earlier in the year. It was essential, because this is a four-week intervention, to get that money out very quickly to support people.

I hope that further schemes will be developed. The Economy Minister told the Executive on Thursday that she intended to bring some schemes to the Executive early this week. I look forward to seeing those. They will come to my Department for assessment, and then, I hope that, at this Thursday's Executive meeting, we will have some understanding of what that amounts to and will be able to try to get support to those people as quickly as possible.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Minister, for acting early to provide support to businesses to Derry and Strabane and for continuing with that process. When will those businesses receive the portion owed on the higher payment?

Mr Murphy: As I said, we moved ahead with the scheme for the Derry City and Strabane District Council area because, even though we knew that further interventions were coming, they had already been closed for more than a week by that stage. It was important to move ahead as quickly as possible with that scheme. The scheme for all 11 council areas opened this morning, and I understand that several thousand applications are already in. The rest of the regulations are in place, but when the regulations in relation to the level of payment come through, we will add to the payments already received by some of the Derry and Strabane businesses and will make sure that they get the same amount as everyone else as quickly as possible.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for his responses so far, and I commend him on getting the finance package in place and open today. When the north-west package was announced, the SDLP leader claimed that Nichola Mallon was critical of the package made available. Is the Minister aware of any such representation or criticism from the Infrastructure Minister?

Mr Murphy: I am loath to get into internal Executive matters, but suffice to say that, when that scheme was put in place — obviously we circulated the scheme to all Executive colleagues for comment before it was brought to the Executive — we received no objections to the scheme at all.

Budget 2020-21

6. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Finance when he will publish a Budget for 2020-21. (AQO 926/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Budget for 2020-21 was published on 31 March this year. However, if the Member is referring to the 2021-22 Budget, that cannot be published without understanding the overall financial context. In that regard, the Executive's funding envelope is yet to be determined. The funding envelope is dependent on the outcome of the Treasury's spending review, and the Chancellor has not yet set a date for the spending review outcome. I and my colleagues in other devolved Administrations have been pressing him for that.

Once we know the outcome of the spending review, a local Budget process will follow. The Executive must have a Budget for 2021-22 in place before the new financial year.

Mr Beggs: I welcome the publication of the Main Estimates in the last few weeks. It is important to have detailed estimates for planning purposes. Does the Minister appreciate the importance of having a draft Budget published and engaging with the public, going forward? Will he assure me that we will have one this time and that he will not become the second Sinn Féin Minister to fail to publish a draft Budget?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that I can only publish a Budget when I know the amount that will be there and the time frame within which we will be planning. The comprehensive spending review was due to have taken place in Whitehall over the summer months. It is now pushed back into the autumn. I and the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers have been jointly pressing for the earliest possible information because the lack of information on that affects all our planning. I can assure the Member that, as soon as we have sufficient information to allow us to do so, we will engage in the Budget planning process immediately and make sure that there is full consultation with the Assembly and its Committees and with other sectors that have an interest.

Ms Anderson: Minister, are you are planning a multi-year Budget? I am thinking primarily about infrastructure money and the Infrastructure Committee. It would be quite useful and helpful for the north-west, particularly Derry.

Mr Murphy: Once we know that, I intend to have a series of discussions with Executive colleagues individually on their budgetary requirements. It is necessary to do that, but we are also doing it with one eye blind, if you like, because we do not know what amount we will have. It will be for the Minister for Infrastructure to bring forward spending proposals within whatever time frame we have. I look forward to receiving those from her, including some for the north-west.

Mr O'Toole: The Budget published in June of this year was basically a placeholder. That was, in part, because of the COVID crisis. We are now 10 months on from the restart of these institutions and only about 18 months from the end of this mandate and new elections. We are also in the midst of the COVID crisis, which will probably not be over for at least six months, even on the most optimistic timeline. Does the Minister accept that it is extremely unlikely that there will be a full multi-year Budget, a Programme for Government or anything approaching a serious strategic budgeting process for the Executive? Further to that, does he accept that he needs to sit down with the Economy Minister and deliver a more coherent economic response?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I suspect that the Minister's answer will be shorter than the Member's question.

Mr Murphy: I do not accept that. I operate a can-do process. We should, of course, have the ambition for this institution to deliver a Budget and Programme for Government that are properly set out and which have been properly consulted on and properly debated. The economic plan is not the responsibility of just two Departments. The Department for Infrastructure, for instance, has a huge role in economic development, and the Department for Communities has a significant role in town centre regeneration. It is not simply a matter of two Ministers knocking their heads together and coming up with a grand plan for the Executive and Assembly. This is an Executive-wide responsibility. I look forward to discussions on the Budget process with the individual Departments and then, collectively, with the Executive.

Mr Blair: Will the Minister, in the interests of future planning processes, provide an update on the prospects of multi-year Budgets starting in 2020-21?

Mr Murphy: As I have said, when I put that question directly to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury a fortnight ago, he said that they were still operating on that basis, which did not entirely fill me with confidence, because we want certainty. That is a question that we continue to pursue with Treasury, and it is not just us. Scotland and Wales are pursuing the same question. They are in the same bind as we are when it comes to getting their Budget processes going: getting consultation going, understanding the funding envelope and knowing what will be the time frame attached to all of that.

Procurement Board

7. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on his plans to reconvene the Procurement Board. (AQO 927/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Procurement Board is responsible for setting policy priorities for procurement expenditure, which influences around 25% of the Executive's Budget. It is important to ensure that these policies are developed by experts in public procurement, along with representatives of the key sectors of the economy.

I have asked the Executive to agree to a reconstituted Procurement Board, and I have asked the appointment representatives of key sectors of the economy to work with procurement professionals to develop future policy. It is important to ensure that procurement policy is informed by experts, if it is to address the immediate priorities of the Executive in regard to economic growth, social value and the faster delivery of infrastructure projects

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I am glad to hear that the board is to be set up. How does the Minister intend to ensure that social value is at the heart of such procurement?

Mr Murphy: In reconstituting the board, the intention is to have expertise on it and to ensure that the policies and advice that it brings forward are adopted by the Executive. Social value is a key policy objective for me and the Department. We want to ensure that, when those policies are agreed, they do not just sit in the Procurement Board

but, to make sure that they are effective, they filter down through all the Departments and arm's-length bodies. In some of our public institutions, there is a tendency to be overloaded with policies but not have much by way of implementation. My idea in reconstituting the board is to get expert advice, get Executive approval for policies and then follow through, in each Department and arm's-length body, to make sure that things like social value are properly put in place in procurement.

Ms S Bradley: I appreciate the Minister's response, particularly his reference to putting together the Procurement Board. Does he accept that the Procurement Board must work as part of a much wider framework? If so, will he also consider the appointment of a one-off fiscal commission to examine budgetary settings and structural challenges for the economy in the difficult times ahead?

3.15 pm

Mr Murphy: You are correct in that procurement is one part of public spending; it is about 25% of public spending, so it is very important. It is important that we have policies attached to that: things like social value and more efficiency around the spend are key. I am looking at the idea of a fiscal council to assist with the overarching spending plans and what levers we have available around revenue raising.

Mr Dunne: As Minister, you will be aware of the concerns around unacceptable delays in the opening of tender documents for public-sector schemes. What have you done, as Minister, to try and progress that issue?

Mr Murphy: If the Member has specific issues, I ask him to communicate with us and we can look into those. Of course, we want procurement to be as efficient as possible and to make sure that tenders and all the issues are done in such a way that Departments are delivering them as quickly as possible. During the pandemic, we sent a note to all Departments to advise them to get construction projects ready and to make sure that they were at the point of tenders going out, even when the construction industry was shut down during the earlier lockdown phase — to do that and get those issues ready so that all the procedural things were done and construction could very quickly get back up and running again.

We are always keen to improve on efficiency and effectiveness. If there are specific issues that the Member is aware of, I invite him to let us know and we will deal with them.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The time for listed questions has passed, and we now move to topical questions.

Rates: SOLACE Proposal

T1. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of whether the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives' (SOLACE) suggestion of marrying together the district rate and the regional rate would be a possibility, given that he may be aware that SOLACE briefed the Committee for Communities two weeks ago and was very complimentary about him and his permanent secretary and the work that they are doing around rates. (AQT 551/17-22)

Mr Murphy: It is very worthwhile, particularly because, through the interventions that we made in relation to business support, the councils' take from the rates was actually protected in that. It was a good outcome for councils, and I am not surprised that they are complimentary about the Department — whatever about me. It was a good outcome, because some of those businesses might have closed and the councils would have lost the rates. We guaranteed the protection of their rates.

On setting an overarching policy, if the Executive took the initiative to support businesses and reduce the rates on them, but the council took the initiative to increase the rates — an individual council, or a number of councils — one part of the policy would undo the other. The closer that what regional government does is to what local government does, the better the outcome and more consistency in approach that we will have.

I am very keen to work with local government, through SOLACE and the councils. I have met the Northern Ireland Local Government Association on occasions as well to discuss these things and try and get more joined-up working arrangements right across the public sector. It is to the benefit of everyone.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. Following on from that, we all know that the rates are based on the estimated penny product. SOLACE also mentioned, in its briefing to the Committee, protecting that for it going forward because it is worried about clawback when the figure becomes a reality. SOLACE has asked for that for two or three years, but will the Minister give an assessment of that for the year ahead?

Mr Murphy: As part of the rates process that I talked about earlier, around looking at what rates might be like next year and what relief can be provided, we also have engagement with councils. For a lot of the more technical issues, like the penny product and others, we can undertake engagement, but I am committed to closer working with the councils. Clearly, over the course of the pandemic, we, at various times, found money to put through the Department for Communities into councils because we recognise how vital they are to public services and support on the ground. We want to make sure that the councils are in a position to deliver public services and continue to function and do the good work that they do. That level of collaboration and understanding of all those issues is something that we are keen to work on.

COVID-19 Restrictions: Support Scheme Eligibility

T2. **Mr McCann** asked the Minister of Finance whether social enterprises and B&Bs are included in the support scheme for businesses that have been subjected to the COVID-19 restrictions. (AQT 552/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As I confirmed in a previous answer to Mr Allister, after a conversation with the smaller bed and breakfasts, the Department ascertained that the Tourist Board's list can be used to verify those businesses, and the smaller bed and breakfasts were included in the scheme. Social enterprises have also been included: not only do they have a business side to their function but they are hugely important for delivering services and engaging and employing people who otherwise might not make their way on to the workforce.

Mr McCann: Further to that, has the Minister received any proposals on financial support for sole traders, taxi drivers and the coach industry?

Mr Murphy: We have yet to receive proposals for a range of sectors, many of which were mentioned in the earlier debate. Some of the delay has been due to the difficulty in getting individual Departments to decide who has responsibility. Other delays may be caused by the need to find ways to verify the data about who is economically active in the various sectors. I have encouraged all Ministers who have a responsibility to bring forward support schemes urgently. I have made it clear that we are now on the second round of providing support for some businesses, and that is all the more acute for those who have yet to receive any support. It is vital that we get those schemes brought forward and delivered quickly.

COVID Business Grants

T3. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Finance whether, as the Minister with responsibility for the public purse, he is confident that the £13 million of COVID business-related grants that, last month, the Northern Ireland Audit Office reported had been paid in error can be clawed back and the money utilised in other areas, albeit that she appreciates that the schemes were designed by the Department for the Economy. (AQT 553/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that those schemes were developed in an unprecedented — “unprecedented” has almost become overused — situation and that speedy support for businesses was of primary importance. We had discussions with the Comptroller and Auditor General to advise him that we were taking a risk with the schemes. Having said that, I recognise that the amount that you have identified is an estimate based on samples that have been worked up. On that estimate, 93% or 94% has been paid out accurately, which is remarkable, given how quickly the schemes were put together and the money paid out. I understand that some money has already been clawed back. Where money has been paid out in error, I encourage Departments to seek to get it back. As the Member says, it is important to spend that money in the areas that need it.

Ms Sugden: I appreciate that the schemes were developed quickly and that the aim was to get money out as quickly as possible. The frustration is that there are still so many businesses that have been unable to avail themselves of any moneys, while some have availed themselves of more than they were entitled to. If money does come back into the Department of Finance’s coffers, I encourage the Minister to distribute it as quickly as possible, not just to businesses that have already received money but to those that have not received anything.

Mr Murphy: Absolutely. However, the Member will know that it is not up to me to distribute that money. It has to be on the basis of a scheme brought forward by a Department. In this case, the Department for the Economy has to say, “We recognise that these people have missed out. Here is a way to supply money to them”. Any conversations that the Department of Finance has had with businesses have always been about getting cash to businesses quickly, as have any conversations since the further intervention by the Executive. That is what

businesses tell us that they require. Of course, we will try to do that as best we can.

Some businesses were able to continue to trade during lockdown. So it was important to target to make sure that we were not giving money to people who were doing OK and who continued to trade with very little restriction. It is important to find ways to target the support where it is needed. However, in doing that, sometimes people miss out or fall through the cracks of various schemes. I have asked Ministers to bring forward proposals as urgently as possible.

Healthcare Staff: Lost Wages

T4. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister of Finance why money allocated to healthcare staff to reimburse them for wages that were lost while they were on strike has not yet reached those staff members. (AQT 554/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive agreed on 18 May to allocate £1.64 million to reimburse healthcare staff. It is disappointing that, five months on, the Department of Health has yet to provide that money to healthcare staff. I again urge the Health Minister to reimburse healthcare workers, who are at the forefront of the COVID-19 pandemic, as a matter of urgency. The matter has been agreed by the Executive, so I am not sure what the hold-up with the payment is.

Mr Sheehan: Go raibh maith agat, agus gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as ucht a fhreagra. I thank the Minister for his answer. Hospices provide a vital service here but their funding has been badly impacted as a result of COVID. Will any extra funding be provided to the hospices in the time ahead?

Mr Murphy: In May, I announced £6.75 million support for the hospices and had an opportunity at that time to visit some of them to see at first hand the incredible work that they do. I am working on a further support package for the hospices, which I hope to bring to the Executive in the near future. We have been engaging with the hospices, including Daisy Lodge, which is the children’s support project, and the Cancer Fund for Children. We hope to bring a proposition to the Executive in the very near future on that.

Getting emergency support to the hospices at this time is one thing, but there is the outstanding issue of funding for the hospices being mainstreamed. We need to make sure that that 50:50 funding that had been agreed with the Department of Health some time back is honoured. I know that there is ongoing dialogue between the Department of Health and the hospices, and I hope that we do not end up in a situation where we are continually trying to find emergency funding for those very worthy projects and that we get them on to a more mainstream way of funding in order to remove that uncertainty for them on how they carry out their services.

Support for Supply Chain Businesses

T5. **Mr Newton** asked the Minister of Finance whether he is prepared to consider support for the businesses that directly supply goods and services through the supply chain, particularly to the hairdressing and hospitality sectors, given that the closure of those sectors has had a knock-on effect on such businesses, which brings to

mind a small company that normally employs 16 people but, because of the closure of hospitality, is down to five people. (AQT 555/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The short answer is yes. The recognition in developing the schemes, which we did very quickly, was to get support to people who were obliged to close their business under the new regulations. There was also a recognition in our discussions at the Executive of people who were not necessarily obliged to close their business but who would feel a very adverse economic impact from the closure of businesses where their primary function was to supply them.

The Minister for the Economy is looking at a range of issues, including those businesses that have been forced to close but that cannot be got through the rates-based scheme, if you like, and at people in the supply chain. I hope that some schemes or propositions on that will be brought forward to the Executive very quickly.

Mr Newton: I accept that that is not the Minister's responsibility, although he indicated that it would happen very quickly. Will the Minister give favourable consideration to supporting the suppliers of goods and services to those particular sectors?

Mr Murphy: Yes, I will give favourable consideration to that. I make a recommendation to the Executive, so, ultimately, the Executive have to approve it, and I can make a recommendation based only on a scheme that is brought to me. I encourage all responsible Ministers to bring forward schemes very quickly. We have a limited pot of money, and it would help us not only to know what we need but to get that money out quickly, because the COVID-related money that we received has to be spent in this financial year. Therefore, if that money is due to businesses that need that support, it is important to get it out on the ground very quickly to allow it to be spent.

Free Face Masks

T6. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Finance whether he has had any discussions with the Health Minister about rolling out a scheme to provide free, reusable masks to the general public in order to deal with the pandemic and the worrying rise in cases. (AQT 556/17-22)

Mr Murphy: No. The Health Minister has not approached me about any such scheme, nor have I received any such proposal. I know that there are various considerations for supporting the community generally in dealing with the pandemic, but that scheme has never been put forward to me.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his answer. It is worrying that he has not received any proposals. I know that this is hypothetical, but if he were to receive a proposal from the Health Minister, would he look favourably on it and be minded to support the roll-out of such a scheme in order to tackle the pandemic?

Mr Murphy: Undoubtedly, the wearing of face coverings is hugely important. It has been identified as one of the three key elements that the community can actively engage in, which are sanitisation, face coverings and social distancing.

There has been investment in providing sanitisation on the high street and in shops, and support has been given

to schools to provide that. Clearly, if there were an issue with people being able to afford face coverings and a proposition were put forward to address that, I am sure that there would be considerable support in the Executive for that, given their central desire to promote the very strong message on face coverings.

3.30 pm

Paul Quinn

T7. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Finance, given that tomorrow is the anniversary of the brutal murder of Paul Quinn, whether he can find it within himself to publicly and unequivocally acknowledge that Paul Quinn was not a criminal and thereby bring some relief to his still grieving parents. (AQT 557/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I do not consider that to be part of the Finance brief, but, nonetheless, I have made a number of statements in relation to that, and I reiterate and stand over those statements.

Mr Allister: The Minister has never acknowledged that Paul Quinn was not a criminal. He knows that that is what is required to unlock the matter. Why can he not find it within himself — he holds a position of great authority — to offer to an ordinary family in south Armagh an acknowledgement that their son was not a criminal?

Mr Murphy: I repeat: I made a number of statements in relation to that, and I stand over those statements. My offer to meet and discuss the issues with the family remains.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Members. That concludes questions to the Minister of Finance. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments to allow a change at the Table, after which we will return to the debate and discussion on the Supply resolutions.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Executive Committee Business

Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2020-21 and Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 Statement of Excesses

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £4,757,631,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 and that resources, not exceeding £4,791,050,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3 (a) and 3 (b) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2020-21 that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

The following motion stood in the Order Paper:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £112,618,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 and that resources, not exceeding £183,290,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Part 1 of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020.

Mr Catney: I have to get my glasses out. I can see the time I did not need them. Things are not working.

Mr Speaker: Get your glasses on and you can see your way clear to make your comments.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you, Minister. I am sure that the Minister will note the approval of the Finance Committee to allow accelerated passage of the Budget Bill, but I know that the Minister does not take this for granted and that it is not a ringing endorsement of the level of scrutiny that the Committee has had in this process. When the further Vote on Account was brought forward, both in the Committee and in this Chamber, I

asked that better opportunity for scrutiny be given to the Committee as we are talking about large sums of public money being spent and proper time and consideration must be given to their use. I know that the Minister agrees with me on that.

We all know the strain that the pandemic has put on many different government processes. However, the Minister must now put the maximum effort into regulating the Budget process and bringing back a sense of normality to this process. This is not about the Committee trying to butt in or cause an issue. It is about recognising that we are yet to see the full impact of this pandemic as we look to the coming year, along with Brexit looming, and that regularising the Budget process can only allow the Committee and this Chamber to support the Department and the Minister during what I am sure will be a difficult Budget process. Having said that, I do welcome the fact that the Minister has brought forward this expenditure plan for the rest of the year, and I thank his team in the Department for the work that has been done to produce this Budget.

There are some areas that I hope to cover in the Budget debate, but there are a few technical points that I want to make. Although it may come up in the Budget debate later as it is not decided, one point that I will make is to steal the thunder of my Committee colleague Mr Allister, who is sitting at the back. There are still a number of those notorious black-box payments indicated in the Estimates. I know that a number of Departments have given notice of their intention to use sole authority going forward. I hope that, with our ability to legislate now restored, the Minister will see this used less and less. That is not to say that it should be eliminated. We cannot foresee every instance. Where possible, I hope that the Minister will encourage spending programmes that this Chamber and the Committee can have proper scrutiny over.

One key area that we cannot escape is that of the difficulties that there have been in using capital expenditure this year. I welcome the initiative that the Minister has taken with the Finance Ministers of the other devolved Administrations to ask for increased carry-over of underspends going forward. However, more needs to be done to allow capital-to-resource transfer to deal with emergency issues in-year. Although the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has said some ludicrous things in recent days, especially in my constituency of Lagan Valley, one thing that is absolutely true is that many of our businesses will not come back if there is a continuing cycle of lockdowns without more support in place. If we can push for greater flexibility to use capital underspends to help businesses, that can open funding streams and even borrowing potential to put support schemes in place whatever the future might bring.

Although I hope that we will get the accommodations needed from the Treasury, the Department must plan for how we can adopt our budgets if the Treasury does not move. This will mean Departments surrendering underspends early so that we can utilise as much as possible in the upcoming spending review, which should be the goal of the Budget process.

Mr McHugh: I am pleased to support the accelerated passage of this Bill, which was supported unanimously by the Finance Committee when representatives from the Department presented themselves to the Committee,

answered all questions and gave clarifications on matters that arose. The Bill gives power to the Executive to direct £4.75 billion of resource to where it is most needed.

As the Chairman of the Finance Committee said earlier, flexibility is required: the same flexibility that was exemplified by the Minister recently when, on his own initiative, he supported businesses in the north-west that were impacted on by restrictions that were placed on the area two weeks ago. Those same supports have been extended to the rest of the country and increased.

It is not by accident that Health, the Economy, Communities and Education are the Departments that are the main beneficiaries of the Budget. In the midst of the pandemic, it is of the utmost importance that those Departments be provided with resources to meet the increasing demand for their services. It is not only an investment in the here and now to fight the pandemic itself but an investment in the future. It is important that business and industry be supported to ensure that we still have an economy at the end of the crisis and to ensure that services can be delivered to those who are most in need.

Comments were made earlier about one-year and four-year Budgets. Many of the people who are most in need live on a weekly budget and may not know where their next shilling is coming from. That situation has intensified since the COVID outbreak, with businesses and employees finding themselves under pressure. Young people, at this stage in their life, must feel bewildered by what is happening. It is important to reassure them that they have a future and that every opportunity will be exploited to provide the best possible education to enhance their future prospects.

In the past, I have spoken in support of a retention of the furlough scheme, which is due to finish at the end of October, and about how it is incumbent on the British Government to provide resource to industry when that scheme comes to an end. That is not the only resource that we demand of the British Government. Commitments that they made under NDNA, which are needed even more now, in every respect, to support the region have, unfortunately, like so many other commitments, been broken, to date at least. They have not delivered on them.

In looking at commitments in each Department, I notice that every one has ensured that it has the resources that it needs to deal with the cost of Brexit: costs that we could do without at this time. Added to that is the additional stress of a no-deal Brexit and how it will impact severely on industry, which is clearly calling out for certainty. That illustrates the magnitude of the problems that we face.

As it is with the economy, it is with the pandemic on this island. The pandemic affects us all. It knows no borders, so it is imperative that an all-island approach be developed to meet the current crisis. Today, a two-week firebreak has been announced in Wales. The Republic is likely to move to level 4, and possibly to level 5, which would bring it more into line with our current restrictions. It has been acknowledged that a county-by-county strategy does not work. Contrary to what the Minister of Agriculture may think, the rising trend on this island is consistent with rising trends in Britain, in the rest of Europe and throughout the world, with a few notable exceptions. The spread cannot be categorised by whether a council area is nationalist or

unionist. The pandemic will be with us into the future. It will require the very best from us all, at all levels, to minimise its detrimental effect on our health and our economy.

Finally, I commend the Minister for bringing forward the Budget (No. 3) Bill, which will help to provide some certainty to so many people in these uncertain times. I commend him for showing leadership and for being able to respond quickly to the needs of all.

3.45 pm

Ms Bradshaw: I rise on behalf of the Alliance Party and will focus my comments on health, with some dovetails into justice.

This is a dramatically changing financial situation, and I have concerns that vital bids from Health will not be agreed to. Every time that happens, we move closer to a COVID service than to a health service, and it has a hugely detrimental impact on society. The surge framework sees vital work around cancer, as well as some day-care centres, which remain operational but not as they were before the pandemic. The Estimates provide for funding pathways to secure those services. However, elective procedures have been postponed or cancelled; support for long-term conditions such as diabetes or Parkinson's is being redeployed so that even basic services are lacking; access to GPs is still extraordinarily difficult in many locations; and we are storing up huge problems down the line. Those problems will cost more to fix when we get to them than they would if services were maintained and procedures could take place now.

We are also in the precarious position of still being largely reliant on Barnett consequential to provide vital uplifts to spending. In effect, our ability to respond financially, as required, is determined by what is deemed required for England rather than for Northern Ireland. At times like this, when we are moving up the curve faster, that presents a considerable challenge.

There is an allocation of just over £600 million for additional spend on COVID in the Health Department. Our challenge relates to the fact that, although the Estimates contain allocations for that money, we have no detailed clarity on how or even if it will all be spent. The question is not what we can aspire to spend but what can be spent. We do not want to arrive at a situation in the new year in which we have not spent money usefully. We need detailed actual spending for that money urgently. The Minister has indicated explicitly that any money not spent out of the allocation will be made available to other Departments, but we need to know now how much that will be, because people need support now.

We also have to consider the broader situation around health. Among the commitments in 'New Decade, New Approach' are some that mean so much to us all: dealing with the waiting lists; the reform of adult social care; three cycles of IVF; the mental health strategy; the new strategic direction for drugs and alcohol; and palliative end-of-life care. Those issues are of high priority for us all.

Waiting lists are so long that some services are effectively unavailable, and even being on them causes further health problems for many people, not least around their mental well-being. Even the recent postponement of elective care in the Belfast Trust, for example, will have had a devastating impact on the people who had prepared

themselves for it and who will not regard the word “elective” as apt for the vital procedures that they were about to undergo.

The reform of adult social care has received a funding uplift of £1.7 million. That is welcome, but we must recognise that, in the context of the overall health and social care spending, it is a paltry amount for a care sector that is more vital yet more complex than ever. A tough decision awaits about how exactly we fund care in the future.

The mental health strategy is more urgent than ever. I commend the work of the interim mental health champion to carve out a niche providing vital information and sensitivity at this difficult time. However, there is an urgent need for a strategy that takes account of the real issues raised by the pandemic and of the need to link in a raft of other issues, such as victim recognition, tackling addiction and so on. Surely, that is an area to which money could be allocated highly efficiently, but we urgently need plans for how that bid could be made available in this financial year to fund those vital interventions, not least the new strategic direction for drugs and alcohol.

The problem with such debates as this is that they concern numbers and tables, but we are dealing with the basics of human interaction and humanity. I agree with many in the Health Committee that the toughest stories that we have encountered recently have been around palliative end-of-life care. We cannot allow the separation — even physical separation — of people from their loved ones in care homes at this time. The seriousness of the strain caused by the lack of social and physical contact with loved ones must not be underestimated. If ever there was a topic that is not about Estimates or Budget lines, it is that. We need to spend whatever it takes on PPE, testing or additional staff to ensure that people in care homes can spend time with their loved ones.

We have to talk about the charts and numbers. In the Main Estimates, there is some good news on transformation. The funding of just over £94 million is £13 million more than the original stand-still projection. However, the reality is that the wider health transformation has again, unfortunately, been seriously disrupted and delayed at the very moment when the need for transformation has been demonstrated.

I will move on to justice. Much of the health transformation agenda is about early intervention so that significant problems can be avoided down the line. Much of what the Department of Justice is trying to do falls into broadly the same category. We must never forget that rehabilitating offenders, for example, is not some soft option. It improves lives directly and indirectly improves society as a whole. It is therefore concerning that Justice has seen a real-terms cut to its budget of 12% since devolution, yet there is no less need for its services. Consecutive Ministers have had to manage rising demand for services on ever-decreasing budgets, often because the outcomes of those services are not immediate and do not suit an electoral cycle. It is time for that short-termism to end and for the funding of the vital services that are designed to keep people safe — the prisons, probation, youth justice, tackling paramilitarism and the rest — to be prioritised. There is irony in DUP and Sinn Féin Members calling for more police officers, when, in office, their Finance Ministers have reduced budgets year after year. If you want it, you have to pay for it. The

implications for public safety and security of cutting the Justice budget have to be recognised.

Mr Speaker: The Member’s time is up.

Ms Bradshaw: OK, thank you.

Ms McLaughlin: Before COVID-19, we knew that lots of things had to be addressed. However, without an Assembly and Executive, they could not be addressed. Let us be honest: many things were swept under the carpet long before then. Coronavirus means that we cannot ignore them any longer.

One of the elephants in the room is our health service. Let us appreciate the role of Pivotal, the think tank, in forcing the scandal of waiting lists into news bulletins at the beginning of the year. At that time, Northern Ireland had 120,201 patients waiting for more than a year for planned care. In England, that figure was 1,154. The waiting list was 100 times longer in Northern Ireland than in England, yet the population of England is 30 times larger. Our waiting list, weighted for population, is 3,000 times longer than that in England. That is astonishing, and COVID is making a terrible situation so much worse. That puts a considerable strain on our capacity for Budget planning.

Other examples of where a bad situation is getting so much worse include the devolution settlement. The British Government are taking advantage of Brexit to remove powers and funds from Northern Ireland. They have taken to themselves funding streams that had been provided through the European Union and on which we had much greater influence than we are likely to have with the British Government after Brexit. In the Estimates, every Department cites additional cost as a result of EU exit, and many cite loss of revenue from EU funding. However, we do not have a clear articulation of those numbers from the Department. We need urgent clarity on precisely how much the EU exit is costing us in protocol implementation, the loss of EU funding and the staff cost in preparing for it. That is not all. The UK Internal Market Bill is removing from the Assembly the powers to make laws on market regulation. That is unacceptable.

Meanwhile, Departments do not have all the funds that they need to support businesses and workers through the COVID crisis. We now have the highest rates of infection in the UK and Ireland, yet the Barnett consequential are inadequate to provide the financial support needed to prop up our economy. All power to Andy Burnham and the people of Greater Manchester for demanding more financial support from the Government for their workers and businesses. Their demands are also our demands. The furlough scheme needs to be extended on a more generous basis than that being rolled out next month, with support provided for workers and businesses on a more comprehensive and inclusive basis than has been the case to date.

So far, we have failed to produce a joined-up economic recovery package for the sectors most directly affected by the ongoing pandemic. Allocations over the past number of months could be characterised as coming in dribs and drabs, more indicative of the last group or sector to press the Executive for support. What we need is a strategic, cohesive, all-government recovery plan based on real needs. We do not have the borrowing powers to help our economy through the crisis or to undertake capital investment at the scale that is required to enable

us to build for the long term while providing an economic stimulus in the short and long term. We need to get creative about schemes that could help to aid our recovery from COVID, about borrowing and about finding novel ways to utilise the financial transactions capital that we have often proved chronically incapable of spending. Using those fiscal levers, we can make serious commitments to deliver major infrastructure programmes, as well as investing heavily in education and skills for our future generations.

We cannot avoid the truth that we need to do more to improve our public services. We also need to reform the devolution settlement, but in the opposite direction to that being taken by the British Government.

Mr Beggs: I will speak first as the Ulster Unionist member of the Public Accounts Committee. I wish to address the Northern Ireland Statement of Excesses for 2016-17.

We are advised that many of the adjustments are of a technical nature and that, had the 2017 spring Supplementary Estimates occurred, the situation would have been regularised. There are excesses that are clearly of a technical nature, particularly around pension schemes requiring additional funding. We need to cover employee obligations, and it would be right to correct that error. Minister, are we getting better at calculating pension estimates so that there are fewer such adjustments going forward? There is relatively little information about many of the other excess expenditures. However, we are aware that civil servants were in an impossible situation when there were no Ministers in place and the opportunity to move money during the spring Supplementary Estimates was not there.

Turning to some of the larger ones, I notice that the Department for the Economy had the largest adjustment. There was £81.6 million of additional resource bid for or required, £51 million of which was a result of an underestimate of the notional student loan subsidy. Again, have we learnt lessons, and are we better able to plan? It is better if we can accurately project costs at an early stage, rather than having to make adjustments late in the year. Also listed is £27 million of additional RHI expenditure as a result of the absence from the Northern Ireland RHI scheme of controls that were in place in the GB scheme. I would be interested to know whether there were subsequent additional costs of RHI that resulted in funds being diverted in a similar fashion.

I notice that there was also a large overexpenditure by the Department for Infrastructure. The Minister might be able to advise at some point whether that overexpenditure dates back to pressures that he experienced when he was Minister of that Department or, indeed, when my colleague, Danny Kennedy, was Minister and it appeared that that Department was regularly underfunded, even having to make winter funding awards from in-year funding at the last minute rather than their being budgeted for, as is the case today. Again, I ask the Minister this: have we learned lessons? I notice in the request for resources (RfR) A section that there was a breach of the Department's resource limit by some £40 million and cash limit by some £63 million.

Have we learned lessons to better plan yearly budgets and to avoid moving large sums of money to roads maintenance in the less than ideal winter period when we

put tradesmen under difficult conditions and undoubtedly get poor results by putting down a great deal of tar in the middle of winter?

4.00 pm

I also noticed that the Executive Office breached its RfR A limit by some £35 million and had a net cash requirement of some £34 million. The extra expenditure was attributed to the social investment fund, a Strategic Investment Board grant, and Together: Building a United Community. Have we got better at planning so that, had the Executive been there at that time, we would not be moving large sums of money in the last three months of the year? That is not a good way to build a Budget.

I have a number of queries on the Main Estimates. Initially, I will comment largely on the Department for Infrastructure, the Committee for which I serve on. I noticed that in the introduction to this section in the Main Estimates for the Department, there are, as others have indicated, words of warning regarding uncertainty related to Brexit. We are coming to the end of the Brexit transition period, and there may be unknown costs that may affect the Department. From being on the Committee, I am aware that provision is being made to enable additional grants to be made to our ports and airports should additional emergency funds be necessary, so I can see why that warning is there. Similarly, there is great uncertainty about COVID-19, and it is right that there is a warning listed about it.

On the figures quoted, I noted that there is a significant increase in the Driver and Vehicle Agency resource funding from £7 million to £24 million. There is also a small increase in expenditure for ferries from £3.3 million to £4.3 million and significant increases for railway services, from £112 million to £205 million, and for road passenger services, from £70 million to almost £118 million. Will the Minister confirm that each of those significant increases is largely as the result of having a reduced number of customers? Buses and trains are still running, but less income is being generated. I am interested to know whether that is the cause of all those significant increases or if there are other factors that are not listed.

On roads, there has been a significant uplift from 2019-2020 to 2020-21, from £164 million to £209 million. What I found strange about that significant uplift is that there are still ongoing difficulties with issues such as fixing potholes. Can the Minister advise whether that money is going entirely, or significantly, to new roads and that we are failing to maintain our roads as we should and are creating problems with potential accidents and claims due to the poor state of our roads —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Beggs: — and whether we will ensure that we make better use of our money in future?

Mr Dickson: I support the motion. I will make some brief comments about the Committee of which I am a member: the Economy Committee.

By anybody's book, this has been a very difficult year for the Assembly and the Executive. We have certainly had some difficult times in the past, but none has been so severe in its challenge to our health, wealth and well-being over such a concentrated period. As a result, and given the incredibly fast pace of events during 2020, we have

seen the Main Estimates being laid much later than would otherwise be the case.

The amount of money that has been spent over the past few months is unprecedented. More than £2.2 billion extra has been allocated to Northern Ireland by the Treasury to respond to the health emergency and to support individuals and businesses. We still do not have a full picture of what financial room and flexibility Northern Ireland will have over the remainder of this financial year and beyond, and we await a spending review from Westminster.

We need a recognition that austerity has failed, and that should be very clear to our Finance Minister and to our whole Executive. It is not the way forward, so I hope that the Finance Minister will see flexibility and will be asked to allow Northern Ireland to spend its allocation where pressures arise.

The Department for the Economy has, like the Department of Health, been on the front line of the COVID-19 response. As such, it has seen huge amounts of money flow through it over the last number of months, with some £450 million in additional funds, and it has a net resource requirement for this year that is about 30% higher than last year's.

For the most part, the Department for the Economy has, I have to admit, coped well with delivering funds to those that need them. The biggest single intervention has been the £10,000 small business grant, and that is at £246 million. However, unfortunately, there are still those businesses, including individual businesses, that have gone without support. We need to find funds to support those that have been excluded. I note that the Finance Minister gave indications that he will be receptive to bids on that front, but I understand that it requires a bid from the Economy Minister. Perhaps the debate will be a further prompt for her to do so. The Department is, understandably, given its past reputation, risk-averse, but there has to be a means of delivering interventions while ensuring that public money is being spent wisely.

Perhaps helping those who have been left out would require access to what appears to be a difficulty, which is HMRC data. That would be of considerable assistance not only to the Department of Finance but to the Department for the Economy in delivering small, sharp and fast financial interventions. It has been achieved in Wales, so why can it not be achieved here in Northern Ireland? I recognise that the situation is different in Scotland, as they have tax-raising powers and, therefore, have more access to HMRC data than we do in Northern Ireland.

The Department for the Economy needs to be more confident in moving forward. We cannot have people being unfairly left out with underspends and missed opportunities because we are not seeing clear bids that are linked to a comprehensive economic strategy. Nonetheless, I understand that the sums have been vast this year, and we should not lose sight of the fact that public money has to be spent wisely. Of course, the Department for the Economy has had a difficult first few years in taking on the challenges of its predecessor. We see a reminder of that in the Statement of Excesses. RHI, with an excess of £27 million for 2016-17, is also a reminder that the Assembly has a fair amount to do to resolve the problems of the last three years of failure, given the absence that that caused.

There are challenges in spending money, which are ongoing, but I understand that the challenges in accruing resources for the year are due to the unusual set of circumstances, which have altered demand and consumption. There is, perhaps, a perception that this would pick up later on in this part of the year. However, with the disruption being so prolonged and severe, I think that we all have serious concerns. Will the Finance Minister comment on how such things have been built into his Estimates?

I note that there are two elements of spending by the Department for the Economy that are under the sole authority of the Budget Act. Northern Ireland Screen is to receive £14.6 million, and there is a £450,000 payment for HMS Caroline. I understand that the funding for Northern Ireland Screen has now been regularised with the legislation that was passed in the Chamber only a few weeks ago. I also think that it is important to reference the royal naval maritime museum, which has responsibility for HMS Caroline, along with the Department for the Economy. The issues there need to be regularised as quickly as possible not only for the staff but for the venture in particular as it goes forward.

I will also make a specific point about European structural funds, which represent a considerable source of funding to the Department. In late 2020, however, we still await specifics on how those will be replaced. Meanwhile, disability employment organisations are also entirely funded by the European social fund, yet today they are unable to plan for the future due to a complete lack of information. I want to see a plan from the Department of Finance and the Department for the Economy on how we are going to avoid a cliff edge for those groups and many like them.

I mentioned the previously unseen levels of public expenditure for Northern Ireland. It is necessary that we spend wisely and strategically, and look forward and towards our recovery. What we need from our Executive is an endorsed economic recovery strategy to incorporate the interventions made by the Department for the Economy in particular.

I look forward to the October monitoring round, which has been delayed, and hope that we see a bolder set of bids from the Department for interventions, with assurances that such money can be spent wisely. We cannot return funds to Treasury when individuals and businesses are in such dire need of support.

Mr Butler: I pay tribute to the many officials from across all Departments, not just the Department of Education, involved in developing the Estimates and Budget reports. I thank the Minister for bringing them to us today.

If you will indulge me, Mr Speaker, I would like to pay my respects to a friend and ex-neighbour who died at the weekend from COVID. She was not at the average age of 82, did not have underlying conditions and will no longer be with her family. All of us, including those who compile these reports, probably have friends or family who are involved and are under great pressure. Last week, the Executive Ministers worked tremendously well to pull together something that, although very difficult for people to understand, has the potential to save lives. I ask them to do that again this week so that we see a return to collective thinking.

I also pay tribute to all those involved in the education sector, because, as I said last week, teachers and support staff are on their knees. As has been said many times, in terms of the budgets for which each Department is responsible, the education budget is over £2 billion. That sounds like an awful lot of money, but, with the pressures that are on education, it is, unfortunately, not enough for the factors that need to be addressed. The Department of Education reported a £2.8 million underspend, and the Education Authority reported a £0.5 million overspend, which should be seen as a warning. The Department was able to secure significant additional funding through the in-year monitoring rounds process, which contributed to the reduction in the Education Authority's reported overspend to somewhere in the region of £0.5 million. However, as those allocations were a one-off, there continue to be significant pressures going into 2020-21.

One of the major pressures on the financial resources of the Department of Education is the significant rise in cases that require support from the special educational needs services right across Northern Ireland. The Department has seen the numbers increase by over 20% in five years. The Department needs to have that increased demand supported with resource in order to tackle the issue and to help to deliver the best education possible for those vulnerable children who require additional support in their education and in many other areas in order to be a success in life and be the best that they can be. The recent announcement of multiple consultations by the Education Authority could prove pointless if they are not guaranteed and underpinned by the promise of financial and resource support. Our SEN pupils deserve better.

The Department of Education has also seen increased spending on the Strule campus, which has sadly been delayed until 2025. With a mounting series of seriously fiscally overspent projects — this has been going on for many years — it is really important that the Department, the Committee and the Minister provide the necessary scrutiny not only to deliver the project but to deliver it as close to budget as possible and on time.

No one can be content with the complexity of our education system. Perhaps that complexity contributes to the large budget. Regardless of the educational sector that our pupils come from and of their religion and faith or none, we are all aware of the need to tackle mental ill health and well-being in our schools because it is part of a preventative strategy. Mental ill health, like COVID, is a problem for all, and I would like to see a greater emphasis on it with regard to the Estimates and budgetary allocations. We need to make sure that there is significant investment in and access to quality nurture- and resilience-building initiatives, with increased mental health resources for all our schoolchildren.

That process will come with a cost but will surely have incredible benefits down the line in preparing our children to deal with mental health challenges throughout their life. That can be described as a process of “invest to save”.

4.15 pm

Mr Allister: The Estimates are, undoubtedly, pretty dry documents, but they are important because they amount, along with the Budget Bill, to the legal authority of the House, as the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland, for the spending of public money.

Therefore, they perform or should perform a critical role in terms of that responsibility to be paid by the House to the people and in the transparency that should attend it.

The first issue that I want to raise is a presentational one in respect of the Estimates. In every table, wherever one goes in the document, it sets out, for example, what the resource provision is to be for the current year, 2020-21. Then, it tells us what the provision was in 2019-2020 and what the out-turn was in 2018-19. Given that we are in October, why are we not getting the out-turn figure for 2019-2020? As I understand it, the out-turn figures are known from June or July. Why, when we get Estimates in October, are we not getting the out-turn figure for the previous year? The importance of that is that it affords MLAs the opportunity to compare and contrast the provision being made today for this year with what was needed last year; in fact, all that we are being given is what was provided or made available last year, not what was needed last year. I do not understand why the Estimates do not address that issue.

When we turn to an issue such as that, by way of example, on page 42 of the Estimates we come to the vexed issue of RHI expenditure. In the annually managed expenditure (AME) figures, we have a figure of £33.4 million for this year. We know that, in 2018-19, the actual figure was £23.7 million. We know that the provision made last year was almost £29 million; yet, on page 42, we see that, this year, it is to be £33.4 million. As I understand it, the tariffs, which were reduced, have continued to be reduced and have not been increased, so I would like to hear from the Minister why the figure is at £33.4 million, which is £11 million higher than the last out-turn figure that we have been provided with. That is one of the things that I would like to have explained.

The other matter that exercises me about the Estimates, as it did last year, is the black-box figure. That is the figure that has been spent not on the authority of any legislation that governs the affairs of an individual Department but on the sole authority of the Budget Act. Of course, that robs us of proper scrutiny of the basis for any spend. I raised the point last year that millions of pounds were being spent on the basis of the Budget Bill, whereas there should be legislation to cover that spend and it was not there. Here it is again: this year, £34 million is being spent on welfare reform without legislative authority other than the Budget Bill. Why is that? Why has the Department for Communities not legislated to govern that? NI Screen is to receive £14.5 million, which is now, belatedly, covered by legislation. On page 219 of the Estimates, we find that almost £8 million is to be spent on good relations. My understanding is that that would be social investment fund (SIF) money. Why do we not have legislation that authorises the expenditure of yet another £8 million of social investment fund money?

I asked that question at the Finance Committee and asked to see the letters, because the guidance that covers the funding of public money requires that you should not have any more than £1.5 million on any subject in a black box unauthorised by specific legislation. You should not have it for more than two years. I therefore asked, “Can we see the letters, please, that drew that to the Department's attention before it gave authority to items like that £34 million without having any budgetary authority to do so other than the Budget Act?”. After the debate started

today, Finance Committee members got a letter from the Department that I find astounding. There was no written authority given by the Department of Finance to spend the extra millions on welfare: there was a verbal approval, we are told. There is no legislation governing it. Guidance on spending public money states that you need written authority: it does not exist.

Oh, yes: the letter was sent out last Friday. After I had raised the matter with the Finance Committee on Wednesday and the Committee pressed officials about it, a letter went out last Friday retrospectively approving. Up until that point, it was a shrug of the shoulders and the giving of a verbal approval. The same thing happened with the good relations money, the SIF money: again, only a verbal approval. Frankly, Mr Speaker, that is not good enough.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Allister: Those issues need to be addressed urgently.

Mr Carroll: Not for the first time, I will highlight in the Chamber the absurdity of the Executive making huge financial decisions with little or no mechanism for accountability or scrutiny. It has got to the stage at which the Executive do not even pretend to follow the normal democratic functions of oversight that we are supposed to expect from legislative chambers and Parliaments. The Estimates commit large amounts of public expenditure and form an integral part of the Budget process, yet it is only today that we get access to information on a Bill that will be debated tomorrow. In that sense, MLAs who are not in the Executive have only a matter of hours to look at the incredibly important detail of the Budget. Frankly, it is virtually impossible to have any influence over the direction of public funds. It speaks volumes about the value that the Executive place on transparency. Such a lack of scrutiny is unacceptable at any time but is especially so during a pandemic. I ask whether it has been totally lost on the Minister that years of austerity, signed off in Stormont Budgets, have led to health service cuts and attacks on public-sector pay that have fundamentally undermined our ability to grapple with the crisis.

Our ability to come through the pandemic is dependent in large part on the financial decisions of the House. The need for accountability, to make sure that we get those decisions right, is paramount. It is unacceptable that that has been shirked once again by the Minister and the Executive. From the Estimates, from where I sit, it looks as though the Executive may repeat some of the mistakes of the past. The increases, which reflect money committed to the COVID crisis, do not appear to be enough.

I will look at some of the figures in the Estimates. The increases for the Department for Communities will, no doubt, be welcomed by the Minister but are nowhere near enough to overhaul our benefits system so that people are not falling through the cracks. The benefit cap needs to be lifted at least until the economic crisis is over. The bedroom tax needs to be written off for everyone, including those who are paying through the tooth every month. Those changes are necessary only because the Executive endorsed welfare reform in the first place. Anyone with their ear to the ground in working-class communities will know that the changes are necessary to support people at this time. A serious financial package for hospitality workers and those who are set to lose out

because of the latest restrictions is also lacking. If those workers had not been rushed back into workplaces before the furlough scheme had even ended or the virus was properly contained, they would not face another period out of work, this time with less support from the state. COVID payments from the Assembly have overwhelmingly favoured the business community over workers. Despite having raised that repeatedly and brought it to the attention of many Ministers, I see no attempt to rectify that imbalance.

The Estimates reflect the Department of Health's request for an increase in funding, which, in some ways, is unsurprising, but I am not convinced that it is enough to meet the challenges that we face. On top of the massive COVID costs, people are concerned about surgeries being postponed or cancelled, which is, largely, down to the fact that our health service is overstretched. The Estimates make no attempt to fill the void and recruit the extra healthcare staff or obtain the hospital facilities that we need urgently to ensure that we can fight the virus and continue to provide vital services to people who need them.

Nor will the Estimates make a serious dent in the mental health crisis in our communities. The Government in the South — by no means a radical Government — have increased mental health spending by £50 million. Where is the sustained and significant increase to tackle the mental health problems in our society that, we know, will increase after the pandemic? We have heard about the increased anxiety and depression faced by so many due to the pandemic. Where is the plan to rapidly increase funding to provide more access to counsellors for things such as cognitive behavioural therapy and all the other mechanisms that are needed to support people in need?

Earlier this year, I raised the important issue of the £50 million reduction in funding for trusts. When people were clapping for the NHS, there were plans to strip back the NHS via the trusts. We have been told that there is a bid to plug that gap, but we do not know whether it has been accepted or when it will be. We need information on that as soon as possible.

There are serious concerns that need to be addressed and highlighted in relation to the Estimates for the Economy Department. Resource spending for the Health and Safety Executive seems to be down from last year. That would be extremely worrying at any time, but, during a pandemic, when people are worried about their safety, that seems to be preposterous. Why is that the case? Why are we not ramping up and expanding our Health and Safety Executive? Why are we not recruiting more staff and carrying out regular on-the-spot checks to ensure that workers are safe and protected at this time? There also appears to be a serious gap in funding for student support services. It is unclear why that is the case, but it is worrying.

Beyond the financial decisions that I have raised, the Estimates contain traces of previous bad decisions and wasted expenditure. A significant reduction in spending on public-sector superannuation for Civil Service pensions seems to be a reflection of the changes in workforce driven by years of austerity and a disastrous voluntary exit scheme that has led to worse terms and conditions, reduced trade union membership in the public sector and wasted expenditure. There is also a concerning increase in

spending on agency staff at a time when public-sector jobs have been gutted.

The Statement of Excesses gives us another glance, as people have said, at the £27 million listed as added expenditure from RHI from the 2016-17 period after the Assembly collapsed and £17 million on the SIF programme, which, for some at least, acted as a slush fund of power and patronage. There are many other issues on top of those.

The Westminster Government need to step up to the plate and provide more funding for the North. We have been chronically underfunded for some time, but that should not be an excuse for the Executive. They should be shouting loudly about that. It is not good enough for the Executive to say, "We don't control the purse strings", not when they have, for years, wasted tens of millions of pounds on RHI, PFI and austerity, to name but a few issues. Many will ask whether —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Carroll: It is important to raise those issues. I am unlikely to divide the House, but I oppose the Estimates for those reasons.

Mr Chambers: I welcome the motion. It is detailed and timely. However, I concur with some Members that the work of the Departments would be less constrained if we could move away from the single-year model of Budget-setting.

However, it would be remiss of me not to acknowledge that, when it comes to setting a Budget, this year is like no other we have ever faced.

4.30 pm

Other Members spoke about the strain on small businesses. We see and hear about their situation daily. Their problems are a stark reality. I commend the Minister and the Executive for, earlier this year, quickly coming up with schemes designed to get money out to businesses. Using the rates database as the pointer to facilitate prompt payments helped to reduce the associated administration. The money made available was very welcome, and it was paid into bank accounts as quickly as possible. Local errors and omissions were, once identified, fixed in a timely and sensitive manner. That said, a large number of people in my constituency fell through the cracks due to the delivery mechanisms. I tried to reassure those who approached me about their dilemma that their situation would be recognised and rectified. I am disappointed that this remains largely unresolved. Someone needs to address the situation urgently.

This new four-week circuit breaker has reopened wounds. Taxi drivers and the hairdressers who rent a chair in a salon make up only a very small section of a self-employed community that feels left behind and, indeed, even abandoned. On their behalf, I appeal for someone to grasp the nettle and, finally, sort that out. Local government will also require intervention, and I hope that that will be forthcoming.

In relation to the logistic and financial demands inflicted on our National Health Service, I recognise that money has been found to try to deliver a service that saves lives. However, a lot of the negative issues that have arisen in our health service during the pandemic are exacerbated by previous years of serious underfunding. When we

finally defeat this dreadful virus — we will — we must be prepared to make available the budget necessary to tackle unacceptable waiting lists, which have been lengthened by the pandemic. When this crisis is over, we cannot return to how we approached health in the past. We must also make provision for a fast COVID vaccination programme for when a vaccine is found. That will come with a huge cost.

This year, Northern Ireland will receive billions in direct financial assistance through, for example, the job retention scheme, as well as Barnett consequentials. Like so many other regions, were it not for our membership of the United Kingdom, we simply could not have responded in the manner that we have. To those who criticised the British Government for some of their policies — I am not a frequent cheerleader for them — I say, "Be grateful", even begrudgingly, for the assistance that they have given us to date and which will, no doubt, be added to in the weeks and months ahead. Had the British Treasury not been in such a generous mode, the job of the Finance Minister would have been significantly more difficult than it has been to date. I wish the Minister well in his endeavours.

Mrs Barton: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the debate. Financial support is essential to the running of the different Departments. In January, when we returned to Stormont, one could never have imagined how different, within weeks, Northern Ireland would be because of the COVID-19 pandemic or the effect that it would have on the Budget that we are looking at today.

Today, however, I direct my comments mainly towards the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Estimates. I welcome the various financial aid packages that were put in place to support our agricultural, horticultural, including ornamental horticulture, and fishing communities. The substantial financial support that was made available to councils has been of wonderful benefit to them in dealing with waste management and other issues that arose due to the period of COVID-19 lockdown. All of that was very welcome, and it is to our Government in London that we are very grateful. However, I am aware that there are still sectors of the agriculture industry that have received no support. Here I must pay tribute to our agri-food industry, which ensured that we had no food shortages during the present crisis. Our population was well fed and, through innovative methods, the industry ensured that the movement of livestock continued through these difficult times and that the farming economy continued. There are, however, some uncertain times ahead for the agri-food sector, with the uncertainties of Brexit and the movement of goods, particularly west-east and east-west. There are so many unanswered questions. Will all legal impediments to the trade at the end of the transition period be resolved? What is the definition of "qualifying goods"? Those are just two of the questions. I welcome, however, the prompt payment of the basic farm payments, due out in November. Hopefully, these will continue for the agricultural community for the foreseeable future.

Looking at the Main Estimates, I assume that the significant reduction in the common agricultural policy is due to Brexit and payments not coming from the EU. There is one other issue I wish to ask about. Will the Minister please advise why, when the operating accruing resources for forestry were approximately £10.5 million in 2018, in 2020-21, it is down as far as £14,000?

I support the motion.

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance, Conor Murphy, to conclude and wind up the debate. The Minister has up to 26 minutes.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Supply resolution debates can often cover many aspects, not always related to the Bill under consideration. However, I suppose that on this occasion the background of COVID-19 has helped to focus most, if not all, minds on the importance of public expenditure and the decisions that we debate in the Assembly. I will endeavour to address as many of the points raised during the debate as I can in the time allotted to me. There were quite a lot of contributions, and if I miss some points or do not pick them up, I will ask officials to read through the transcript and see whether such points can be answered in writing.

I once again thank the Finance Committee for its agreement to take this important legislation through by accelerated passage. This agreement secures a timely passage of the legislation through the Assembly, thereby avoiding any risk or uncertainty over the funding for public services at this critical time.

I listened with interest to Members during the debate, and I wish to respond to some of the points — as many as I can. The Chair of the Committee raised the issue of the Budget exchange scheme and whether it should be reviewed. Members will be aware that I, along with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers, have sought additional flexibilities from the Treasury — Mr O’Toole asked the same question — including an increase in the Budget exchange mechanism, which limits us to carrying forward unspent funding up to a maximum of 0.6% of resource DEL and 1.5% of capital DEL. These limits hinder good financial management at the end of the year, with underspends that emerge late in the year being reallocated to where money can be spent quickly, rather than to the highest priority. It can result in a loss of funding to the Executive for the sake of a day’s delay in contracts being signed. It would be much better to have the flexibility to carry forward our underspent funding so that it can be appropriately utilised. This is not really a call for additional funding; it is a call to have the tools to allow us to manage our existing funds. I will meet the Chief Secretary to the Treasury later this week and continue to press for these flexibilities.

Dr Aiken also asked about payments being made for reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing. The principal repayment costs are costs against our rates income. They are approximately £120 million for 2020-21. Interest payments are a direct cost to our resource DEL, and amount to approximately £48 million for this year. The costs of borrowing are handled centrally to ensure that there is a consistent approach and to reduce the administrative burden on Departments.

Dr Aiken also asked a question in relation to the Public Accounts Committee report on the Excess Votes and the review of the financial process. The Excesses in 2016-17 were unique, due to the fact that the Assembly was unable to pass the spring Supplementary Estimates at the end of that year. My Department is working on the review of the financial process and, while this has been delayed due to the impact of COVID, the Department will be bringing it to the Assembly in due course. It will include engagement with the Finance Committee over the format and process for the approval of the Estimates and the Budget Bill.

A common theme that Members raised was in relation to schemes for business sectors that have not yet received any funding. I reiterate the point that I made during Question Time, which was that I have encouraged Ministers to bring forward schemes as quickly as they possibly can.

On the question asked by Caoimhe Archibald and Andrew Muir about Invest NI and its role in providing business support, I recognise that there may be gaps. Obviously, it is for the Ministers who have policy responsibility for that area to develop proposals, but I am happy to consider any such bids. I have asked the relevant Departments — in this case, the Department for the Economy — to bring forward proposals to provide support for those affected by the restrictions. As I said, we have set aside £55.2 million specifically to address sectors that have fallen through the gaps.

Andrew Muir asked about Kickstart and why we did not have a scheme that, for three months, has been in place in England. I cannot comment on specific timings, but I understand that the Communities Minister is drawing up local plans to introduce a scheme similar to Kickstart. Mr Muir also asked about further funding and engagement with other jurisdictions. I continue to press Treasury to ensure that support is available to protect people and businesses, whether in the form of schemes from the British Government or additional funding for the Executive. I am in regular contact with the other devolved Finance Ministers, who keep me apprised of situations in their respective jurisdictions. We have joined forces in pressing the Treasury on those matters.

Mr Muir: Will the Minister take an intervention?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Mr Muir: Does the Minister agree that the funding allocated thus far is to be welcomed, but, for us to properly deal with this public health emergency, we need additional support from Westminster? There are consistent calls for us to align our approach with what is happening in the Republic of Ireland, but we cannot do that without the necessary financial support from Westminster.

Mr Murphy: I am very much aware of that, and I think that the Member made the point about some of the English cities. His colleague Paula Bradshaw made the point that, when the demand comes from England and is then spent in England, it comes across as a Barnett consequential, and that is not necessarily the best way to get funding. Over the course of the debate, a number of Members criticised the bit-by-bit approach, but the Barnett funding came bit by bit over the past six or seven months. It was not the case that we had an allocation at the start and could decide what to do with it; we received Barnett funding at various stages. While additional Barnett funding is welcome, it is not ideal for planning. It would be much better if we had an agreed way to support the expenditure that we need.

A number of questions were asked about the Department of Education. I do not purport to answer on behalf of every Department, and Members are free to scrutinise and ask questions of individual Ministers. A total of £137 million was given to the Department of Education to address COVID-19 funding, including £1.9 million for free school meals during the initial stage of the pandemic in March 2020. Additional costs have been put forward for resource funding, capital funding and the childcare response.

Of course, the initial childcare scheme, as Members mentioned, was undersubscribed and, fortunately, a better scheme was later put in place that was more fully subscribed.

A question was asked about the A5 road scheme. The Member who asked it is aware that it is one of the Executive's flagship programmes and that it was funded not only by the Executive but by the Dublin Government. That commitment was most recently made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement. I understand that the most recent public inquiry is being considered by the Department for Infrastructure, and I will discuss the required funding with the Infrastructure Minister as part of the Budget discussions. I am not sure whether the Member is in the Chamber, but he will be aware that the Dublin Government have announced a capital programme for the next five years that, I hope, will assist in other cross-border infrastructure developments.

Mr McCrossan also asked about the isolation fund. Whilst we do not have one locally, the Department for Communities has established a £10 million food and distribution scheme for vulnerable people, including those who received shielding letters. The spend to date on that is £7.2 million for the food box scheme. That intervention is planned to continue throughout the year.

Mike Nesbitt asked about the New Decade, New Approach commitment for additional police officers.

I am content to honour all the commitments under New Decade, New Approach. It is important that we do. However, it must not be just the Assembly that does that, and that is why I challenged the British Government about their lack of commitment to the financial propositions that they made in that document.

4.45 pm

The Department of Justice submitted a strategic outline case seeking approval for the PSNI to proceed to an outline business case for an additional 600 officers at a cost of £40 million a year. My officials are engaging with the PSNI and the DOJ on that strategic outline case. On the basis that it demonstrates value for money, the Executive will consider funding for that in light of the Budget envelope that is available. Obviously, it is for the whole Executive to agree that, but, as I say, given our commitment to New Decade, New Approach, we will want to ensure that the target is met.

Mike Nesbitt also asked about Brexit funding. We submitted a bid to the Treasury on 11 September for a number of different costs relating to the protocol, including PSNI costs. Officials responded to the Treasury on a number of queries, and we are awaiting confirmation that it will fund the costs of a lot of the protocol issues that other people raised. We are awaiting confirmation of the funding. Mike Nesbitt made the point about the multi-year Budgets, and I agree with everything that he said about planning and the ability for the community and voluntary sector in particular to plan on a year-by-year basis. The failings of annual Budgets are very evident to all of us who support that sector.

A question was raised about the failure to spend all the Barnett allocations. Prior to receiving the additional £200 million as part of the guarantee extension on 9 October, the Executive allocated the available funding. As I outlined,

£55 million has been left for other sectors, and £600 million has been held pending an assessment of health costs. It is crucial that the money is spent to best effect, and I urged Ministers to come forward with proposals for that. Of course, the COVID-related money has to be spent within this financial year. It is incumbent on all Members and Committees to ensure that the Departments that they are scrutinising come forward with bids that are made in good time and that can be spent in the available time.

Mr Frew asked for an explanation of the figures on the Vote on Account, which is shown in table 1.3 of the document. The Assembly passed two separate Votes on Account this year. The first was passed in March in the Budget Act alongside the spring Supplementary Estimates, which is the normal process. That was intended to see us through to July, by which time we would have the Main Estimates. However, as the Member will remember, we were unable to bring the Main Estimates, and we had a further Vote on Account. The figures in table 1.3 in the Main Estimates are the sum of the March figure and the July figure.

I am disappointed but not surprised at his challenge to the Executive's position on the interventions that we have made with further restrictions. Members are entitled to express opinions if they want, but we have a broader responsibility for the public message. For him to reiterate the view that was expressed by the Agriculture Minister and endorsed in some shape or fashion by the Education Minister is damaging to the public message. I very much regret that he expressed that view.

Chris Lyttle, as the Chair of the Education Committee, asked questions about the Education Department. The Department has advised us that no significant capital underspend is anticipated between now and the end of the financial year. While construction work has been down on anticipated levels, there is additional demand from ICT and transport, which will balance that reduction.

He also asked about the Fresh Start capital. It is disappointing that the Strule campus appears to have been held up. We are fully committed to delivering that significant education programme. Treasury approval is required for the release of Fresh Start funding, and I have engaged with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in order to secure the timely release for this specific purpose, but I have not yet received a response. Any delay in confirmation from the Treasury will significantly impact upon the campus's opening date.

The Member asked whether the Treasury had confirmed the availability of Fresh Start funding for re-profiling over the remainder of the funding period. I confirm that such an agreement exists to re-profile shared and integrated education and shared housing funding. Work is under way to revise and update the profile for that spend.

I think that Mr Lyttle also asked about the establishment of an independent review of education. New Decade, New Approach recommended the establishment of an independent review of education, and, therefore, I support its delivery.

Matthew O'Toole asked a number of questions about EU exit costs. There is still some uncertainty about the protocols and what may emerge from them, particularly with the Department of Agriculture's requirements on ports and other areas. We are coordinating, particularly with the Department for the Economy and the Department of

Agriculture, to understand the impact of the protocol. We will then lead the engagement with Treasury and work to encourage the mitigating measures that are required — financial, legislative or otherwise — to alleviate, as far as possible, any negative repercussions locally, and we will seek full recovery of any associated costs from Treasury.

We had provided some costs, but those have a tendency to change depending on the outcomes of negotiations. If we move to a no-deal scenario, as the British Prime Minister has predicted, the potential cost will be much more substantial. It is not possible, therefore, to give an accurate feed at the moment.

Other Members raised a number of issues. Pat Catney spoke about proper scrutiny. We recognise that this has been a unique year for doing our business, and the intention is to get back to proper budgetary processes.

Maoliosa McHugh quite rightly spoke about the difference between the job retention scheme and the job support scheme. Thankfully, the job support scheme, which initially was not intended to assist anyone who was forced to leave work as a consequence of regulations, is now intended to do that, but that will not capture people whose businesses are not obliged to close but will undoubtedly suffer severe financial loss.

Paula Bradshaw made some points about Barnett and the spend in Health. Health recently provided us with the detail of how it intends to spend the £600 million. That leaves some return to the Executive, but a substantial amount will be used by Health. People who are involved in the Health Committee, and MLAs generally, will know that that is a very significant amount of money, and it has to be spent in this financial year. I am sure that the necessary level of scrutiny will be provided to that.

Mr O'Toole: I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way. Further to what Alan Chambers said, will any of the additional ring-fenced Health money be used specifically for vaccine provision? We do not yet have a vaccine, but it would be helpful to know whether there is that level of planning in the Department.

Mr Murphy: I cannot say for sure whether that is the case. I know that a certain proportion of it is COVID-related, and another proportion is for ongoing Health requirements. The Health Committee Chair — he is sitting beside you — might know more about that, but it is in excess of £500 million, which is a very substantial increase in Health spending. There has already been a significant spend on PPE and other matters.

Roy Beggs asked a range of questions, particularly about infrastructure, and he is quite right. I know from my time in the Department that it is a victim of habitual underspending, but that has been the way in which budgets have been provided to us.

That takes me on to Stewart Dickson's point that austerity has clearly failed. It has damaged public services for a long number of years. He asked about securing HMRC data to support employment support schemes. We had asked HMRC for assistance in looking at that, and we were told very bluntly that it was not going to provide any assistance to any devolved Administration to do that. The Member raised the issue of European structural funds. Again, we were told that we will have a shared prosperity fund to replace any lost EU funding, and as yet we have

had no significant detail from Treasury on that. Along with Scotland and Wales, we will continue to press the matter with them.

Jim Allister asked for the out-turn figures, and I will get an answer for him. I am not certain why those have not been provided by this date, but we will respond to him.

There were comments about welfare mitigation and the sole authority. As part of the Fresh Start Agreement, the Executive agreed to put in place schemes to mitigate some impacts of welfare reform, and they provided funding for a four-year period ending on 31 March 2020. The extension of the scheme beyond 31 March was included in the NDNA deal, and £40.3 million was allocated for mitigation payments in 2020-21. The extension of the welfare mitigation scheme requires two new pieces of legislation to be approved by resolution of the Assembly. In the absence of that legislation, the Department has been making mitigation payments, under the sole authority of the relevant Budget Act, from 1 April.

Mr Allister raised a point about consistency in approval, which I recognise as an issue. I have spoken to officials about that. There has not been consistency in the past. At times, there has been a letter of authority. At other times, there has been an email of authority. As the Member identifies, in some cases, there has been verbal authority. We want to see, going forward, consistency through the provision of a written letter of authority. I am happy to ensure that that is carried forward. I have no doubt that we will continue that discussion in the Committee. I do not think that there was good practice in the past. We need standard, consistent practice on approval.

Gerry Carroll raised the issue of austerity and its impact on public and health services. The impact of austerity has been a consistent theme from this side of the Chamber for many, many years. That is hitting back all the more forcefully given the COVID response. He raised the question of Executive support for the economy and said that that had been biased in favour of businesses as opposed to workers. Anybody with a cursory observation of this will know that the schemes in support of salaries and workers come directly from London. The Executive do not have HMRC data to be able to pay workers under the job support or job retention schemes that came directly from London. That is why I have consistently lobbied for the continuation of the job retention scheme: to ensure that workers receive salaries. The job support scheme initially was not to assist workers who were put out of work as a consequence of the restrictions, but we argued against that, and it has now been altered. It is, however, still far short of what we require. We have been consistent on that. To try to land that criticism on the Executive is mistaken and unfair.

The Member also mentioned some of the spend in the South, where we find ourselves in opposition. One of the things that we have to do in the South, in opposing or criticising a Budget or public spend, is to provide an alternative Budget. That has to be costed, and it has to stack up when having a public debate. I know that, through autumn and into spring, we will have an opportunity to debate next year's Budget, so I look forward to him providing some figures, rather than simply criticising all the spend that we have allocated, and identifying where the additional spend that he would like to see will come from and, as a consequence of the restricted and finite pot of

money that we have, where spend will be taken from to address other measures.

A Cheann Comhairle, in drawing my remarks to a close, I want to thank you very much for your patience during the debate. The Assembly approval of the motion today on the Main Estimates 2020-21 is a crucial stage in securing the public expenditure that the Departments need to continue to deliver in this unprecedented situation. Failure to pass the Supply resolution would put at risk the continuation of public services for the remainder of the financial year. Likewise, the Supply resolution for the 2016-17 Statement of Excesses will regularise the excess expenditure concerned and close off that outstanding matter. I therefore commend the Main Estimates 2020-21 and the 2016-17 Statement of Excesses to the Assembly, and I ask Members to support the two motions.

Mr Speaker: Before we proceed to the Questions, I remind Members that it is established practice that the votes on the motions require cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £4,757,631,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 and that resources, not exceeding £4,791,050,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 as summarised for each Department or other public body in columns 3 (a) and 3 (b) of table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2020-21 that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £112,618,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 and that resources, not exceeding £183,290,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Part 1 of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-17 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

5.00 pm

Budget (No. 3) Bill: First Stage

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to introduce the Budget (No. 3) Bill [NIA 09/17-22], which is a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of a certain sum for the service of the year ending 31 March 2021; to appropriate that sum for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance to borrow on the credit of that sum; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources (including accruing resources) for the year ending 31 March 2021; to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of an excess cash sum for the service of the year ending 31 March 2017; to authorise the use for the public service of excess resources for that year; and to repeal certain spent provisions.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: I inform Members that I have received a letter from the Committee for Finance informing me that the Committee is satisfied that the consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill has been appropriate, as required under Standing Order 42(2).

Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill: First Stage

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance to move the Bill on behalf of the Minister for Communities.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I beg to introduce the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill [NIA 10/17-22], which is a Bill to make provision about liquor licensing and the registration of clubs.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Speaker: Members, please take your ease for a few moments while we prepare the Table.

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

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The next item of business is three motions to approve statutory rules, all of which relate to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations. There will be a single debate on all three motions. I will call the junior Minister to move the first motion. The junior Minister will then commence the debate on all three motions listed in the Order Paper. When all who wish to speak have done so, I shall put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion. That process will be repeated for the remaining statutory rule. If that is clear, we shall proceed.

Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Go raibh maith agat, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle. Éirím leis an rún a chur chun cinn. I beg to move

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

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

Mr Kearney: As you aware, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, the most recent amendments to the regulations were announced in the Chamber last week. Members had an opportunity to probe and scrutinise them before they were made. I believe that Members will agree that those most recent amendments have moved us on considerably. It is within that context that I bring forward amendments No. 5, No. 6 and No. 7 to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations.

With your permission, a Leas-Cheann Comhairle, I will focus my remarks exclusively on the amendments that are at the centre of the debate. Amendments No. 5, No. 6 and No. 7 to the regulations came about following the establishment of a cross-departmental working group on entertainment issues. The group considered the risks that are associated with certain activities, such as singing and dancing, and the effects of loud music. I will outline for Members the changes that have been brought about by the amendments.

I will begin with amendment No. 5, which came into effect on 23 September 2020. It placed requirements on venues where alcohol may be consumed in respect of music, dancing, risk assessments, seating, consumption of food and drink, and the collection and sharing of visitor information. It also made it an offence for a person who

organises or operates a gathering not to comply with the relevant conditions, and further required that person to provide a risk assessment and an account of the measures that are being taken on request. Finally, certain regulations on gatherings are amended so that the numbers that are permitted to participate do not include children who are aged 12 or under.

Amendment No. 6 ensures that outdoor venues where intoxicating liquor may be consumed are now subject to the same requirements as inserted by amendment No. 5 of the No. 2 regulations. It does, however, provide an exemption for places of worship.

Finally, the third motion. Amendment No. 7 ensures that movement is permitted in such premises to access a smoking area for the purposes of avoiding injury or illness, to escape a risk of harm or to provide emergency or medical assistance. An exemption is provided for residents of hotels or guesthouses. It also places restrictions on the opening hours of certain venues at which alcoholic drinks and food and drink may be consumed.

I acknowledge, however, that, with the decisions that were announced last Wednesday, the situation has moved on. Now, the hospitality sector is subject to further restrictions. The Executive have not taken those decisions lightly. Tuigimid go mbeidh brúnna agus deacrachtaí suntasacha ag cur isteach go mór ar an tionscadal. Many of our friends and family are connected to the industry. Therefore, we know that licence holders have very challenging times ahead, not only for their own businesses and families but for their staff, their families and all those who rely upon that sector for their livelihoods.

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

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I rise to speak on behalf of the Committee for the Executive Office. Statutory responsibility for scrutinising those regulations lies with the Committee for Health. I look forward to hearing about its deliberations when the Chairperson of that Committee gets to his feet. The Committee for the Executive Office recognises that amendments need to be made to the regulations to reflect new medical and scientific advice, and to help to protect the health service and the health and wealth of the public and economy.

The Committee's message throughout the pandemic has been to encourage compliance with the restrictions that are in place. That message has not changed. However, situations can change rapidly, and the worsening situation that we have witnessed unfold over the past few weeks proves that we need to be nimble and flexible in our approach to fighting the spread of the virus.

I will speak now in my capacity as an MLA. There can be no doubt that times are difficult. People are unhappy, worried and stressed, and businesses and the self-employed are reeling. Those in the creative industries of art, music and drama feel totally undermined. Their very existence is challenged. The spread of the disease in the past few weeks has been shocking. Our death toll sits at over 600, and the number of positive cases has increased to over 7,000. That number continues to rise.

The introduction of the most recent restrictions last week was massive but necessary. I welcome the fact that, last

week, we had the announcement and statement to the House by the First Minister. I will give credit where it is due: having the statement, and the ability to scrutinise and seek clarification, was important for Members. I also respect the parliamentary process, but what we are dealing with today is ludicrous. The first amendment — amendment No. 5 — was made at 7.40 pm on 22 September, and, here we are, at 5.00 pm on 19 October, discussing it. The others follow a similar timeline.

Those changes had a substantial impact on the hospitality industry — in bars and restaurants and on where music and dancing can and cannot take place. They even dictate where people can and cannot move in such venues. Behind every decision is a person, a family, an income, a life. I will set this in context. It may seem straightforward that you can leave a table in a bar only to go to the bathroom or to enter or exit, thereby reducing the circulation — that is important — but not getting to the gaming machine or the pool table, for example, means that those who service those machines have no work now. If self-employed, they have no job or income. Such decisions bear a heavy weight on people in our communities.

Let us not forget the inconsistencies. Last Wednesday, the First Minister said, in the Chamber, in response to my question:

“There was never going to be a situation in which we would announce overnight that people had to do something the next day.” [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 131, p326, col 2].

Yet and all, those who work in bingo halls and amusement arcades, as well as some in the hotel sector, found out on Friday evening that they had to close or leave that very evening. Even people who were queuing up for a football match received last-minute instructions. People have been left hurt, sore and broke — all in the mouth of Christmas.

Decisions need to be scrutinised, analysed and interrogated. I continue to reiterate that the process is defunct and needs to be amended to allow greater transparency and openness in the decision-making process. We owe that, at least, to the people whose lives we are shattering.

We need to see COVID numbers come down. They must reduce. I make a simple, direct appeal to the naysayers, the COVID deniers and the anti-maskers: more testing does not equal more cases. However, more cases equal more hospital admissions, which, in turn, mean that more ICU beds are needed, which, in turn, equals more deaths, but not of just COVID. If hospitals are overrun with COVID, who looks after your granny if she has a stroke, or your child if they are involved in a car accident? No one wants to turn up to an emergency department and see a “No room at the inn” sign. Is that what those who spread the view that there is no such thing as coronavirus want to see? If the disease spreads and hospitals close, we will all suffer.

To those who gathered in the grounds of Stormont yesterday — those who did not work with the Police Service to ensure social distancing or that people stayed in small groups — I say this: if the virus jumped into that crowd as quickly as some were jumping on the backs of police officers, any work that might be achieved as a result of the next four weeks will have been undone.

To those voices I say, “Wake up and get real”. This is not about control or a cashless society or even the Rothschilds. This is not about the denigration or stripping away of your human rights. All we ask is that you wear a mask in public spaces, keep your distance and maintain cleanliness. The virus is real. It is among us and is flooding our hospital wards. Our collective effort as legislators and members of the public is not simply about fighting a virus; it is about saving lives by protecting the health service.

5.15 pm

Speaking of legislators, I would say that Executive Ministers and Members of the Assembly really need to rise above the dissenting voices. If you disagree with the regulations, raise it here or at the Executive table. Do not do it on ‘Talkback’; do not do it in the columns of newspapers; avoid the temptation to fill interviews with your dissenting voice or begin a keyboard war. Ministers who think that a solo run is an appropriate method of responding to the pandemic should know by now that it is not, and such moves should be resisted at every juncture. The public will not thank you for it. Their confidence in the institutions will suffer, and they will flood our inboxes demanding that we call you out on it, and rightly so.

I welcome all interventions to deal with the scourge of the virus and its second wave, which we are battling together. I would like to see a review of how we address the legislation, even if that just means more ministerial statements and scrutiny. However, I am happy to support the amendments.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Because of the nature of the confirmatory process, the regulations reopening and regulating so-called wet pubs were in force for a period before consideration by the Committee last week. By last Thursday, however, they had been overtaken by events, in that, on Wednesday, the new four-week restrictions were announced. Members were keen to understand the implications for the regulations and the circumstances in which they would resume operation. The Committee is acutely conscious of its responsibility to play its part in considering the merits and implications of the many regulations being brought forward to manage the crisis.

Because of the fast-moving situation, the Chief Environmental Health Officer was not in a position to advise the Committee whether today’s regulations would be revoked in light of Wednesday’s announcement or whether the new regulations would require an amendment to the provisions under consideration today. The Committee asked about the circumstances in which they would become operable — in other words, the criteria, whether defined by R rate, prevalence of the disease or other factors being used to determine when it will be safe in public health terms to reopen wet pubs. The Chief Environmental Health Officer advised us simply that the decision would be taken by the Executive on the basis of a basket of indicators.

We also enquired about the period during which the regulations were in operation and how their impact was monitored and measured. The official advised that the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Chief Medical Officer provide a weekly update to the Executive but he does not have sight of that advice. He could not comment on any consideration given by the Executive to the Scientific

Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) advice of 21 September in relation to the risks associated with reopening wet pubs. The Committee restated its previous concerns at the lack of supplementary evidence and advice coming to the Committee to facilitate our scrutiny of the regulations. The official undertook to see what evidence he could provide of the impact of the regulations to date.

The Committee asked whether it would not have made more sense to revoke the regulations before us today and remake them at a time when the Executive deem them safe to bring into force once more. The Committee would then be in a better position to consider that question on the basis of conditions at that time, which remain very uncertain. The official stated that that was a possible approach but could not say more.

In light of the limited information before us and with no assurances in terms of criteria for reopening wet pubs, the Committee therefore declined to come to a view. While, once again, the Committee fully recognises the extreme pressures under which the Health Minister, the Executive and all officials are working, the Committee was unable to complete its role and regrets that it is, therefore, not in a position to advise the House today.

I would now like to make a few remarks in my role as Sinn Féin’s health spokesperson. It is no coincidence or surprise that the vast majority of the House’s time has been taken up in dealing with the COVID-19 health protection regulations. It is a fast-changing and dynamic situation with serious impacts for all our society and across the community. I speak as the Sinn Féin health spokesperson, as the Committee did not take a view on the regulations. Although the rising number of COVID-19 cases has superseded the regulations, it is still important that they are considered in full, given the aforementioned impacts that they will undoubtedly have. I will refer to all the regulations together as, although they make different changes, they mainly relate to hospitality premises: our pubs and restaurants.

Requirements on seating arrangements, the playing of music and dancing are not to be taken lightly. I understand the impact that the regulations have on the hospitality sector and on many communities and livelihoods, including those of the singers, musicians and artists who rely on live performance for their income. I refer in particular to the creation of a requirement to collect visitor information, names and contact details. That is important, as it shows the lengths that we have to go to for a joined-up, effective strategy to tackle the spread of coronavirus.

Maybe it says something that, over seven months into the public health crisis, there is only now a requirement to collect contact-tracing information. However, what I am concerned about is that, as the hospitality sector has additional responsibilities and requirements placed on it, the public systems, such as contact tracing, are not being built up to support it. Just last week, the Health Committee heard how the Public Health Agency had grossly underestimated the demand on contact-tracing services. It estimated 300 cases a day, but, in reality, as we now know, contact tracers face some 900 cases a day. Recently, it moved to a “Digital First” approach, which is essentially a text message to tell someone that they have to self-isolate for two weeks. It does not provide any support or advice, and there is no human voice to reassure and direct people to further necessary support services.

We also have the concerning issue of identifying how many numbers and contact details that have been given to the hospitality sector are incorrect or where contact tracers were not able to get through to someone, leading to gaps in knowledge for tracing efforts and impacting on our efforts to break the chain of transmission. I illustrate that concerning fact to highlight that none of the regulations can be taken in isolation; they must interlink to provide an effective suite of measures to fight the spread of COVID-19. If a duty is to be placed on the public and on the hard-pressed hospitality sector to collect information, there must be a concurrent responsibility on public health authorities to use it effectively and with purpose and urgency.

I have mentioned the reality that the regulations have been affected by the changing circumstances. The rates in the North continue to be deeply concerning, in particular the impact on lower-income earners and areas with higher levels of deprivation. As of today, Members, we have 820 new confirmed cases and 261 inpatients with COVID-19. We have 80 care homes with active outbreaks and 29 people in ICU with COVID-19. It is also interesting that additional information has now been made available by the Department of Health dashboard. Although limited, it gives an insight into new cases per postcode area. A quick glance should be enough for anyone to see the correlation between deprivation and the current high levels of cases in those areas. It is, perhaps, telling that some Members have ignored poverty and deprivation and, unfortunately, chosen instead to attempt to focus on religion or politics. It is important that those who are opposed to increased restrictions and the current circuit-breaker approach recognise that the measures are necessary to buy time, to reduce the chains of transmission and to give our already hard-pressed public health services the time that they need to rebuild in order to stay ahead of the virus. Maybe it is now time to revisit the test, trace and protect strategy and to put in place a robust and fit-for-purpose find, test, trace, isolate and support strategy that works with industries, businesses, communities and the public in a way that meets the needs of a rigorous and appropriate public health response to COVID-19.

Mrs Cameron: Like most Members who are tasked to speak in these debates, I almost feel that the regulations apply to something that is a distant memory. Such is the nature of how things have moved on since the rules were in place, certainly in the context of where we find ourselves today, which is much more restrictive than what is in the amendments.

I want to briefly focus my comments on two aspects of the regulations. The first is our hospitality trade and, specifically, our public houses. Today, those businesses are closed. The regulations are a reminder of how much we have asked of those businesses in recent days. Aspects of their businesses have been taken away, there are restrictions on what they can do and demands have been made about how they manage their patrons. Yet, despite all that, we find that their doors are closed. My heart breaks for those people. They went above and beyond, and, on Friday, they were told that that was not enough. We need to explain to them why the measures that we are discussing today have not been enough. We owe them that. Some will never reopen, and people will be unemployed as we approach the festive period. We need to support those who have been so badly impacted.

At this point, I would like to raise a small issue about the regulations, and that is the collection and sharing of contact information. The Chair of the Health Committee outlined much of what has been discussed by the Committee recently, but, when I asked a question of Nigel McMahon, he confirmed that the contact information to be supplied was not specified in law. It would be useful to have that information to ensure that postal addresses, in particular, are collected. I am sure that the regulations will be used in the near future — hopefully, that will happen when we come out of the next four weeks — and it would be good to have those postal addresses to help to enforce the restrictions on households and on the number of households that can sit at one table in those establishments.

The other matter that I want to mention is places of worship. They remain open, with specific exemptions in place for their continued opening, and I welcome that. While primarily places of worship, our churches also provide places where issues like social isolation and mental health challenges are alleviated. Faith is important to so many people; indeed, at this time of uncertainty, a place of solace and comfort is what we all need. I welcome the continued opening of churches and trust that that can continue.

Sadly, things have moved on so much since the regulations were imposed, given the number of cases and the loss of life, and we are now in a much worse place. We need to analyse publicly what works and what does not work in tackling COVID effectively. None of us should hide from that. Those whom we ask to sacrifice everything deserve it, and, ultimately, it will help us to gain public support and beat COVID-19.

As I have done all along, I fully support the regulations. As I said last week, the measures are not welcome, but they are absolutely needed in order to keep our health service from being overwhelmed. We will not have the luxury of choosing which services can go ahead if our health service is flooded with COVID patients and staff are required to leave their normal day job in order to cope with the reopened Nightingale facility. We owe it to every member of our health service staff to respect and follow the law and guidelines to the letter whether we like it or not. We have a personal responsibility, and we have the power to control what happens in two or three weeks' time. We can prevent people becoming infected and prevent those who are so vulnerable becoming critically ill or losing their life.

How many times must it be said? We all know the message inside and out. We must stay apart, practise good respiratory and hand hygiene and wear a face covering in the appropriate places. If we could only get back to taking those basic actions, we would likely not need these draconian measures in order to keep the virus under control.

Mr Beattie: Standing here, I do not know what to say that has not already been said time and again.

Six people died today of coronavirus-related illnesses. Many more people died due to heart disease or cancer. We put in these restrictions to try to save lives and to help people's health. If those restrictions helped people with heart disease or cancer, we would put them in without thinking twice.

5.30 pm

We all have to admit that, in doing this, we could be destroying people's livelihoods. It is the trade-off that we have made and that we need to understand, and yet people complain about wearing a face covering and social distancing. I just do not understand it. I absolutely hate wearing a mask, but — I have said this before — if I can save the health or life of just one person by wearing a mask, I will wear a mask. It is not too much to ask. If, by wearing a mask, I can get an older person to feel a little more comfortable about being out and about, I will wear a mask. It is not difficult. If I have to social distance, I will do all that I possibly can to stay socially distanced.

What people want from us is consistency, and they want us to be proactive rather than reactive. We are standing here talking about amendment regulations from two or three weeks ago. Although that is nobody's fault, if I am really honest, it is slightly nonsensical. Let us set measures and put in the mitigations as quickly as we can. We saw the numbers growing and the deaths increasing. If our Executive are meeting and saying that they saw this coming, they should have been ready for it and put in the measures straight away. We should not be waiting until today for the financial package to be put in place for businesses. If we saw this coming, that should have been done on the day that the measures were released. That is what we have to do.

Let us not allow this to become a sectarian issue. Of course, people have made mistakes, and we will all be able to carry out the post-mortems on those mistakes in the months to come. However, right now, we do not need a unionist or a nationalist COVID: we just need to fight it. We need to stop it from killing our people, and, if we can do that, those same people who are keeping us safe — the doctors and the nurses — can concentrate on people who have heart disease and cancer. It takes 100 nurses to run the ICU beds. They need to be working somewhere else.

We can look at these restrictions from two or three weeks ago, which have been superseded by new restrictions, and argue, "Do you know what? This should have been a hard lockdown. We should have gone all out in the way that we did in the spring. Do it, have the mitigations in place and make sure that the money, the funding and the financial package is there for businesses". You can argue that case, or you can argue the case that we should not have locked down at all. We could instead have pumped all the money into looking after the vulnerable; that is another argument.

However, the reality is that our Executive came up with a plan, they delivered that plan, and it is incumbent on every single one of us in the Assembly, whether unionist, nationalist or none, to get behind it, to show the people that we are united and not to bicker any more. I do not want to be standing here in 2021 and still going through this, but, right now, I think that I will be.

We are going to have a miserable Christmas, but we will be here and we will be alive. What I do not want is to be doing this again next year and to have people, in whatever form, using it for party political point-scoring. Let us not, let us stop, let us try to work together, and afterwards, when it is gone and we are doing our post-mortem, people can point-score all they want. The bad decisions are not going to go away, but right now we do not need to be too worried about them.

Ms Bradshaw: Before I begin my remarks, I offer my sympathy to the families who have been bereaved since

we last spoke about the amendments to the health protection regulations.

As the Health Committee Chair noted, we did not reach a decision on amendment No 5, but I will be supporting the amendments this evening. However, the Health Department should use the next four weeks so that, when we come through this round of restrictions, there are better provisions in place for wet pubs in particular to reopen. That is about monitoring the risk assessments and compliance.

The amendment was passed by the Executive on the basis of the evidence, which, as we heard at the Health Committee, was subsequently revised. That poses serious questions about where we are getting our evidence, and we did not receive as full an answer to those questions as many of us would have liked.

The evidence presented in mid-September was that transmission was largely taking place in households. However, it remains entirely unclear where Northern Ireland-specific evidence is coming from. For example, in August, there were far more applications per head of the population to the Eat Out to Help Out campaign in Northern Ireland than in any other region of the UK. It was exactly at that time that the transmission level rose to a higher rate here than in the rest of the UK for the first time. That may have been a false correlation, of course, but there was already a suggestion that hospitality was a risk area, and the evidence a month or so on seemed to demonstrate that.

I have two particular concerns about our evidence. First, the Chief Scientific Adviser confirmed to the Committee that it is derived mainly from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) and Independent SAGE. Those are very useful sources, but their evidence is designed for the UK Government and often specifically for England. Secondly, contact tracing has long since failed to provide us with information about the origin of infection, which has made it much harder to identify where to intervene appropriately to break chains of infection. It appears, therefore, that we have not been operating on the basis of definitive and clear Northern Ireland-specific evidence. Contact tracing is not able to provide that, and it is unclear what other sources of Northern Ireland-specific evidence there are.

Fundamentally, it was either a mistake to reopen pubs or a mistake to close them again. What is understandably galling for the hospitality sector is the lack of evidence either way. Given the lack of evidence, it appears that the regulations were rushed and that the issue of how to reopen pubs and any premises serving alcohol in a safe manner was not fully thought through. In fact, there was plenty of evidence from elsewhere in Europe that masks should have been worn by all customers until they were seated, that contact details should have been taken for all customers, that ventilation should have been subject to specific legally binding guidance and that risk assessments should have been subject to quality assurance and monitoring. None of that is covered under any of the regulations that we are discussing.

I said before that what we are aiming for at all times is voluntary compliance. That will come about if the rules are clear and the reasons for them are provided in a transparent manner. We need to be able to explain to the public, particularly when the decisions that we are taking

concern social contacts and economic livelihoods, not just what we are expecting of them but why.

Consideration of the regulations needs to be backed by clear, published Northern Ireland-specific evidence. That means two things. First, we need to give greater clarity on the basis of the evidence provided by the Executive for the regulations, if we, as a Committee, are to properly scrutinise them and this House is to adopt them. Secondly, we must not waste the next four weeks. By mid-November, contact tracing has to be reformed and resourced so that it can provide us with clearer and more specific information about the origin of infections and thus how we can best intervene without closing down entire sectors to break the chains of infection.

Last week's nonsensical shenanigans around solo runs have again caused a serious breach of trust. To put that right, we need much clearer, evidence-based decision-making and clearer, united messaging.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for bringing the amendment regulations to the Chamber this evening. This has been an extremely difficult and challenging time for our hospitality sector. No doubt, every contributor will echo that sentiment. We have heard it expressed many times since the start of the pandemic. I do not want to sound patronising in any way, but I really and truly feel sorry for the owners of bars, restaurants, cafes, nightclub venues, hotels etc, and, of course, the many staff whom those establishments employ. Their livelihoods have been put on the line as a result of the COVID pandemic and the hard but necessary measures that have been put in place to protect our health and save lives.

The amendment (No. 5), amendment (No. 6) and amendment (No. 7) regulations that we are debating today were made just a short time ago, when the sector was beginning to emerge from the first wave of the virus, after there had been collective efforts to bring down the level of transmission and stop its spread. That required the help of and buy-in from the general public and collaborative working with the hospitality sector. I recognise the tremendous effort that has been put in, operationally and financially, to ensure the implementation of the sets of regulations that we are discussing today.

Today, of course, we are in a different reality than we were in in September. The virus has begun to take hold again, and we are in the grip of a second wave. To be clear, Sinn Féin does not want to see our hospitality sector close. The collective decisions that were taken by all parties at the Executive last week were not easy, but they were necessary. They were taken because the medical and scientific evidence told us that we had to do something to protect lives and stop our health service being overwhelmed.

Those businesses and the many thousands of staff who work in them, who made significant efforts to adapt to the new normal, must be commended. All their hard work, as well as the plans that have been put in place by the hospitality sector, is vital for changing habits and behaviour around social contact. That will stand us in good stead in the time ahead, as we focus our energy on tackling the transmission of COVID, which has had an impact on families and communities across the North, and on protecting our health service and supporting our economy.

To have a thriving economy, we must protect public health in a way that inspires confidence in the public to engage in

economic activity and support our businesses through the pandemic. We need to use the next four weeks to address, as much as possible, the COVID transmission rate and, importantly, to ensure that adequate testing, contact tracing and supports are in place to help suppress the virus. I support the regulations.

Mr Durkan: I join other Members in offering my condolences and heartfelt sympathy to those families who have lost loved ones over this past awful time. I also offer our support and solidarity to those who are staring into an economic abyss and facing huge financial uncertainty as a result of these necessary regulations.

I am conscious that the regulations that are before us today have long been superseded by more and more stringent restrictions. The decision, for example, to enter into a circuit breaker has caused understandable dismay, frustration and fear, not least in my constituency of Foyle, which has been subject to additional restrictions for a number of weeks. The past seven months have been extremely difficult, and none of us wanted to have a repeat of March in any form. The vast majority of people understand and do their utmost to do what is required to overcome the virus, however.

If we expect the public to adhere to restrictions on their freedoms to curb the spread of the virus, it is incumbent on the Executive to make it financially viable for people to do so. It is totally unacceptable, and remains so, that, unlike in England, Scotland and Wales, there is no self-isolation support grant in Northern Ireland for people who are forced to self-isolate and who cannot work from home. The Communities Minister has informed the Committee for Communities that her Department is considering a bid for such a scheme in the January monitoring round, but that is just too late. We need that scheme now.

We cannot leave people torn between protecting their neighbours, workmates and the public at large, and putting food on the table for their families and themselves, which is what we are doing with the lack of such a scheme.

5.45 pm

Similarly, there is a swathe of businesses and workers who have been overlooked again by the Executive, not least sole traders and the self-employed. Other businesses have been left in the impossible situation of being allowed to stay open, and therefore not eligible for support, but their income stream is effectively halted. Many will be glad that gyms, for example, have been allowed to stay open, given the associated physical and mental health benefits, but they cannot hold classes — a vital income stream. Anomalies also exist around soft-play and child minders, another area that is in need of specific, tailored support. The gaps in support in these regulations must be urgently plugged, and I hope that the Minister can set out when that will be done.

People and businesses have complied, despite the fact that these regulations are only being debated and voted upon in this House after they have been implemented and before they were even published. That is a testament to the public's willingness to heed the advice from our scientific and health experts and to protect one another to end this pandemic as soon as possible. Unfortunately, their collective efforts are not being entirely matched by this Executive.

It is one thing to expect people to follow laws that have not even been published. That is not good governance, but it is perhaps forgivable given the urgency, but only just. What is not excusable is Ministers contradicting one another on the airwaves hours after these arrangements have been agreed. Clear, coherent communication of the regulations is, quite literally, a life-or-death situation. It serves no one for Ministers to undermine the messaging by trying to insinuate that they are more favourable to one sector or the other and trying to disown decisions that they had a hand in.

The Executive cannot command adherence from the public if the public is not afforded coherence from the Executive. It is reckless for the DUP to be talking out of both sides of its mouth on this. I do not know whether Minister Poots thought to share his criticisms of these regulations with his Executive colleagues before he shared them with the BBC. However, I do know that his party had the power to veto them but chose not to.

Political representatives need to be making the same collective effort that we expect from our constituents and definitely not making this a sectarian issue. I do not deny Minister Poots's observation that levels of this virus are higher in predominately nationalist areas. However, his observations were devoid of any recognition of the link between deprivation and high levels of the virus, just as in many other countries in the world. We need to understand the variation in levels across the North and determine the reasons for it, whether that may be the inability to work from home, housing or underlying health conditions, and to respond accordingly by committing to addressing those inequalities rather than making this a sectarian head count.

Mr Chambers: I had not intended to speak in this debate. The corporate message has been undermined by those in this House who should really know better. The most recent example was the words of an Executive Minister distancing himself from the collective and unanimous decision taken by the Executive just days before and supported by him. He was wrong to speak as he did, and I really do not know what his motivation was for doing so.

Regrettably, his remarks were compounded by bringing religion into the equation. The religion of a patient who is lying in a COVID ward certainly does not matter to me. Thankfully, it most certainly does not matter to the nurses and doctors who are wrapped in PPE and doing their best to save the life of that patient. However, how many in the House have clean hands in relation to supporting and remaining on the health message? Point-scoring is running wild. Foolish comments and actions are alive and well, but the biggest attitude at play is, surely, hypocrisy.

We hear a lot — we have heard it tonight — of people asking, “Where is the evidence?”. The evidence is the 89 nursing homes, which we have heard about tonight, that are suffering a COVID outbreak. It is the 29 people lying in ICU and fighting for their life. It is the hundreds of patients in COVID wards who may take a long time to recover from the effects of the virus. It is the deaths that have left families and lives devastated. What more evidence do we need?

Mr McGrath: Will the Member give way?

Mr Chambers: Yes.

Mr McGrath: I respectfully take the point, but that is not necessarily the evidence; that is the outcome of people not following the rules. If we had the evidence and put it simply to people, they may understand it better and stick to the rules. Then, we would have fewer people in hospitals and ICUs, and fewer people dying. I can think of nothing better than putting the evidence to the hundreds of people who were here yesterday and saying, “There you go. There’s the evidence. That’s what you’re breaching. Now, go home and follow it”, but, at the minute, all we can say is, “There’s evidence there somewhere”.

Mr Chambers: I take an opposite view. People like Mr McGrath, who demand this evidence, are playing right into the hands of those who were in the grounds of Stormont on Sunday. They are planting a seed in their mind that this is not what it seems and that more evidence is needed. So, yes, why do you not seek more evidence? I do not particularly buy that.

The hospitality sector is certainly hurting, but can we afford to give it an exception during the next four weeks? I noticed at the weekend that the streets in Bangor — there is a thriving evening economy in Bangor — were empty. I am sure that other Members saw that in their towns and villages. There were no taxis or cars on the road; the place was like a ghost town on Saturday night. Surely that is what the circuit breaker is all about. We must get back to collective responsibility, and we must provide the leadership that people deserve.

I conclude by giving a message to the people who are filling my inbox with emails telling me that this is all a hoax: will you please stop writing to me?

Ms Anderson: I, too, express my deepest sympathy to all those who have lost their life through COVID-19 and to all those struggling with the disease. I reflect back to June, when figures were down and restrictions were easing. We assured the public that we would not keep the restrictions in place one minute longer than was necessary. However, since opening up society, COVID cases have gone up. Too many people let their guard down. I reflect back to places such as Ballymena, which was the first place to see a rise in cases after society opened up, and restrictions were put in place. Unfortunately, many other places followed. The rate of the spread across the North, especially, as has been said, in places of high deprivation, has rightly alarmed many.

I am reminded of the comments of Emily Maitlis, the ‘Newsnight’ presenter, one evening — this has struck very clearly — that we are not all in this together. However, some of the language around the amendments and restrictions that have been put in place has been misleading. You are not protected from COVID, despite what anyone might tell you, if you are from one religious denomination as opposed to another. COVID is neither orange nor green. In that respect, it is a leveller.

The amendments and subsequent restrictions that have been put in place are across the North. The sectarian insinuation articulated regarding community transmission is nothing short of scandalous and shameful. These political institutions — the Assembly and the Executive — should be able to handle the global health pandemic without, intentionally or otherwise, attempting to introduce a sub-zero sectarianism. There is enough fear and uncertainty across society without the introduction of

baseline, anti-scientific and sectarian rhetoric from people who should know better.

For those interested in interrogating why the virus is spreading in more deprived areas, look at the fact that people are less protected if they are more exposed to it because they are serving on the front line, work on or use public transport, stack supermarket shelves or are carers, hospital porters or shopkeepers — basically, all those who are low-paid workers and members of our society. There are too many low-paid workers in my constituency in Derry, which is one of the most deprived constituencies in the North. They are more likely to be exposed to this deadly disease. Those with manual jobs are not able to work from home. This is a health issue with huge ramifications for social welfare, and it is a social welfare issue that has huge ramifications for public health. When you are assessing why the virus is out of control in areas that have higher rates of deprivation, you should understand the need to tackle regional inequalities.

Listening to you, Minister Kearney, I know that the Ministers and the Executive took hard decisions over a number of weeks, and last week was no different as you tried to suppress the community transmission levels. With the closure of schools for two weeks and the closure of businesses for six weeks in Derry and Strabane, whilst we are talking about wet pubs today in amendment Nos 5, 6 and 7, things have moved on, as other Members have said, and businesses have been hit hard. As you have said previously, these restrictions give us a chance to double down and to strengthen the test, track, trace, isolate and protect system.

Almost everyone in Derry, Strabane and, indeed, Donegal knows someone with COVID, someone who is self-isolating, someone affected by these amendments when they were introduced or someone impacted by the subsequent restrictions that have been put in place. People have been clearly reminded that we are the hosts. We are the carriers of this deadly disease. Therefore, it has been spreading at an alarming rate.

We had to reflect and look at our behaviours — all of them.

6.00 pm

We can turn this around. Fortunately, we can report that the restrictions that have been in place in Derry and Strabane for two weeks have started to see the R rate of the virus come down. However, just as it comes down in Derry and Strabane, I am conscious that, as of today, the R rate is climbing in Lisburn and Castlereagh.

Community transmission has brought the deadly virus into our homes, care homes and hospitals; indeed, on Friday, it was reported that Altnagelvin Hospital was on red alert. Nurses are struggling with COVID-19, and many more are self-isolating, which has put pressure on our health service. As the Chair of the Health Committee told us today, 80 care homes are now battling with COVID-19. Minister, we need to protect our front-line workers, our carers, especially those on low wages, who do not receive statutory sick pay if they self-isolate. The MLAs from Derry and Strabane, along with the MPs, spoke to you on Friday once again. I acknowledge that the Executive Office has afforded us the opportunity on two occasions to talk to you about the impact that the restrictions have been having on Derry and Strabane. After the great efforts

made by wet pubs, cafes and restaurants, there came further restrictions, and that broke the hearts of many who work in that industry. We talked to you and collectively expressed our concern about the number of people in Derry and Strabane and across the North who are not self-isolating because they cannot afford to and decide to keep their head down and carry on. Minister, we must give the maximum support possible, within the limited spending power available to the Executive, to workers and the most vulnerable in our society. We cannot simply tell people that they need to self-isolate but not provide financial support if their employers are not paying them even basic sick pay. Whilst the COVID-19 discretionary support grant is welcome, the threshold for successful applications cannot be above the living wage of just over £20,000 per household. That, in itself, is simply not enough to lift families out of poverty. I know that the Minister for Communities understands that. The Assembly needs to let those in Derry and elsewhere who are struggling and juggling the need to self-isolate with the need to put food on the table know that a financial package will not leave them behind.

Unfortunately, the amendments that we are discussing did not stop the spread of this deadly virus, because there were a number of reasons why the virus spread. The further restrictions are impacting on thousands of sole traders designated as "newly self-employed", businesses without premises, charities and small manufacturers. Again, I raise the case of the transport sector. Taxi drivers have been left behind since March, and, just as their wheels were starting to turn again, the restrictions now in place have stopped them. Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, put a financial package in place last week, just days after further restrictions were announced. Yet the self-employed, taxi drivers and the recently self-employed, who are all hit by the restrictions, are running on empty. Telling them that close to £800 million has been allocated for rate relief, business grants or the newly emerged support grants is neither helpful nor welcome, because most of them fell through the cracks. They have not received one penny. Some hoped that the Economy Minister's hardship fund would offer them some support, but, because the criteria were so limited, they could not avail themselves of it. They got nothing; they did not get a bean. They are rightly annoyed, as they watch hardship money being returned, not spent.

On Thursday, Friday and Sunday, I heard the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, once again call on his ministerial colleagues to bring forward proposals for sectors that they are responsible for. Whilst we are dealing today with amendment Nos 5, 6 and 7, which cover wet pubs, we know that further restrictions have been brought into place, so Minister Dodds needs to bring forward a scheme for the recently self-employed. She can use their accountants to verify the authenticity of their business. Minister Mallon needs to bring forward a scheme immediately for the transport sector, including taxi drivers and others.

Minister, this island is a single unit, and all-Ireland policies and practices have been put in place for the 10,000 pigs that come into the North every week. We have seen an all-Ireland health strategy with policies and practices for the thousands of cows and sheep that cross the border every day. Whilst we are talking about wet pubs today, we have had situations in Derry where the restrictions were different from those in Donegal. We have also

heard of a memorandum of understanding that the two Administrations, North and South, we were told, had established, but doctors have told us that they have neither heard of it nor operate it. Government, North and South, must act swiftly, collectively and collaboratively if it is to protect the 30,000 people who cross the border every day to work and study and the thousands of others they come into contact with. It is absolutely reckless and wrong that people in Derry and Donegal operate under two different COVID restriction practices. There are houses and other buildings across the border corridor that partitions Ireland where the front is in the North and the back is in the South or vice versa.

Finally, I acknowledge the huge debt of gratitude owed to the healthcare heroes who have been at the forefront of the fight against COVID-19 and who, once again, face the serious challenge that the deadly virus presents. There are many strands to the amendments that we have talked about today and to the subsequent restrictions that are now in place. In order for people to be able to afford to comply with them, we need to hear more about the support schemes that Minister Murphy has called for for those who are most in need so that, in places like Derry and elsewhere, our much-needed services, whether they are public or private, are not brought to their knees. I support the amendments.

Ms Armstrong: These new restrictions — amendment Nos 5, 6 and 7 — have been and gone. They are subject to negative resolution. That means that they took effect on the day that they were laid. I ask the junior Minister to clarify, please, why it takes so long for the regulations to come to the House. They are subject to negative resolution, and, as soon as they are laid, they become law, so why do they take so long to get here? Earlier today, amendment (No. 10) went through. If that had been subject to affirmative resolution, we could have debated it in the House and it would have gone through. The way that the process works means that we take for ever to get these through to the House. We could have done amendment Nos 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9 today, but, instead, we are doing things that were passed at the end of September and the start of October. I ask the junior Minister to clarify that for us.

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

That is what is happening now. There is delay after delay, and we heard it from many Members here this evening. There are delays in the Department for the Economy getting money out to people. Really? What is the problem?

The money is there and it needs to go out. People need it. Why is there still a delay? The situation has changed since the amendment regulations were written. That was so long ago that the pubs are now closed. The amendments are irrelevant given what has since come to pass. As many Members have said this evening, Northern Ireland cannot afford any more delays for the businesses that have been impacted.

There are necessary rules in place. Please do not get me wrong. I have absolutely every sympathy for any family who has had a death, for those who have tested positive and been left with poor health, for those with loved ones in hospital whom they cannot see and for those in care homes who are heartbroken and do not understand why their family cannot see them or hug them. This virus is

horrendous. While people are frustrated with the virus, we have delayed things. We need to move more quickly.

I have already written to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to say that part of the current problem is not only the rising COVID infection rate in the community but the boring message that we are giving to people. The arts sector is on its knees, and thank goodness the Executive have said today that money will go to the sector. Can we please use interesting people to get the message out? No harm to anyone, but the podium has become irrelevant to folk. A boring message is being put across in such a doom-and-gloom way that people just hear it as “another day at the podium”.

We need to take people with us on this journey. They need to fight with us. They need to be with us. They need to stick to the message. They do not need their businesses going down the pan because they have closed again. They have to keep at this because it is all about saving lives. I read on social media that the reason people wear a mask, wash their hands and keep a social distance is to keep someone else alive. We have to keep that message going.

When the next round of amendment regulations comes forward, I ask the Minister to recognise the carers and not just the businesses that Ms Anderson talked about. Since March, the carers have been caring 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I know that people on Twitter or some smart Alec will say that you cannot work 24 hours a day, seven days a week, but carers do. They do not get a break. They have not had a break. There is no day care. There is no respite. There is no help. No one is rushing to help carers. When the carers go down, our health service will be on its knees.

While we are sticking this out and trying our best not to spread the virus, we should recognise that up in Derry — my goodness — there are further weeks when people have no opportunity to make an income. We are in the month of Christmas, and families do not know what they will be doing. Presenteeism is happening because some employers are forcing employees into the workplace. Some employees are working more hours because they feel guilty as their children are at home, and it is presumed that they are not working.

We cannot afford any more delays. Can we please get all the outstanding regulation amendments forwarded to the House as soon as possible? The Speaker has said on plenty of occasions that we need more Executive business to come to the House. Let us get the business moved forward and start planning for the future. Let us start planning for a time when we are not closing things. Let us start planning ahead. I know that the Budget is coming through, but we still do not have the October monitoring round. We still cannot see what is happening with next year's Budget. We need to move forward.

Why are these amendment regulations coming to the House so late? It does not have to be 26 days. We will work with you. The House will work with the Executive to do what needs to be done to ensure that our citizens have the best possible service from us. Amendment (No. 10) was laid today, and it could be done next week. Why not move it forward more quickly? Why not put forward the economy pieces that we need more quickly? Why not invest in where the money needs to go?

Mr McNulty: I cannot let today pass without welcoming the reopening of the emergency department at Daisy Hill Hospital. I thank the Health Minister, the chief executive of the trust, Shane Devlin, and the entire team at the Southern Trust for their work to remodel Daisy Hill in order to open the emergency department today. Most of all, I pay tribute to the medical teams and support staff for their commitment and determination to keep the show on the road despite untold pressure, duress and uncertainty. They are the heroes who are ultimately responsible for the reopening of Daisy Hill's emergency department.

6.15 pm

As others have said, these restrictions would not sit easily during normal times. Restrictions affecting civil liberties, people's way of life and their livelihoods do not rest easily with me, but we are not in ordinary times.

These regulations are over a month old. Many of them have been superseded by the regulations that came into effect on Friday. However, when the current tight restrictions are lifted, we will revert to those restrictions. Whilst these restrictions have been necessary, the plan to get us out of these restrictions and to rebuild our economy and our society will be equally necessary.

A big issue with the implemented restrictions that we discussed and the ones that have followed is how they are enforced and how effectively they are enforced. We need to get back to the compliance levels in the community that we had in March. That is the only way that we will defeat this virus. We need to drive home the message and communicate better why each restriction is needed, and we need people to observe the restrictions not because they have to but because they understand that, by doing so, they will save lives.

Lots of businesses, individuals and organisations feel that they have been left behind and are still falling through the cracks. That may have been acceptable in March, April or May but not six or seven months into this pandemic. Why are people and businesses still being left behind: close-contact services, such as the health and beauty industry; self-employed people; people who work in the gig economy; freelancers; taxi drivers; town and city centre businesses, many of which are family-owned?

Just this morning, I met two gentlemen who were driving an ambulance to Belfast. Those two men run a gym in Armagh, but they have had to close it. Whilst the gym can remain open, without classes, it is inviable. I applaud those two gentlemen for the important work that they are doing now, but it is incredible that they have been forced into that situation.

We are telling people to stay at home, and we are telling shopkeepers to stay open. How does that make sense? How does that add up for those business owners? People from the health, beauty and close-contact services are also asking why they have been shut down when they have complied with every regulation. Other businesses are in the same boat and find it difficult to understand the rationale. Is there a better way of communicating why each restriction has been introduced? Surely, the publication of the relevant scientific and PHA data that informs each decision would help to encourage greater compliance and buy-in. I support the regulations.

Dr Aiken: The Ulster Unionist Party supports the amendments, but I wish to make a couple of comments. First, as we all know, this is a global pandemic that does not recognise race, gender, religion, political affiliation or anything else. In fact, as I have said on several occasions, it is an equal opportunity killer that has no regard for who you are or what postcode area you live in.

As we all know, regrettably, with pandemics, there will be multiple waves, and we are now dealing with the second wave. We can see the impact not just on this island or on these islands but across Europe and the world. If anybody noticed what was happening in Belgium or France today, they would realise that this has a long way to go. The best way that we have of defeating this virus is to stop giving it an opportunity, because this virus exploits weakness, it exploits ignorance, it exploits dissension, it exploits complacency and it exploits bigotry. What it must not be allowed to do is to overwhelm us.

We have an opportunity to come together. On Tuesday, the Northern Ireland Executive decided to make particular rules and regulations and put in particular procedures that will help us get through this next part of the COVID pandemic.

The reason that we did that was to prevent our health service from otherwise being overwhelmed. This is no longer a question of, "We do a bit of this or we do a bit of that". We all have to join together to prevent our health service from being overwhelmed.

All of us — every single MLA here — will know people who are healthcare professionals. We know people who have been on ICUs. We know people who are fearful about going into work for their next shift because of what they might see and what they might receive. They are also extremely angry about what they see as politicians, the Assembly and the Executive not coming together to make the right choices and the right decisions. They want to see us all working together.

Last week, the party leaders came together to say that we would support whatever came out of the Executive and put our full-hearted support behind that. We as party leaders also committed our parties to doing exactly the same thing. That is because COVID does not respect politicians. COVID does not respect political parties. What we have to do is break the transmission path. To do that, the people of Northern Ireland need to have confidence in the message that is coming from us. They have to have confidence that the Northern Ireland Executive are making the right decisions.

I therefore send a message from the Assembly to all those healthcare workers who tonight are about to go on a shift in some fairly horrendous conditions that we support them and that we do so by supporting these rules and regulations. We do not quibble over them; rather, we get behind them. Frankly, Members of the Assembly, we do not have the time or the space in which to do that. The Ulster Unionist Party supports the amendment regulations.

Mr O'Toole: I will try to be brief in order to let other Members in, given that we are close to the end of the day. As many Members have said, it is slightly surreal that we are debating the amendment (No. 5), amendment (No. 6) and amendment (No. 7) regulations, which are specifically regulations for the hospitality industry, when, in the past

week, we have gone much further and closed down, out of necessity, the hospitality industry for the next four weeks.

First, I want to talk about the hospitality industry, because the regulations are specifically about it. It cannot be said often enough that the virus and the unavoidable response to it have imposed extraordinary and heartbreaking challenges on the industry. Sometimes, the debate here and in other jurisdictions has fallen into the narrow and unhelpful binary of health versus wealth, or the idea has been that the economy is something that is participated in purely by rapacious, cronyistic capitalists. As we all know from our constituencies and from our lives, however, the vast majority of people who own and operate hospitality premises, be those coffee shops, pubs, restaurants or, indeed, hotels — perhaps not so much hotels, because they tend to be slightly larger entities — run independent businesses and are quite often sole traders. Those people are intimately and profoundly connected to the community that they serve. What they provide is not just a local business or an amenity but something that defines and binds local communities. That is particularly the case on this island. In Ireland, we have a particular tradition of hospitality that is very special and intimate to our sense of self, whatever part of the island we are from. Indeed, it is strategically important in a sense, because it relates to our tourism offering.

All that is preamble to saying that this is a profoundly difficult moment for our hospitality industry, and no words that I or anyone else in the Assembly can say today will, in the weeks to come, alleviate the acute need, frustration and, I am sure, intense anxiety of many people in that industry. What is the answer to that? The answer is, clearly, the maximum possible help that we can give that industry through the next few weeks and the maximum possible financial support in the most straightforward possible way for them to access it. That is true of the other industries that are most directly affected by the new restrictions; not these regulations that we are technically debating today but those imposed in the past week.

It is not just about having an economy on the other side, although, clearly and self-evidently, we need an economy on the other side and we need employment. It is about having those businesses such as coffee shops, restaurants and pubs that create a sense of place and, frankly, a sense of self for people and places here. I speak as someone who grew up working in pubs and who has pulled more pints than I care to remember — not quite as many as my Assembly colleague Pat Catney but certainly quite a few.

That brings me on to the next point about these regulations and our broader response to COVID, which, touching on something that my colleague Colin McGrath talked about, is about consistency and clarity of communication. I agree with what Kellie Armstrong said about moving these amendments to regulations in the Assembly more quickly, so that our communication to businesses and the public can be more coherent and joined up. As Colin McGrath said, it is really important now that, as we have already moved into the most complicated bit of the public health response to this, we are as clear and consistent in our messaging as we possibly can be.

Let us be honest; this is a unique jurisdiction. It is not totally unique in that there are other consociational power-sharing arrangements in the world, but we have a pretty

unique arrangement. It is certainly unique in these islands and in western Europe. That creates certain specific challenges with communication and with political buy-in. It is a challenge for jurisdictions everywhere, whether a single-party Administration or whatever, to communicate the difficult bit, which is that new partial restrictions may be required.

That is a challenge, but it is not an excuse for, I am afraid, some of the inconsistency and some of the unforced errors that our Executive have made. I have two points to make about that. First, I agree with what Colin McGrath and, I think, other Members said, that publishing the evidence and being as clear and as forthright as possible is the best way to bring people along.

I do not agree, with respect to him, with Alan Chambers, who said that, purely by publishing the evidence, you are feeding conspiracy theorists or people who do not want to go along with the regulations. Bluntly, I say that the opposite is true. My experience, as someone who worked for a very long time as a civil servant, largely in communications, is that you get the maximum buy-in from people — first, from the media and, secondly, from the public with whom you are trying to communicate — if you show them your working out. It is a little bit like primary school. If you show people your working out, they are a bit more bought into it. So, if we can be as maximalist as possible in explaining to people why these restrictions are necessary and why we are imposing them now, I think that we have a greater chance of buy-in and, therefore, a greater chance of compliance. That includes the regulations that we are discussing today.

The second part is around consistency at Executive level. As I mentioned before, we have a unique jurisdiction here. No one expects that every Member of every Executive party will constantly and consistently speak from exactly the same hymn sheet on all policies. That would be impossible, given our context. We would just have Mr Carroll and Mr Allister to keep us honest. I am sure that they would do a very good job on that, but the rest of us would not be doing our jobs if we were not here debating this frankly.

However, it is clear that remarks like those made by the Agriculture Minister over the past few days can only be detrimental to the public health message. I will not dwell on his remarks. Frankly, I will not dwell on them because I do not want to. They were pretty contemptible. It was a pretty lurid and garish display of sectarianism of the kind that saddens and frustrates me. Frankly, it is a reminder that, unfortunately, this society is struggling with a disease that has been with us for significantly longer than the virus of COVID-19 and which will probably long outlive COVID-19, sad to say. That kind of utterance is, frankly, completely counterproductive, and, yes, there have been other examples of Executive Ministers behaving in a way that was counterproductive. My party has been clear about that, and there is no point in going over those where we have discussed them in the past. Clarity and consistency is needed.

6.30 pm

My next point is about the consistency of our financial response to the crisis. We talked about it earlier with the Finance Minister and will talk more about it tomorrow. We have not yet seen, I am afraid, a consistent and clear

enough response to the overwhelming economic crisis that we face. I do not want to get into a ministerial blame game. Others in the Chamber have done a bit of that. That is OK; it is fine. All that I want to say is that we need to see a clear, more coherent financial and economic response from the Executive. That has to be tied in to a serious look at what the next three, six and 12 months will look like with regard to the virus, Brexit and what we can expect in fiscal terms from the UK Government.

It is true that, while my party clearly and unequivocally supports the restrictions that have been imposed in the past week, it is also the case that we need to see — this is why evidence is really important — the clearest possible vision from the Executive of the exit strategy from the current restrictions. That is not because I am a sceptic about the restrictions or that I do not think that they are a good idea; I think that they are completely essential to prevent the health service from being overwhelmed. However, we need to have a discussion about how we progress through the pandemic and what the mechanism and thresholds will be for easing those restrictions and getting back to some sort of normality. That will not happen immediately but as we move, hopefully in the spring, towards the availability of a vaccine.

Those are the key points that I wanted to touch on: the centrality of the hospitality industry; the need for clear and concise messaging from the Executive; and my view that the maximum publishing of evidence does not feed conspiracy theorists, because, frankly, the best antidote to conspiracism is to publish clear, evidence-based scientific advice. I hope that the advice from the CMO and CSA will be published in full by the Executive and that that will lead into an overarching and coherent financial response to the crisis, understanding that some of that response will be limited by the fact that we must wait for Barnett consequential from London. However, that is not the full alibi, as it were; we have many tools at our disposal in this place. There is also the fact that the Treasury is not stopping us being coherent in our response or setting out what we see as the clear road map for various sectors over the next few months.

In conclusion, I support the regulations. However, I want to see a much clearer set of communications from the Executive moving forward.

Mr Allister: There is, indeed, something inherently farcical about the debate, in that we are debating amendments to regulations that have been overwhelmingly superseded by events. These regulations date from a time when the Executive were telling us that hospitality venues were safe but your home was not. Therefore, you could meet your granny in the pub but not in your home. That was the genesis of the regulations that we are discussing. Of course, to make places of hospitality safe, their owners, with great diligence in most cases, spent thousands of pounds on taking the steps that the Executive required of them, only to have all of that pulled away last week and those very premises, effectively, closed.

Maybe it is not entirely coincidental or inappropriate that there is something farcical about a debate such as this because, frankly, there is something farcical about the Executive's stance on issues such as this. Last Wednesday morning the First Minister, quite properly, came to the House and gave us an outline of what the Executive had agreed. I stood where I am standing now,

and one of the questions I asked was, "Where does this leave spectators at elite sporting events?" She very clearly indicated that nothing had changed in that regard and that spectators could still attend elite sporting events under the existing restrictions.

We had such an event on Friday night at the Showgrounds in Coleraine, involving Ballymena United from my constituency and nearby Coleraine. Bear in mind what the First Minister had said. Nonetheless, even before the regulations were made — they did not come into effect until 10.30 pm on Friday, even though various hospitality places had been told to close from 6.00 pm, and did so. Up until the moment of 10.30 pm, the regulations were of no legal effect whatsoever. Yet, at about 6.00 pm or 6.30 pm on Friday, the Communities Minister — a member of the Executive, who had agreed the very regulations that were coming into effect — sent a letter to the sporting bodies in Northern Ireland telling them that, with immediate effect, they could not have spectators at their matches. Not surprisingly, chaos and confusion reigned in Coleraine.

What a preposterous situation. I think that "preposterous" was the right word for the First Minister to use, on Friday night, on the social media that she does not use. What a preposterous situation that a Minister who is a party to the making of the regulations so misunderstands them as to go out of her way to misrepresent what they say. Nowhere do those regulations say that spectators cannot attend elite sports. Whether they should is another question, but they do not. In any event, we had the farce of the sports Minister telling people the very thing that was not in the regulations as if it was.

Of course, it did not end with Sinn Féin. We then had the DUP Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister, who also is a member of the Executive, seeking to create an aura that he and his party were not really for these regulations and that they were, in fact, in opposition to aspects of them. That might be for the gullible within the base that he was trying to settle, and who were unsettled by the stringency of some of the regulations, but it is not for any thinking person who knows anything about how the Executive operate. Anyone who knows anything about that knows that nothing comes to the Executive table until it is put on the agenda and agreed by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister acting jointly. Therefore, the proposals that came to the Executive on Tuesday night came with the imprimatur of the Democratic Unionist Party. When they were debated, it seems, from reports, there was not a cheep of opposition because they were the pre-packaged, already agreed proposals of DUP/Sinn Féin. So, for the Environment Minister to strut his stuff as if he were an opponent of the very things that he did not require a vote on in the Executive, and which his party endorsed, is quite inappropriate.

Maybe a little embarrassing. Maybe that is why, today, we have had but one token speech from the DUP Benches on that issue. Where are the defenders of Edwin Poots? We are told in press briefings that, apparently, it was not a solo run. I suspect that that is probably right. If it was not a solo run, he is looking very solo tonight in this debate. No one is rising to defend his position.

It is not that there are not points to be made against these regulations. There are, but not by those who agreed them. That is the difficulty. The fact that they are more likely to kill the economy than to kill COVID-19 is certainly a point

that can be made. However, politics, not for the first time, is over-riding the issues. This debate, in its own way, shows that.

To finish, I come back to a point that I have made many times: here we are again with a junior Minister, who, when we debated some of the early amendments on 30 June, could not be in the House because he was off attending the funeral of a terrorist. Yet, once again, the public are being lectured by people who have not apologised and are being told, "Do as we say, not as we do". That is one of the fundamental reasons why there is a credibility issue for the House on this issue.

Mr Carroll: The COVID-19 restrictions that we are being asked to sign off on today are largely redundant because the virus is, once again, out of control. A much more robust approach is needed. The fact that the regulations before us are so weak is symptomatic of the head-in-the-sand approach of the Executive to the surge of cases over the past few weeks. New cases, now in the thousands, are growing by the day, and these regulations are nowhere near close to the response that we need.

That is exasperating because, like others, I warned time and again that the virus would surge because of the actions of the Executive. I feel like a broken record, and I am sure that there are some in the Chamber who would rather that I changed my tune, but a cursory glance at the number of occupied ICU beds is the vindication of what trade unions, workers, People Before Profit and others warned about. I did not want to be right when predicting that the virus would surge because the Executive prioritised getting people back to work before it was safe to do so. Nor did I want to be right when predicting that hospitality workers, artists, taxi drivers and others would be thrown under the bus by this Executive after they spent weeks crooning about the importance of saving jobs.

What about the jobs of hospitality workers now, who did everything that they could to keep themselves and their punters safe when the Executive promoted a return to pubs opening without even a proper, functioning test-and-trace system in place? What about the workers who will lose out on payments when furlough comes to an end, and those who were never furloughed in the first place because their jobs were not deemed viable enough to save or protect? They are now being forced into the situation that they faced in the spring.

Once again, they will have no work to go to, but this time, they will have even less financial support to avail themselves of.

6.45 pm

Where is the plan here? Where is the leadership that we urgently need? What we urgently need is an all-island, zero-COVID strategy that seeks to eliminate this virus. It is the only way to crush COVID-19 in the absence of a vaccine. Unfortunately, that means restrictions for a period. However, those absolutely must be accompanied by full financial support and emergency contingencies for vulnerable people and by cash injections into our health service to enable it to provide a COVID service and regular services. It means putting the focus on those who are in control of workplaces rather than an obsessional overemphasis on individual behaviour. It means promoting that strategy through education rather

than the primary focus being on criminal deterrents. Those issues are important. The workplace issues are essential. Again today, my office has been contacted by workers in Bombardier — this is a bit of a déjà vu scenario — where there are serious health and safety concerns that appear not to be taken as seriously as they should be.

Instead, we are in a situation where it is an absolute shambles on the hill. There are those who cannot even get the message straight. They openly call for profits to be prioritised over health, and they plead poverty when it comes to paying people through the crisis, but they do not hesitate to pay £4 million for a bump in their own expenses. There is another shambles in the South that is led by Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. The Government in the South are very happy to use the border as an excuse not to take this virus as seriously as they should, and this Executive, or certainly some elements of the Executive, seem very happy to let them because of an irrational fear of an all-Ireland approach.

We need to get real here. This virus is taking lives because of the political decisions that have been made across this island over the past few months. The economy was rushed to open before it was safe to do so. This virus will emerge again and again if we do not get a handle on it. We cannot accept an endless cycle of a surge in cases and circuit breakers and a surge in cases and circuit breakers. We have already seen the impact that it has had on our life, our livelihood and our mental health.

Moreover, it is rich for some in the Chamber to suggest that we cannot afford a different approach because the economy will suffer and there is no magic money tree. I would like someone to tell me how exactly they expect any economy to recover if they are periodically shutting it down because they have lost control of the virus time and time again. As for the magic money tree, for the First Minister in particular, here are five headlines from the past few weeks:

"UK billionaires' wealth soars by 35% as tech and healthcare firms thrive in the pandemic"

"Sir Jim Ratcliffe, UK's richest person, moves to tax-free Monaco"

"Ireland's richest increase wealth by 7.3% in last 12 months"

"Billionaires' wealth reach record levels during Covid pandemic".

Just today, we had:

"Ireland's super rich own €93bn — and Covid-19 has made them even richer".

Not only is there a magic money tree, there is a forest full of them. Anyone who denies that, it appears to me, would rather see billionaires hoard the wealth that they built on the backs of ordinary people than bail out vulnerable people at a time of crisis. Shame on them for backing that strategy.

There are other Members who, over the past week, have sought to suggest that the spread of COVID-19 is happening on one side of the community. One would imagine that they would hang their head in shame when, unsurprisingly, it emerged that this virus is spreading in working-class communities as a result of the Executive's

approach. Past experience leaves me doubtful that any heads were hung in shame, such is their shamelessness. Let me say this: sectarianism is also a virus, and Edwin Poots is a superspreader.

I will end on this point, which I think many would benefit from hearing as a refreshing circuit breaker from the rank sectarianism that has poured from some in the Chamber over the past few weeks: there is a way out of this crisis, and it is not a pipe dream. When we look around the world at millions of people returning to life as normal, we can be hopeful of what is possible beyond this virus. Look to New Zealand and other islands around the world that have used to their advantage their ability to limit travel and implement post-travel quarantine while ensuring that a proper track-and-trace system is in place to track and trace the virus. They decided to slow their economies down to allow people to get well and have now successfully reopened, including holding big events in their countries. That is what is possible; it is time for us to do it.

Mr Kearney: I welcome the debate on amendments No. 5, No. 6 and No. 7 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations and thank Members for their contributions. Their concerns, questions and observations play a key role not only in scrutinising the regulations that are under debate but in helping to inform policy development as we go forward in these most challenging of times.

I will now turn to some of the points that Members made during the debate. I intend to address those contributions that were specific to the regulations. With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, in deference to the range of contributions, I will also acknowledge other Members and the commentary that they made during the debate.

Colm Gildernew outlined the wet pubs discussion that took place in the Health Committee and the Committee's discussions with the environmental health officer. He pointed out that the absence of criteria for reopening wet pubs meant that the Committee formed no view on the amendments.

Pam Cameron highlighted the relevance of the collection of postcode details in the context of the amendments, as addressed in the Committee, as a more effective means by which track and trace could be taken forward.

Paula Bradshaw questioned the region-specific scientific analysis and data that underpins the amendments and, therefore, how we arrive at decisions about the type of restrictions that are placed on the hospitality sector. The scientific data is obtained from a variety of sources, including from the SAGE group, which the Chief Scientific Adviser attends. A range of other evidence is considered, including international experience and relevant scientific publications. However, I am aware that the Health Department is looking at how it can upscale the amount of scientific data, information and analysis on the dashboard so that there is a greater public circulation of that information.

Colin McGrath and Kellie Armstrong raised what I think we all already know. That was, as Kellie Armstrong described it, the negative resolution approach that is taken with the regulations. I have great sympathy for her critique and discussion of the lag with the regulations. Ministers have sought to address all those issues with greater energy and in a more systematic way through oral and written

statements, but we can always try to improve how we manage the legislative process. For consideration, there may be merit in a discussion between the Speaker's Office and the Business Committee about how we could, perhaps, address that more effectively within the constraints with which we are expected to operate under.

Kellie Armstrong also urged that the extant regulations be expedited, and Matthew O'Toole supported that position.

Much was said in the debate that extended outwith the regulations. There was much commentary about the current situation and, in particular, the bringing forward of the new intervention that was announced by the joint First Minister in the Chamber last Wednesday. Many Members spoke about and commented on those matters. They are effectively outwith the specificity of the regulations under debate, but, nevertheless, colleagues made a range of observations.

Colin McGrath spoke about the naysayers and the dissenting voices, but he welcomed all the interventions to have the desired effects. He and Matthew O'Toole appealed for more consistent processes to be adopted in how we all take forward our business.

Colm Gildernew commented on the linkage between the collection of information in the hospitality sector and the test, trace and track systems that we require to fight back against COVID-19.

Pam Cameron stressed the importance of letting our hospitality sector know when it can reopen, and that is because we have moved into a series of much more stringent restrictions, which have effectively overtaken the positions that are adapted by the amendments that are before us.

Doug Beattie and Steve Aiken emphasised very strongly the importance of fighting now to defeat COVID-19, and they called for a unity of purpose among all Members and parties that occupy this House.

Sinéad Ennis acknowledged the sacrifice that is being made within and by the hospitality industry.

Alan Chambers made the point that the evidence of this pandemic is found in our infection levels, our hospitals, our ICUs and, sadly, in the new wave of fatalities that are being recorded.

Mark Durkan and Martina Anderson spoke about their constituency context and the need for increased solidarity and financial supports for businesses. They made the point that the health emergency needs to be understood as interlinked with social disadvantage and that we all need to ensure that COVID-19 does not deepen the poverty trap. By way of information and to share it with those colleagues, it is important to note that, between April and August of this year, COVID discretionary support grants totalled £1.9 million and, in the same period, non-COVID discretionary support grants totalled £4.2 million. Those interventions need to continue into the future if we are to avoid COVID becoming a deepening poverty trap.

Kellie Armstrong called for enhanced messaging and communication, and Justin McNulty spoke about the importance of increased compliance.

Matthew O'Toole spoke from his experience and an economic perspective on the centrality of our hospitality industry.

Gerry Carroll and Jim Allister, once again, expressed their exasperation at the actions of the Executive.

I hope that I have responded to as many of the Members' queries, comments or questions that arose. We all have a responsibility to help to curb the spread of the virus, and we all know that; we have discussed it so many times. We can do that by complying with the restrictions that are in place and by following the health advice that we have. That extends to what we all already know: maintaining the social distancing that is required; good hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene; wearing face coverings and self-isolating immediately if we experience any symptoms, including a persistent cough, the loss of smell or taste or developing a fever; seeking a test if we experience any of those symptoms; and downloading the StopCOVID NI app. By following that advice, as we go about our daily lives, we can protect not only ourselves but others from serious illness. We can, crucially, protect our health service and, just as crucially, our economy, and we can help to avoid further, prolonged and more stringent restrictions.

A Leas-Cheann Comhairle, molaim an rún agus na rialacha don Tionól. I commend the regulations to the Assembly.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

7.00 pm

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The motion has already been debated.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The motion has already been debated.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

Adjourned at 7.01 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 20 October 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30 am (Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McGlone] in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 3) Bill: Second Stage

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

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill [NIA Bill 09/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated any time limits to this debate. I call on the Finance Minister to open the debate on the Bill. Iarraim ar an Aire Airgeadais an díospóireacht a oscailt ar an Bhille.

Mr Murphy: The Second Stage debate follows yesterday's approval by the Assembly of the Supply resolutions for the 2020-21 Main Estimates and the 2016-17 Statement of Excesses. Accelerated passage of the Bill is necessary in order to ensure Royal Assent before any Departments reach the cash limits for 2020-21 that were set in the Vote on Account. I am grateful to the Finance Committee for confirming that, in line with Standing Order 42, the Bill can proceed under accelerated passage. I thank the Committee for its work in agreeing to accelerated passage.

We all recognise that the situation this year is unprecedented and, as I explained in the debate yesterday, instead of bringing the Main Estimates to the Assembly in May, it was necessary at that time to seek the Assembly's approval for a further Vote on Account to provide authority for Departments to access the cash that they would require to continue to deliver services and to respond to the developing COVID situation until the autumn. That requirement was passed by the Assembly in the Budget (No. 2) Act (NI) 2020.

The financial position now allows me to bring the Budget (No. 3) Bill to the Assembly to seek the legislative authority for the expenditure of the Departments and other bodies for the remainder of this financial year. That is based on the Executive's up-to-date expenditure plans, including over £2.3 billion in additional resources and capital allocations, which they have made in response to the COVID emergency and for economic recovery.

Standing Order 32 directs that the Second Stage debate should be confined to the general principles of the Bill, and I shall endeavour to keep to that direction. The Bill will authorise the cash and use of resources on services to allow Departments and other bodies to operate for the remainder of the financial year, carrying out the functions and delivering the services that are set out in schedules 1 and 2 to the Bill. The detail of how the cash and resources will be used is set out in the Main Estimates, and that

document, together with the 2016-17 Statement of Excesses, was laid in the Assembly on 13 October.

The Bill will authorise the issue of the sum of £4,757,631,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund and the use of resources totalling £4,791,050,000 by the Departments and certain other bodies listed in schedules 1 and 2 to the Bill in the year ending 31 March 2021 — this financial year.

The cash and resources are to be spent and used on the services listed in column one of each schedule. These amounts are in addition to those previously authorised by the Assembly in the Budget Act (NI) 2020 in March and the Budget (No. 2) Act (NI) 2020 in June. They represent the Executive's up-to-date expenditure plans and include the allocations agreed with the Executive in response to the COVID situation since the 2020-21 Budget was debated by the Assembly on 5 May. The Bill ensures that all Departments will have the statutory authority to spend cash and use the resources required to deliver services for the remainder of the financial year.

Clause 2 provides for the temporary borrowing by my Department of £2,378,816,000. This is approximately half the sum authorised by clause 1 for issue out of the Consolidated Fund. I stress that clause 2 does not provide for the issue of any additional cash out of the Consolidated Fund or convey any additional spending power. It enables my Department to run an effective and efficient cash management regime.

As Members will recall from the debate yesterday, as well as authorising the 2020-21 expenditure, the Bill regularises excess expenditure that occurred in 2016-17. Clauses 5 and 6 authorise the sum of £112,618,000 from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund and the use of resources totalling £183,290,000 by the Departments and certain other bodies listed in schedules 3 and 4 to the Bill for the year ending 31 March 2017. This is necessary to regularise the excess expenditure that was incurred by some Departments and other bodies as it was not possible to bring the spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) and the associated Budget Bill to the Assembly at the end of the 2016-17 financial year. The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) considered these 2016-17 excesses and recommended that they now be regularised through the Statement of Excesses and their inclusion in this Bill. The Bill also repeals a number of Budget Acts from 2016 and 2017. This is a normal process to remove legislation from the statute book once it is spent.

The numbers contained in the Budget Bill are significant, and I am sure that Members will agree that it is not an

easy task to try to translate those figures into the delivery of public services on the ground. The reality is that the legislation is required to ensure that all public services can continue to be delivered for the remainder of this financial year. This means that we can support essential workers, such as our doctors, nurses and care workers, who continue to be on the front line dealing with COVID-19. It also means support for the businesses that are so vital for economic recovery. It means that all the day-to-day services on which we all rely can continue to be delivered to citizens.

On that note, I will conclude. I am happy to deal with any points of principle or detail of the Budget Bill that Members may wish to raise.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call Paula Bradley.

Ms P Bradley: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Excuse me, sorry. My mistake. I call Steve Aiken, Chair of the Finance Committee. That was very remiss of me, Dr Aiken.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): Yes, well, I think that I am still the Chair of the Finance Committee. Thank you very much indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for his remarks so far.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I can confirm that you are. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Aiken: As outlined, the Bill makes provision for the balance of cash and resources required to reflect the departmental spending plans in the 2020-21 Main Estimates. These are based on the Executive's Budget, which was approved by the Assembly earlier this year. The Bill also includes provisions for excess cash and resource requirements. The Committee noted that this matter has been considered by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) and reported on by the Public Accounts Committee, which recommended that the necessary sums be provided by Excess Votes. The Committee had no observations on this recommendation.

As Members may recall, it was necessary to bring forward a further Vote on Account and associated Budget Bill to ensure that Departments incurring higher than anticipated spending as a result of the COVID pandemic would not exceed their voted limits. As with other Budget Bills, the Department of Finance highlighted the need for the Bill to progress by accelerated passage. As Members may be aware, the Committee has a unique role in determining whether a Budget Bill should proceed via accelerated passage. In this regard, the Committee, at its meeting last week, agreed to grant accelerated passage to the Bill under Standing Order 42(2) on the basis of having been consulted appropriately on the expenditure provisions within it, and I wrote to the Speaker to confirm this decision.

Traditionally, there seems to have been an assumption that the Committee for Finance will automatically grant accelerated passage to Budget Bills.

You might even say that the granting of accelerated passage has been taken for granted. The Department provided a very useful briefing paper to the Committee, but it contained one phrase of concern:

"The Committee for Finance has a vital role to play in ensuring the Accelerated Passage of the Bill".

I make it clear, once and for all, that that is not the case. The Department of Finance has a vital role in ensuring that the Committee for Finance has been appropriately consulted on the policy proposals contained in Budget Bills so that it is in a position to write to the Speaker to that effect and, thus, grant accelerated passage.

That stated, there has been suitable engagement with the Minister and departmental officials on budgetary matters since we have resumed business. I hope that we continue in that vein throughout the remainder of this mandate. That engagement has included advance pre-introductory briefings on any ministerial statements, engagement relating to the up-to-date positions on COVID allocations and the appearance of officials during formal Committee meetings. The provision of budgetary information is important both for the Finance Committee's strategic cross-cutting scrutiny role and for individual Statutory Committees to fulfil their role in monitoring and scrutinising progress at departmental level. The role of Statutory Committees in scrutinising departmental spending and monitoring savings, as well as service delivery, will, I am sure, only intensify, particularly as a result of the social and economic challenges that we all face and will continue to face in the future.

Thorough scrutiny can add real value, but, for it to be effective, the flow and timing of information is critical. Across government, there needs to be an acknowledgement and acceptance that scrutiny Committees must be afforded adequate time to enable them to contribute through constructive scrutiny to influence at the formative stages of the Budget process. Members of our Committee — and I, from my own personal perspective — never want to hear again a member of another Committee saying that they have not had adequate information, or an adequate flow of information, coming through. I understand, in particular, the concerns of the Justice Committee in that area. I hope, Minister, that we will emphasise to the rest of your Executive colleagues that the timely flow of information is vital if we are to conduct our roles effectively.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member's giving way. I thank him, in his role as Chair of the Committee, for the work that he carried out to facilitate the Justice Committee; we got information from his Committee as opposed to the relevant Department. I am pleased to confirm that steps have been taken to address those matters, and there is now much better engagement coming from the Department of Justice directly to the Justice Committee. I put on record my thanks to the Finance Committee for its work in that regard.

Dr Aiken: Thank you.

Concerns have also been expressed by some other Statutory Committees about the flow and timing of information relating to budgetary matters, which makes it difficult for those Chairpersons to fully contribute to debates, such as this one on the Budget Bill. As I said during yesterday's Supply resolution debate, the Committee has, in the course of its work, taken a particular interest in black-box items. There are six items of expenditure for which the Assembly's approval is being sought today under sole authority of the Budget (No. 3)

Bill. The Committee sought copies of the Department of Finance's approval letters for that expenditure. Those approval letters were received during yesterday's debate on the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates and were circulated to Committee members in advance of today's debate. Although the Committee is yet to formally consider the content of those approvals, I am struck by the timing of some of them. The Main Estimates, which included those black-box items, and the associated Bill were formally laid in the Assembly on 13 October. As I highlighted during yesterday's debate, the Committee for Finance received advance copies of those, which were considered at its meeting on 6 October. It is therefore interesting to note the Department's approach: two formal Department of Finance approval letters were dated only last Friday, 16 October, which was after the Committee had asked to see them. In contrast, other approvals had been issued by email. I consider that to be an important point to note because, although the Department stated that verbal confirmation was provided to the two Departments concerned, the appropriate approvals were not formally in place at the time of the Estimates being laid.

Minister, it would therefore be helpful if you would clarify whether it is lawful for a Department to incur expenditure under sole authority prior to formal approval being given and whether Department of Finance approval can, indeed, be given retrospectively.

10.45 am

Those key questions need to be answered to provide the Assembly, and the wider public, with the necessary assurances that appropriate controls are in place to ensure that public money is used appropriately and that there are sufficient checks and balances to safeguard that. In the absence of Department of Finance approval, how can we, as an Assembly, draw confidence from the process if Departments can use public money under sole authority, without the necessary safeguards being observed? The Department must lead by example. It must ensure that the highest standards of financial accountability are adhered to across government to maintain the integrity of public-sector financial processes.

I acknowledge that the Department and the Minister have recognised that there has been inconsistency, and I have no doubt whatsoever that the Committee will wish to explore that with the Minister when it formally considers the issue at its meeting tomorrow.

Turning to the wider Budget process, I look forward to getting it on a level footing in future. I also look forward to a memorandum of understanding being agreed between the Assembly and the Executive so that we can all fully play our part in planning, monitoring and scrutinising Budgets, Estimates and Budget Bills.

On behalf of the Committee for Finance, I support the motion.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Budget (No. 3) Bill and to highlight the areas of financial impact and concern that the Committee for Communities has been focusing on in recent months. In March, I assured the Minister of Finance that the Committee for Communities would work closely with the Department to

achieve all that it could within its remit, whatever its budget allocation. That remains the Committee's position.

The Committee is fully supportive that the request for resources corresponds with the Department's main programmes: welfare, employment, local government, housing regeneration, culture, arts and sports. However, the Committee does not just want to press for more money for each and every area without understanding the underlying issues and pressures and looking at costed options. To that end, the Committee started this term with a strategic planning day to refocus its efforts on where, within its substantial remit, it can make most impact. In the coming months, it will support and scrutinise the Department as it is faced with the prospect of prioritising expenditure across a multitude of areas, all crying out for resources.

The Committee has worked closely with the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) over the past six months to better understand the extreme financial concerns of our local councils as they struggle to continue to deliver essential services in this financial year and beyond and to maintain jobs and leisure, sports, community and arts services. The Committee was pleased to hear from SOLACE of the good working relationship between councils and the Executive and that financial packages of well over £60 million have been secured to date from DFC alone in respect of lost income and emergency expenditure. The Committee also supports the call for a sustainable, co-designed financial model for local government so that councils can be part of the COVID-19 recovery in all our communities.

Throughout the pandemic, the Committee has heard and seen the difference that arts, culture and sports, and the opportunity to take part in them, make in our communities. It is focusing its efforts on supporting those sectors to survive the crisis so that they can thrive again and continue to play their part in the overall well-being of our society. The Committee has pushed hard for financial support to help the culture, arts, heritage and sports sector. Recently, we were delighted to help to secure the remaining £29 million of the arts package. The Committee now wants to see that money spent quickly to support venues and performers.

However, just last week, the Committee was alarmed to hear of the looming financial crisis facing our football league clubs. They are employers, from footballers to coaches, to administrators and more; they are also community and social hubs that have played a vital role in the COVID-19 community response. The Committee supports their call for an emergency hardship fund for such clubs.

On 30 September, the Committee had a very informative briefing from departmental officials on COVID allocations, the October monitoring round and the Budget 2021-24 exercise. Affordable housing is an ongoing concern for the Committee, as it is for all of us, and we were pleased to note that the legislation to reverse the decision of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to classify housing associations as public bodies gained Royal Assent on 28 August. That will allow the Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association to again qualify for financial transactions capital (FTC) funding, and it has been agreed with the Department of Finance that the Department for Communities will bid for £13 million FTC as part of

the October monitoring exercise. The Committee fully supports that bid to facilitate the purchase of an additional 500 homes in order to meet the increased demand for the co-ownership scheme. However, I have heard informally that the October monitoring round is delayed. If that is the case, I ask the Minister where that leaves the funding for co-ownership housing.

I cannot speak without highlighting the Committee's concern over the predicted 100,000 job losses as a result of the pandemic and the huge number of people who might soon find themselves in receipt of universal credit (UC). Indeed, the UC caseload has doubled so far, and the Department is employing close to 1,000 fixed-term contract staff to deal with the increase in social welfare claimants. Sadly, we are creating new jobs in DFC to deal with the massive unemployment that is predicted to result from COVID.

The Committee expressed concern recently about lack of sufficient funds for labour market interventions. That brings me to the new welfare reform mitigations. The Committee noted the very large sums of money that the Department put down in its budget for each of the three years of the 2021-24 exercise. There is over £147 million per year as a place finder for new welfare mitigations. The Committee looks forward to hearing from the Minister soon on the review of welfare mitigations and those spending plans.

Although the COVID response has taken much of the Committee's time, it is keen to pursue the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitments and has been keeping in regular contact with the Minister on key NDNA priorities; for example, the regional and subregional stadia programmes and the development of social strategies. The Committee is, naturally, a great supporter of the proposed social strategies and would like to see the required funding to ensure that they are developed as soon as possible.

We should not show lack of ambition in our planning, but, regrettably, our ambition has been tempered by our finances and the primacy of the ongoing COVID crisis. In addition, the elephant in the room is the absence of a draft Programme for Government. Ultimately, we need a draft Programme for Government so that we can consider the link between the proposed outcomes and the budgets that are allocated against them. Without that, we stand accused of a lack of strategy and vision and of reacting rather than planning.

I will make a few remarks as the Communities spokesperson for my party that I have not already made in my Committee speech. I will make just two points. The first is on the Supporting People budget. The Minister is well aware, as are Members, of the good work that is done through that for our older people, those with disabilities and those with mental health and homelessness problems. During the worst months of the COVID pandemic, the Supporting People scheme went over and above in the work that it did. The Committee received a briefing on homelessness, and it was able to say in the Assembly that no one was homeless. That was very much down to those agencies and groups that work under Supporting People. We have not seen an uplift in the Supporting People budget that matches inflation in many years. The Minister is well aware of that, as are Members. Every time that we have a Budget debate and I have to speak, I always mention Supporting People and the need for an uplift for it.

We talked about strategies, and another issue that I want to mention before closing is the sign language strategy. I know that it is some way away because we have to go through it in great detail.

However, we can do something: the video relay service (VRS). The Department for Communities is trying to make headway with the video relay service. In June 2019, Scotland launched VRS For All, which means that it does not matter whether it is the public sector, the third sector or the private sector; every person who has a hearing or speech impairment can access the VRS. I ask the Minister to progress that, because people with a hearing or speech impairment are being discriminated against every single day in Northern Ireland because they do not have access to that service.

Mr Gildernew: Having addressed Committee issues yesterday, I speak today in my role as Sinn Féin's spokesperson for health in order to address health inequality issues of which we are all conscious. Health inequalities can be adequately addressed only by focusing our actions and our allocation of financial resources on the wider social, economic and environmental determinants of health across various Departments. Health inequality here remains a costly scourge on our health services and our communities, and it must be tackled through targeted funding and programmes that will enhance the health of all our people. Tackling health inequality must be central to any forward planning to rebuild our health services in the North. Poor health limits people's ability to develop life skills through education, careers and professional development. Various public health studies have found that health is strongly linked to education, employment, housing and income.

In my comments, I am merely trying to provide a snapshot of the health inequalities experienced by different communities across the North. Men and women in more affluent areas can, on average, expect to live longer than their peers in more deprived areas. Those living in the most deprived areas have about 60% to 80% more heart and respiratory disease and strokes, a twofold excess of accidents and a threefold excess of lung cancer. Across the North, there are alarming levels of disparity in incidences of infant mortality, childhood obesity, oral ill health, pulmonary and respiratory disease, substance abuse and addiction, and mental health and well-being between the most and least deprived communities. Large inequalities continue in mental health indicators, with rates of suicide and self-harm almost three and a half times higher in the most deprived areas. Prescription rates for depression and anxiety are relatively high across the entire North, although the rate in deprived areas remains two thirds higher than in the least deprived areas.

The 'Bamford Review of Mental Health and Learning Disability' found that poor mental health affects one in every four citizens here. The review concluded that there is clear evidence of inequalities in the investment associated with mental health and learning disability over many years compared with England, Scotland and Wales, despite higher levels of mental ill health in the North. Those living in the most deprived areas have about 60% to 80% more heart and respiratory disease and strokes. In addition to that, significant alcohol, smoking and drug-related inequalities continue to plague the North: for example, alcohol mortality and alcohol-related hospital admissions

in the most deprived areas are four times that of the least deprived areas. We are all aware of the famous study that demonstrated that you can board a bus in Belfast, travel a short journey across the city and expect to live a significant number of years longer and more healthily as a result of where you live. Those issues must be tackled.

According to the Office for National Statistics, patterns of death from COVID-19 also correspond with patterns of deprivation, with deaths in more deprived communities more than double those in the least deprived communities. The ONS data shows that differences in risk of death from COVID-19 are partly the result of socio-economic disadvantage and other unexplained factors. Department of Health figures reveal that the infection rate in the 10% most deprived communities is one fifth higher than the 10% least deprived communities and that the infection rate among those aged over 65 is almost two fifths higher in deprived areas. That amounts to 1,027 per 100,000 versus 750 per 100,000 population between the most and least deprived areas.

11.00 am

The COVID pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on people from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups. Recent statistics from the Intensive Care National Audit and Research Centre (ICNARC), including data from England, Wales and the North, show that, since the start of September, 38.6% of individuals who are critically ill in intensive care with COVID are from BAME backgrounds. Individuals from those groups are also more likely to face housing challenges, which may exacerbate COVID-19 transmission, morbidity and mortality. They are also more likely to work in key worker jobs with a higher risk of exposure and to report being more likely to use public transport to reach their place of work.

Carers are also hugely important in our society. They provide support, often on an unpaid basis, for thousands of older people and those with disabilities. Carers suffer higher levels of ill health. Almost one in five carers provides substantial care of over 50 hours per week and feels that they are in poor health, as compared with 14% of the non-carer population. It is remarkable and disgraceful that carers are one of the few groups in our society that have received no additional support to date throughout the pandemic. I know that you are prepared to look at that issue, Minister. Today, I appeal directly to the Minister of Health to bring forward measures, as a priority, that will make a real difference for carers right now and in the weeks and months ahead.

I move on to transformation. Michael Marmot, in his famous report on health inequalities, stated that:

“Realizing health equity requires empowering people, particularly socially disadvantaged groups, to exercise increased collective control over the factors that shape their health.”

The ambition of Delivering Together is to guarantee that the user of the health and social care system is listened to as they play a central role in developing and implementing new services and care pathways. Any serious effort to transform our health and social care services must be thorough and must be resourced. There can be no satisfactory health and social care transformation process unless the deep and lasting health inequalities across

the North are tackled. With nearly half of the Executive's Budget being spent on health, it is vital that we ensure value for money. In health, value for money must be about reducing health inequalities, improving life expectancy and improving the quality of life. A little well spent goes a long way. Proactive spending on preventative programmes such as smoking cessation, early childhood intervention and health education are cost-effective measures, as they save significant amounts of money further down the line.

Previously, Sinn Féin asked for the population needs assessment across a range of areas. We received a high-level needs report that did not tell us much about the particular needs of people. Without knowing what those needs are and without some idea of where we can get the best outcomes, there is a real possibility that money will not be spent effectively. The central question, for me, when devising a health budget is this: does the budget address the prevailing and persistent issue of health inequalities?

Everyone is entitled to good physical and mental well-being. Our role and responsibility in the Assembly and in the various Departments through which we work is to improve outcomes, including health outcomes, for all.

Mr O'Toole: Yesterday, I spoke about some of the short-term issues facing our economic recovery from COVID, as it related to the Supply resolution for the Main Estimates. Today, I will talk more generally about our long-term budgeting processes and how they can be improved but specifically as they relate to this Budget Bill.

First, of course, my party supports the Budget (No. 3) Bill, as it is required to authorise the £4 billion spend set out by the Minister that is required to keep our public services running and to maintain the response to COVID-19. It is, however, worth saying that, unfortunately, the volume of Budget debates in the Assembly since we returned in January has been in inverse proportion to the quality of the scrutiny and, at times, the quality of the information that we have had. As I said yesterday, that is not said for the purpose of having a dig at the Department or the Ministers — much of that is the product of the crisis that we have faced — but it is important that we set down some key principles for our long-term budgeting, how we want it to improve and what we want to see from the Executive going forward, much of which was set out in the 'New Decade, New Approach' document.

It is now around 10 months since the reformation of the Assembly and the Executive. We are — optimistically, probably — facing another six months in which COVID, in addition to Brexit, unfortunately, is the dominant financial focus of our institutions. It would be useful to hear from the Minister about whether he sees the end of this financial year as an inflection point for our planning around COVID. Does he think that, by spring of next year, we will be in a slightly different place with our response? One would hope so. It is also a little more than 18 months until the end of the mandate and the next election. As I said yesterday, it is becoming ever more difficult to see a detailed and meaningful Programme for Government being agreed by the Executive and brought to the Assembly. That is not to say that I do not want one or that anyone here does not want one; it is just a statement of hard fact.

COVID has created monumental challenges for our public services and our economy — that is clear — but it has also ruthlessly exposed weaknesses that we have

procrastinated over for too long, and some of those weaknesses are key to the Budget process and how we deal with it. As I have said before, the Northern Ireland economy has had major and well-known structural flaws for years, but successive Executives including all parties have failed to deal with them. A long-term budgeting process will be critical to dealing with those challenges. We are among the most unproductive regions in these islands; in fact, I think that we are the most unproductive region in these islands. Our education system too often produces poor outcomes for far too many, especially those from the least advantaged backgrounds. We export too high a proportion of school-leavers and graduates, and, of those whom we export, a depressingly small number return here. As a result, our skills base is low, and the cycle is reinforced by our tendency to settle for low value-adding foreign direct investment (FDI). As a result, we will need to take a fresh look at our long-term economic and Budget planning once we are through this crisis.

We need to take a fresh look at how we organise our public services and our economy. That will require taking a fresh look at our fiscal position. In addition, one of the points that I made yesterday is that, in the short- to medium-term response to COVID-19, it would be helpful to see more ambition in how we use the fiscal levers that are open to us, whether it be reinvestment and reform initiative (RRI) borrowing — there is significant headroom for that this year — financial transactions capital or, indeed, conventional capital. I know that the Minister is appealing to the Treasury for more flexibility in how those allocations are used — I support him in that — but it would be helpful to see as much ambition as possible. We should pull every lever that is available to us.

Our budgeting process has traditionally been somewhat opaque. Married with the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scandal, it has contributed to the fraying of public confidence in these institutions. There is significant confusion over our budgeting processes, so, in addition to greater and more consistent long-term budgeting, we need greater public engagement and awareness. We need to introduce much greater clarity into Budget processes than exists at present. I acknowledge that the actions of this UK Government have thrown a spanner in the works and made the job of the Finance Minister more difficult this year, as they have delayed and avoided a comprehensive spending review (CSR), but failures of long-term financial planning are not new to this place. Westminster is partly but not solely to blame for them. We need to take a long, hard look at how we get out of the challenge of short-term budgeting even when the Treasury is unwilling to provide us with the clear, long-term budgetary horizon that we need. I urge the Finance Minister to bring forward plans for the fiscal council that was pledged in 'New Decade, New Approach' and for the fiscal commission that he himself has suggested. I wholeheartedly agree with him on the need to have both institutions in order for them to take a long, hard look at how we fund ourselves here and how we make our institutions more self-sustaining.

Also, if we are able to demonstrate in the short term that we can use to the maximum some of the levers, limited and small though they are, that exist now — for example, our RRI borrowing power — that would surely make the case that more of that fiscal autonomy would be good for how we do government here and how we deliver for our people.

As I have said, we need to be creative with the fiscal tools that are available to us. Borrowing costs are at an historic low globally. As I said yesterday, the International Monetary Fund is telling Governments around the world not to be shy about making maximum use of their borrowing potential. Though we are not a sovereign borrower, as it were, we should not be shy about using those tools.

It would be helpful to get an update from the Minister on financial transactions capital in-year and what specifically is being done. We talked about that yesterday, but I do not think that there was a specific update on it. It would be really helpful to know what is happening so that we do not hand back any of that money or financing, as it were. I recognise that it is not straightforward funding. It is financing; it is financial transactions that have to be paid back. We should use that allocation, given the severity of the situation facing our businesses and our workers in the months to come. We should not leave money unallocated or, as I said, be conservative in accessing the limited borrowing powers that we have.

Today, as we discuss passing the third Budget Bill of the year, it is worth recognising that we face probably the gravest winter, in public health terms and economic terms, that many of us have lived through. While we welcome the passing of the Budget, because it will enable our public sector to spend money and the Departments to keep our public services going and to respond to the fiscal crisis, let us hope that, in future Budget Bills, we are able to debate not just longer-term, multi-year Budgets but more ambitious use of our fiscal powers to deliver better outcomes for the people whom we serve.

Mr Muir: This is the first time in this unprecedented year that I have risen to support a Budget Bill on behalf of the Alliance Party. The Bill is necessary to allow Northern Ireland Departments to continue to carry out their functions and to respond to the pandemic in the difficult months ahead.

When the Assembly was restored in January, we expected our main areas of budgetary focus to be on preparing for the impact of Brexit and implementing New Decade, New Approach commitments. It has not worked out that way. New Decade, New Approach has taken a back seat as we respond to the enormous challenges placed on people's everyday lives by COVID-19. For the remainder of this financial year, there is little doubt that COVID-19 will continue to dominate all aspects of the Executive's finances and, perhaps, our lives. The most important area of focus now is that all the money allocated is spent wisely. For the Executive to hand back Barnett consequentials at the end of this year or to have to spend a substantial amount of money on non-priority areas at the last minute would be a real scandal, given the circumstances and the challenges that people face.

Numerous MLAs have expressed disappointment in previous debates at the lack of a detailed, meaningful COVID-19 economic response strategy. I share those concerns. We really need to have a better understanding of how the Executive intend to allocate the remainder of the £2.4 billion that they have already received. We know, for example, that £600 million has been set aside for the health service, but the Department of Health has not informed us of the amount required that can be spent in this financial year. I accept that the future remains highly

uncertain in the midst of a public health emergency where we have to prepare for the worst. However, at this stage, we really need to have some idea of whether part of that £600 million might become available to other sectors of society that are also in desperate need of support. It is likely to be too late to provide meaningful support in January or February, if there is money still left on the table.

Furthermore, I ask the Minister of Finance to clarify whether he expects additional Barnett consequentials beyond the £2.4 billion already received. Earlier this year, the Treasury took the unprecedented step of allocating Northern Ireland £600 million in consequentials in advance — a bit like a Barnett guarantee. We now need to know whether further announcements made in England will lead to additional Barnett consequentials for Northern Ireland. We just do not know how the £600 million tots up.

11.15 am

While many of the commitments in New Decade, New Approach have necessarily been delayed, it is crucial that they are not forgotten. Key amongst them is the establishment of a fiscal council. Producing a multi-year Budget in 2021 seems increasingly less likely the longer the UK spending review is delayed, but that alone is no reason to delay the establishment of a fiscal council for Northern Ireland, which is critical for better medium- to long-term economic planning and for the budget discipline that has been so often lacking in the past. It is essential and a step in the right direction to giving Northern Ireland greater borrowing and tax-varying powers. I urge the Minister of Finance to ensure that it is in place by the time of the next Budget Bill.

Nor can we ignore the financial reforms that Northern Ireland has needed for so long and which are commitments in New Decade, New Approach. Bengoa must be implemented to ensure that we have a sustainable, fit-for-purpose health service that does not leave people stranded on waiting lists for years, not weeks or months. Putting the health service back to the way it was before the pandemic just does not make sense. A full review of our education system is also required so that our schools are properly funded and duplication eliminated. We must never again return to a situation where teachers have to ask parents to donate toilet roll.

We must finally get serious about the cost of division in Northern Ireland: over half a billion pounds a year that could be much better spent on other public services. In addition, we must start utilising capital spending to support a medium- to long-term infrastructure strategy developed by an infrastructure commission for Northern Ireland. Infrastructure investment must be at the heart of a green recovery in tackling the climate emergency that we face.

Over the next few months, the Executive must meet the twin challenges of responding quickly and strategically to the ongoing pandemic whilst making progress on the systemic challenges that have plagued us for too long and which are key parts of New Decade, New Approach.

I agree with Colm Gildernew's comments on social deprivation and how that has an impact on people's lives. From the evidence presented, it is clear that COVID-19 does not discriminate on the basis of religion or political opinion but that it certainly does on the basis of poverty and social deprivation.

Mr Givan (The Chairperson of the Committee for Justice): I will speak first as Chair of the Committee and then make some remarks in my capacity as an MLA.

I will deal with the justice-related issues first. The 2020-21 Budget announced by the Minister of Finance on 31 March 2020 included allocations of £1,111,200,000 resource DEL and £88.1 million capital DEL for the Department of Justice. Although this was an increase of 6.3% resource DEL, the Committee was told that this included ring-fenced funding for a number of matters. The Department therefore advised that the allocation was not adequate to maintain current services and that the Minister of Justice had raised her concerns with the Finance Minister.

As I am sure was the case for most Departments, the Department of Justice's budget planning took place before the COVID-19 pandemic materialised. The Committee recognises that this has had a significant impact on the delivery of services and budget planning across the justice sector, and it has resulted in a number of COVID-19 reprioritisation exercises to try to assess requirements and align resources to deal with the emerging pressures.

I understand that the Main Estimates that were agreed yesterday and which will be given effect by this Bill incorporate changes to budgets in the June monitoring round. Based on the June monitoring round, the Department's 2020-21 budget is now £1,143,600,000 of non-ring-fenced DEL, and that includes £25.2 million of non-recurrent resource funding allocated by the Executive for COVID-19 pressures. The extra is made up of £76.9 million of ring-fenced resource DEL and £88.1 million of capital DEL.

The Department had originally submitted a bid of £38.8 million for COVID-19 pressures and received an allocation of £12.4 million resource DEL as part of the June monitoring round. This included £4 million to the Police Service, £1.9 million to the Prison Service, £1.6 million towards the temporary resting place and £4.9 million towards PPE across the justice sector. Subsequent bids totalling £17.3 million were submitted, and the Executive have allocated a further £13.5 million. This left the Department with a £3.78 million pressure to manage at that time. Further bids for £5.6 million of resource and £1 million of capital were then made, though those were unsuccessful. Since then, the Department has continued to examine its COVID-19 pressures, including as part of the October monitoring round. The Department has advised that several identified pressures were reduced and other new areas emerged. However, at this stage, it is expected that those will be managed by internal reallocations, and no further bids are, therefore, needed at this time. COVID-19 has also had an impact on capital spend, with the Department of Justice declaring a reduced requirement of £5.5 million as part of the October monitoring round. That relates mainly to issues within the police supply chain and the reduced capacity to deliver new vehicles.

Moving away from COVID-19, the Committee was advised at June monitoring of a £4.5 million requirement for the PSNI in respect of EU exit. That relates to funding for 308 officers and staff who are already employed and for whom funding was received last year. The Department has advised the Committee that work is ongoing between the Department of Finance and Her Majesty's Treasury on that matter. In addition, £1 million of capital is required for

the PSNI for EU exit, which the Committee has also been advised is being dealt with separately through the Treasury as it relates to the cost of the Northern Ireland protocol. The Committee has asked the Department to provide information on budget planning or scoping exercises to identify additional costs that arise from both a deal and a no-deal scenario at the end of the EU exit transition period.

One of the issues that is of great importance to the Committee at present is the funding for the victims' pension scheme. The Executive made available £2.5 million as part of the June monitoring round to support the implementation costs for the scheme. However, the source of funding for payment of the pensions is yet to be finalised. The First Minister, deputy First Minister and Minister of Justice have advised the Committee that there is a shared view that adequate funding for the duration of the scheme should come from Westminster and that they, along with the Finance Minister, are seeking an urgent meeting with the Secretary of State to discuss the way forward. I urge Ministers to continue to press for this matter to be resolved in order to avoid any further delays in getting payments to victims. Perhaps, when the Minister responds later, he can update the House on progressing that issue.

Other key issues that have been discussed with officials and which the Committee will continue to monitor include legal aid costs; funding for tackling paramilitarism; funding for the implementation of the New Decade, New Approach commitments, which includes the cost of increasing the number of police officers to 7,500; and the costs of maintaining the temporary resting place. It is clear that a number of uncertainties remain for the rest of the financial year, not least because of COVID-19 and the European Union exit, and that departmental budgets will remain in a state of flux. Overall, however, at this stage, the Department of Justice is advising of a break-even position for the 2020-21 financial year.

In its response to the Budget earlier this year, the Committee set out concerns that full funding requirements on a number of issues had not been provided, and that, as a consequence, it felt unable to fully assess the Department's budgetary position. Since then, the Department provided information on a number of those matters and set out the rationale for the figures that are still not available. The Department has sought to keep the Committee apprised of the position in respect of a range of financial matters through oral and written briefings. That has ranged from the more routine monitoring rounds and COVID-19 reprioritisation exercises to the position in respect of the Department's annual report and accounts and the wider review of the financial process. In early November, the Committee will receive an oral briefing from the Department's officials on planning for the forthcoming multi-year Budget, which will be of particular importance for the Department's longer-term strategic planning. The Committee looks forward to that oral briefing and to ongoing engagement with the Department on budgetary and financial matters.

That concludes my remarks in my role as Chair of the Justice Committee. I want to move on and make some remarks now in my capacity as a Member for Lagan Valley. These comments will relate very much to the expenditure on COVID and the impact that the Executive's response to it has had on public finances and wider society. We can

see in the Budget (No. 3) Bill that, across a wide range of Departments, there is expenditure that relates to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Budget (No. 3) Bill is, therefore, heavily predicated on that expenditure, and Departments' normal expenditure has been impacted as a result of how the Executive and wider society have had to grapple with the issue.

Undoubtedly, coronavirus is serious, and measures are required to mitigate the risks that it presents. At the start of the pandemic, there were warnings that up to 14,000 people could die. There was huge coverage of the Armageddon to come upon us. Thankfully, that did not happen. However, that in no way diminishes the loss and pain of those who have lost their lives. I have said it before, and I put on record my sympathy for them and offer my prayers for them in having to deal with that situation. However, Mr Allister pointed out in a questioning session that, during that same period, 2,300 people passed away due to cancer; we can also consider the number of people who have died from heart disease, obesity and alcohol abuse. Those are all tragic circumstances facing our country. We have to weigh that up alongside the response of the Executive and this place when we deal with fatalities in other areas.

At the start of the pandemic, there was a great unknown. We could see the carnage coming across Europe like a tidal wave. A fear beset everybody. Measures had to be taken, and were taken, in order to deal with something that was unknown and which gripped our community with fear. Fortunately, we have a much better understanding now of the impact of coronavirus, so we need to weigh up the measures being taken by Stormont so that they are proportional to the impact associated with the virus. The measures taken now cannot be the same as those taken at the start of the pandemic. If the approach that was taken at the start is taken now, there will not be the same buy-in from society. That is evident from the resistance that we see to what is taking place.

We now have the police raiding small barns in the countryside. There was one such instance in my constituency when 20 people had gathered for a birthday party, in a socially distanced manner. They should not have done it — it was against the rules — but that is where we have placed the police. They are now raiding sheds in Lagan Valley, as opposed to sheds in which something very serious could be going on. Crime is back up at its normal levels, but we are deflecting the police from core crime activity to move into this. We have to weigh up the impact on the enforcement measures that we are asking the police to take with the resistance from the community. I know people who, normally, could be trusted to use their common sense and act responsibly, but I fear that they are resisting because they have not bought into the measures being taken by the Government. That problem faces all Governments across the globe.

The financial support schemes in place at the start of the pandemic are no longer there. The Executive do not have the fire power to provide the kind of financial support that our businesses need. They are being asked to carry this burden. If we are all in it together, I ask you to look at the cost to the hospitality industry and the financial pain being inflicted on people. We think about businesses, but it is not just about businesses. It is about staff in low-paid jobs who, come 1 November, if they qualify for furlough,

will get only two thirds of their pay because the business will not have to make up the difference. I have spoken to employers in my constituency whose staff in low-paid jobs are pleading with them, "What are we going to do?" and "How am I going to manage?" The mental strain on business owners and staff is immense. For every action taken there is a reaction. Measures taken in good faith that, it is believed, will have the right outcome need to be assessed and analysed. Are they having the right outcome, or are they counterproductive? Are we forcing people out of controlled environments and putting them into uncontrolled environments?

On Friday night, I went for a walk in my constituency, having left my children off at my church's young people's meeting, which, fortunately, can still take place.

As I went for a walk for that hour around that immediate community, it was scary to see the number of young people who were gathered drinking and sitting on top of each other in a subway that people in that part of Lisburn will know. Yet we push them out of schools and out of controlled environments, and they go into that kind of uncontrolled environment.

11.30 am

Serious questions need to be asked, and there needs to be an interrogation of the evidence base that is being presented. The measures that were brought in through the legislation, which, everyone in the House has accepted, is draconian, are now not subject to democratic scrutiny by this place. The legislation was brought in and took effect last week. We will come to the Chamber in maybe three weeks' time, when it should, hopefully, conclude. We handed over those democratic powers because, at the time, we did not know what was coming and a fear gripped us. We now know, and we now need to ask ourselves whether the level of democratic oversight is proportionate. When we consider the tragic deaths that have happened as a result of COVID, when I think of friends who have had COVID and long COVID and I see them and hear their laboured breathing and see the impact that it has on them, I weigh up the calls and engagement that I have with people who are their wits' end. When BT28 was put under restrictive measures, a constituent of mine took her own life. She was subject to severe mental health problems and had suicidal ideation. The measures in BT28 tipped her over the edge, and she took her own life. Whenever we think about measures to protect people with coronavirus, we also need to think about the other measures and find a way that can protect all of us.

We are having to weigh up incredibly difficult issues in order to get the right outcome, and we need to ask those questions. Not asking the questions is a failure and a dereliction of our duty to interrogate the evidence base for what is being done, and it should not be said to those who do that somehow they do not care about people who have coronavirus. Not true. Good friends of mine have it and have suffered from it, and I have seen it at first hand. They have been let down by some of the actions that have been taken by other people and by the failure to provide the support that should have been provided at the start of the pandemic. We had the debacle of not getting PPE on time and the promises that were made and not kept. I have spoken to nursing homes that did not get the support from the Department of Health that they should have got at the start

of the pandemic. They have told me directly that they felt abandoned. Where were the most vulnerable people? In our nursing homes. Where were the casualties? In our nursing homes. Where was the financial support? We are now catching up, and they have said to me that it is better, but we need to consider all these measures in a balanced way.

I think about the financial impact that this has had on our education establishments. I sit on the board of governors of three schools, and they have over 2,000 children between them. I have a real sense of responsibility to the teaching staff and to those children to provide for their safety. In one of those schools, a third of the children did not engage in any form of remote learning. They came back to school, and we carried out assessments and found that they are well behind. They are now catching up. Those children are some of the brightest in the school and some of the most disadvantaged. This does not have any boundaries in class or creed, but its impact has been devastating. Those children are missing out on life chances. That is why I am so frustrated that some Members of the Executive wanted to shut our schools for six weeks and then for four weeks. Let me tell you this: I am looking at the impact that this has on children. What has taken place is child abuse, and they are using children in the most appalling way. I will tell you why I say that. Members might not like what I am saying and might think, "Is he going too far?". I have met the Chief Medical Officer, and I have asked the question: "Give me the evidential basis for why schools are being closed". It is not because of what happens in the school: the concerns are about what goes on at the gate and on the buses. Also — this alarms me even more — closing our schools has a wider behavioural impact on society, and that should be taken seriously.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will give way.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member acknowledge that a Minister from his party shared in the Chamber yesterday the information that there have been 1,500 positive cases in schools?

Mr Givan: I heard the Minister's response on this. I am giving the Member opposite the Chief Medical Officer's advice to me.

I then asked myself, "What has been the Department for Infrastructure's response?". This Minister of Finance has been able to tell me that £90 million has had to go to Translink because our buses and trains are empty. At a time when schoolchildren are being packed onto buses, which has been identified as a problem, have we utilised the private sector? Have we tried to help our coach industry, which is on its knees? No. It has not happened, yet we are expending a huge amount of money on Translink, subsidising an organisation that is running empty buses.

Before we close down schools and before someone comes with another recommendation to close down schools, Members need to consider this question: what other financial support can be given to different sectors of our economy that can ameliorate the situation with our schools and protect them? Even the Republic of Ireland has not decided to close schools for the next six weeks, but this Executive have decided to close schools.

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I will give way in a moment. I have more to say and elaborate on.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind the Member to contextualise this within the Budget Bill, please.

Mr Givan: Thank you, Deputy Speaker. I will come back to it.

We have put tens of millions of pounds into our schools to keep them open. Despite the measures that have been taken to keep them open, there are some in the Chamber who advocated the closure of our schools for a four- or six-week period. I am thankful for what our Executive Ministers have done. I appreciate, as the First Minister has said, that, if this were a DUP-only Executive, there would have been a different outcome. We have had to ameliorate some of the actions that other Executive Ministers have wanted to take, and I appreciate their work on that.

I look at the health impact. The financial resources that we are putting into the Department of Health are hugely significant — rightly so — so that we can provide the kind of support that is being provided. Yesterday, the Minister outlined that the Department of Health may have to return some of the money. Maybe he can elaborate on how much, as I may have missed that yesterday. The public will find it strange that the Department of Health is having to return money when it needs even more capacity.

I think of the cost that will come to our community through missed appointments and missed surgeries. How many mothers will sadly no longer be with us five or 10 years down the line because their tests were cancelled through the actions that have been taken? I understand the arguments, but there are consequences and impacts. A constituent of mine who had cancer requiring surgery was in Belfast City Hospital on the day that it turned into a Nightingale facility. It was the eighth surgery that the individual had to go through. He had been prepped and was coming down in the lift when the decision was taken: “No more routine surgeries. We have to prepare for what is coming”. He waited another three months and was red-flagged twice. Thankfully, he got the operation that he needed. He was told, “You were at death’s door, had you not come through”. That is one individual who, I know, was saved, but there are others for whom, sadly, that has not been the case.

My colleague Pam Cameron rightly highlighted the inability to provide support in pregnancy. There is the issue of visitation at end of life. I think about the cruelty that is being inflicted in the end-of-life situation, where people are unable to hold the hand of their loved one. Yes, the Minister of Health has said that no one will die without someone being there: that is of absolutely no comfort to families who are not able to be there. I speak in a personal capacity. My 99-year-old grandmother through marriage is in hospital and is not well at all. She was left into hospital by a relative at the weekend. She is unable to have anybody come in to visit and is pleading to come home. Where is the humanity in some of the actions that are being taken and in some of the decisions that people are grappling with?

We then think of the mental, health and financial impacts that will flow from all the decisions that are coming. We see that in the Budget Bill. Some of the financial impacts

are huge, and we will not have the funding in the future. How will we deal with that?

I look at the Department for Communities and the Budget Bill and see the additional funding that will have to go to that Department. I commend that Department’s Minister. I have met her. She has been in my constituency with charities, and support has been put in place for charities. However, I have met representatives of those charities, and they are on their knees and are closing down. We know that the resources that the Executive have been able to give have not been able to save some of those organisations. The sports clubs that my colleague Paula Bradley spoke about are closing their doors. Then, to add insult to injury, while there is nothing in the law to prevent you going to events, which are socially distanced and on which a huge amount of resource has been spent, the Minister tells people, “Don’t go”. Is it any wonder that the public get so frustrated with regulations? They are interpreted and added to in ways that do not have any legal force.

I also look at the impact on our councils. The financial support that we have given to our councils is hugely significant, but it does not meet the deficit. Members will all know that from speaking to their colleagues. I know it from speaking to members of Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council. LeisurePlex, one of Northern Ireland’s best facilities, is down £1 million of income and is projected to be down by £5 million. That is one council facility. Dundonald International Ice Bowl is in the other part of the council area in east Belfast. The council has received £2 million of support from Stormont, and, while it appreciates that, it does not compensate for those losses, and part-time, low-paid workers and young people are unemployed as a result of the downturn. I understand some of the rationale for the decision, but there are financial consequences.

The Department for Communities also made a fund available to churches because of the impact that some of the measures have had on them. I know that that was appreciated and that some churches have been able to get support through that. I then look at the regulations and see that only 25 people are allowed at a funeral. I was at my church on Sunday, and in the region of 120 people attended.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Could the Member bring us back to the Budget Bill, please?

Mr Givan: I will. My point relates to the financial support that the Executive give to churches. The fact that churches have limitations placed on them has an impact on the ask.

I look at the regulations on churches and see that 25 people are allowed to attend a funeral. I was at church on Sunday, and approximately 130 or 140 of us were there. It is a large building, we were all socially distanced, and it was all properly managed. Some 24 hours later, only 25 people were allowed in for the funeral of one of the members of our congregation. Where is the logic? And you wonder why the public struggle to come with the regulations. The financial impact on the churches in my constituency whose representatives I have spoken to is huge. Yet, those churches provide a place of solace and comfort and the ability, within the restrictive measures, to get support.

I asked my colleagues on the Executive about the measures that were taken on churches, only to be told that there was a recommendation to close churches, which our party resisted. There was a recommendation to close churches. I asked for the evidence from the Chief Medical Officer on the transmission rate in churches: 1%. It was 1%, and, on that basis, some Executive members wanted to close down our churches. Where was the thought of the financial impact, as well as of the rights and wrongs and the logic for that? When we think about the Executive's financial resources and what we ask people to do, we cannot keep asking them to take those measures. We have to think of the consequences and to weigh up the proportionality.

With the financial support that was given to businesses as part of the previous measures in March and July, we did what we could. Not everybody was included in that.

The Minister has been meeting those from Excluded NI and has made his position clear. It is a position that I support. Not everyone was able to be included.

11.45 am

The Minister for the Economy has done a sterling job of trying to identify schemes to get moneys out, but not everybody gets that money as quickly as they would like, and that can be hugely frustrating. We therefore need to be asking questions about the Executive processes when it comes to the administration of schemes. Ministers take decisions that then need to be implemented, and questions are being raised about the capacity of the Civil Service to implement those decisions. I know that we are in very difficult times, but we have been in this position for six months, so the latitude that was there back in March and April is not there for the current scenarios. We need to find a better way of doing things.

People in the hospitality sector and others involved in close contact have made it abundantly clear to me that they very much feel like the scapegoat. They feel as though they are being punished without being given the appropriate financial support to compensate them for having to close. The failure of others in our society to comply has resulted in those in hospitality being punished. They have systems in place. Some have spent tens of thousands of pounds to regulate their environment, yet they are now in a position in which they have had to close. In my constituency, some businesses in the hospitality sector closed in April and did not reopen. Businesses closed, and jobs were lost. What is the financial impact on our Executive when that happens? It means a reduced rates base, less income for Stormont and less income for our local authorities.

I have outlined a number of areas of concern, to which people will rightly respond, "What would you do? It is easy for you to get up here and ask these questions". That is the job of an MLA: to ask questions and to challenge. The new normal cannot be about closing down our society. It just cannot be, because it is not working, and the devastating impact that it is having is leading a lot of people to believe that doing so is disproportionate to the risk associated with what is happening.

We therefore need to look at finding a way in which to have an accreditation process for businesses that are deemed to be doing everything by the book. If they are

doing it by the book, they are mitigating the risk as far as possible, so we need to see financial support going into a system of accreditation for aspects of our different public services and for the private sector. We need to have greater compliance checks. It is important that we have compliance. We therefore need more investment in how we marshal our society and try to help and advise it. I often find that working with and encouraging people can get them to a better place without a need for the big stick to be used, even if it always has to be there for the minority that refuses to comply. I do not believe that using the big stick on the broader population is a sustainable way forward, however. We need to have increased democratic oversight when it comes to the regulations. They were brought in under unique circumstances, but we need to find a different way for the regulations to become law and take effect.

We also need to get to a place in which there is recognition from all the parties on the Executive that, when they create these laws, the Executive's integrity is compromised. That creates a reaction, because the public are then less likely to follow the Executive's rules. I listened to Members speak yesterday about —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to return to the Budget Bill, please.

Mr Givan: I will. All these comments relate to the financial impact in the round, Mr Deputy Speaker. The situation is having a huge impact on the financial situation that we are facing as a society.

I listened to Members speak yesterday, and there were even references made to it today, about my constituency colleague Edwin Poots's remarks. They were remarks that were made in a very sensible manner.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Sorry, but we are discussing the Budget Bill and not the remarks that someone made outwith the House.

Mr Givan: I appreciate that, Mr Deputy Speaker, but this is connected —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Sorry, but I have already said that we are discussing the Budget Bill and not someone else's remarks, please.

Mr Givan: The Budget Bill has implications for the financial impact of decisions that are being taken. I appreciate that not everyone is going to agree with what I have been saying, but the integrity of our Government is being called into question. Those who make accusations about colleagues are blinded by their own catastrophic failures when it comes to how this issue has been managed. The funeral issue has been well-documented. There is an inability to recognise that the rate has been higher — this is what my colleague outlined — in those areas where the party opposite has greater political support. *[Interruption.]* There has been no mention anywhere of religion; it has not been mentioned in any form.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We are discussing the Budget Bill. I have allowed you a fair bit of latitude —

Mr Givan: Thank you.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): — but I will not endure any more of it.

Mr Givan: I appreciate your ruling on that, Deputy Speaker.

The decision has been taken by the Executive, and it is having an impact, but there are serious questions being asked about the evidence base on which it was formed.

Mr Chambers: Will the Member give way?

Mr Givan: I am concluding.

I am highlighting the wider impact that that is having on our financial sustainability and ability to deliver services across our public sector, the huge impact it has had on people's livelihoods, and the consequences for people's welfare and health, including mental health, beyond the COVID-19 issue.

The Executive will have very serious work to do when it comes to the next set of decisions to be taken. I do not envy them, but we cannot have an unsustainable way forward when it comes to dealing with this. I want us to get to a place where we are protecting all lives and every aspect of our society. My party and I will continue to chart a path that we believe to be reasonable and proportionate. We will challenge where we need to and use every opportunity that we have to do that so that we get to a better place than where we are currently.

Mr McAleer: I am speaking in my capacity as the Sinn Féin spokesperson on agriculture and rural affairs, having spoken yesterday on behalf of the Committee during the debate on the Supply resolution motion.

We have been looking at the budget for DAERA since the Assembly reconvened at the start of the year. At that stage, we could never have anticipated that a crisis like COVID and its impacts on all parts of society would come upon us. All parts of society have been impacted, none more so than our farmers and the agri-food sector.

During the lockdown and all of the challenges that we have faced, the farmers and food producers kept going, kept the shelves in our shops stocked and kept food on our dinner tables during the worst days of the lockdown. It is important that we recognise our front-line farmers and agri-food producers for keeping going in the most difficult of circumstances. It has not been easy for them, and the lockdown of the food service sector — the hotels and the restaurants — has resulted in a drop in demand for steaks and other things that people normally eat out. That has resulted in a carcass imbalance, which has an impact through a collapse in farm-gate prices and the prices that farmers get at the factory.

We very much welcomed the decision of the Finance Minister to award £25 million to DAERA to help the sector mitigate some of the losses that it has incurred. We took a special interest on that in the Committee, even having our own short inquiry in which we took evidence from some stakeholders to see how that money should be spent. We want the money to be distributed quickly and fairly and be targeted towards those who suffered most and who need it most. As Members will be aware, the bulk of the money — £21.4 million — has been allocated, mostly across the dairy, beef, sheep, potato and horticulture sectors. Other sectors are coming forward for help. For example, wool producers have come forward, having suffered from prices dropping greatly. Indeed, a LeasCheann Comhairle, you will be interested in the impact on eel fishing in Lough

Neagh. We need to look at how that industry can be supported now that it has obtained official recognition.

We still have concerns about whether there was enough funding for beef cattle farmers and sheep farmers. As I said, we have been lobbied quite heavily by the wool industry. While we welcome the fact that suckler beef farmers have been included in the scheme, one of our concerns is that the 30 June slaughter date criterion has an impact on farmers who got a bad price for their animals in the ring during March, when prices collapsed. Farmers are not entitled to compensation for animals that were not slaughtered by 30 June. Hopefully, the Minister will look at the issue of farmers who endured a loss during lockdown but who do not qualify for compensation.

A related concern is the future of the market, and the British market in particular. On three successive occasions, the British Government have pushed back important amendments to incorporate minimum food standards into the British Agriculture Bill. That is despite the potentially devastating impact that that would have on farmers here and across the water in Britain. A petition to include those amendments, launched by farming unions here and in Britain, was signed by over a million people. Nevertheless, the amendments were pushed back, and, unfortunately, it looks as though that opens the way for international trade deals with other countries whose environmental and animal welfare standards are not as good as those that we are used to. That is regrettable, and it is, potentially, a serious blow to the industry here.

The financial impact on DAERA of delivering Brexit is also a huge issue that exercises us. We know from evidence gathered by the Committee that the Department needs an additional 456 staff to support Brexit delivery and is working to fill those positions. Under the terms of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act and the protocol, DAERA is required to implement the EU official controls regulations, which include sanitary and phytosanitary checks.

One of our big concerns is that we are only months away from the end of the transition period, and there has not been a great deal of progress on planning. We are talking about a £35 million infrastructure project, and the Department is still engaging with planners. I know that a lot of it can be carried out under permitted development but there are site constraints. In Warrenpoint, for example, an adjacent area of special scientific interest (ASSI) could affect expansion at the port there.

There are issues with IT systems, and we heard evidence last week that the HMRC's goods vehicle movement service (GVMS) is not in place and cannot be tested until the transition period is over. That is a major concern for businesses that will have to pre-register in order to enable seamless east-west movement.

I turn to trade across the Irish Sea. We have a concern about our state of readiness. A programme assurance review (PAR) of the Department's readiness was carried out in August and resulted in a red assessment. The definition of a red delivery status is as follows:

“Successful delivery of the project/programme appears to be unachievable. There are major issues which at this stage do not appear to be manageable

or resolvable. The project/ programme may need rebaselining and/or overall viability re-assessed."

Given an amber/red assessment in June, that was a red flag, and it is causing a bit of concern. The cost of getting our ports and airports ready is predicted to be in the region of £45 million, comprising £38 million in capital expenditure and £6 million in revenue costs. Again, that will involve the recruitment and training of additional staff, so it is a serious capital project. We are still, essentially, at the planning stage, and infrastructure expansion is not yet on the ground.

12.00 noon

Another huge issue that is related to EU exit is the future funding that will replace current EU funding. As Members will be aware, the bulk of the EU funding that comes to DAERA is paid out as direct payments to farmers and rural communities, who benefit greatly under the rural development programme. Over the current 2014-20 EU funding period, we have benefited from funding from the EU totalling €3.6 billion across various programmes. That is a huge amount of funding that comes here. The fear that we have is about whether that level of funding will be replaced, and, if not, what the impact will be on farmers, rural communities and food production.

Whilst we welcome the fact that £293 million has been secured for the single farm payment for this year, we are very concerned about what will happen next year and in future years. The single farm payments began to be issued to farmers on Friday, with £265.7 million paid out on the first day. It is important to recognise that that is a good news story, and I commend the Department and officials for getting those payments out. Those payments will include a 4.3% increase to the basic payment entitlements, which is also welcomed by the vast majority of farmers. It is important to point out that the Minister's decision to stop the transition towards a flat rate at the fifth year of a seven-year transition period has surprised many farmers who are below the regional average of anticipated 14% this year and next year. This mostly impacts on the ANC (areas of natural constraint) beef and sheep suckler farmers who are labouring with the loss of the ANC payment, which I hope the Minister will consider reintroducing.

We in the Committee have also expressed concern about the replacement funding for the rural development programme that comes from the CAP pillar 2. As a consequence of our leaving the EU rural development programme because of Brexit, it is important that we develop our own policy in the North. Anyone who represents rural communities will know that the rural development programme has been a very important building block in our communities over the last number of decades. It has provided funding for the development of community centres, community halls, hubs, village renewals and many small businesses and employment opportunities.

In recent correspondence, the Minister indicated to me that almost a thousand jobs have been created to date in the current rural development programme that will run out by 2023. We know the importance of our village and community hubs, halls and church halls and how important they are at all times, but particularly in the community sector, where they became a base for the distribution of

aid packages to people who were isolating and who were in need. It is important in the time ahead that we have a replacement programme that will ultimately be funded out of Treasury money, because the European funding will not be available.

I have been lobbying the AERA Minister and the Finance Minister in relation to the replacement of the programme. Whilst it will be going out for public consultation very soon, I am glad to note that the Minister has indicated that the new programme that will be coming in here will incorporate many of the overarching goals and objectives of the EU rural development programme. However, the lack of progress on the UK shared prosperity fund is a cause for concern, because it is anticipated that that will fund the new rural programme here which will be the successor to the EU rural development programme. I know from questioning the Finance Minister recently that there has been very little progress on that. I appreciate that COVID and many other issues have come into the equation, but it is still really important to have a well-funded and -supported rural development programme in looking ahead to facilitate the social and economic needs of our communities.

I am also keen that the Minister incorporate the LEADER methodology in delivering the new policy. Over many years, the local action groups — we have two local action groups. Many Members are, or possibly were, members of the local action groups that worked along with social partners to identify local needs and to develop projects at grassroots level. It is important that that LEADER approach is continued in the implementation of a new rural policy to make sure that the programmes fit and meet the needs of local communities. The policy must be effective and tailored to meet the social and economic needs of our rural communities. I use this platform to encourage rural dwellers and local groups to have their say on our new rural policy when the consultation opens in the very near future.

The Committee, and my party, anticipates that the UK shared prosperity fund will replace the lost EU funding, but the lack of progress is very concerning. Clarity on the shared prosperity fund is long overdue. It is something that we will continue to press the Finance Minister and the AERA Minister on in the time ahead.

During the past number of months, COVID and Brexit have presented huge challenges to our farmers and rural communities. I am certain that the agri-food and community sectors will survive, just as they have survived many other challenges and crises in the past, but there will be tough and straitened times ahead, and they will need our ongoing support.

Mrs Cameron: I do not think that any of us could ever have imagined the situation that we find ourselves in, in terms of the threat of the virus and the subsequent financial pressures associated with it; it is truly unprecedented. Our health service, throughout this year, has been on the front line in the battle to save lives and to make budgets work. The strain on the health service funding envelope has left it coming apart at the seams. To meet the demand, we all need to recognise that we would not be able to face the pandemic without the financial support and monetary might of our Government at Westminster. If there were ever a time to acknowledge the benefits of the Union, it is now. In the context of rising case numbers and

increased hospitalisation, we take comfort in the fact that, in this corner of the Union, we will be supported by our Government. It is not ourselves alone.

The Health funding before us here today meets the need and pressures that have been prioritised by the Minister. The Department is expected to spend over £7 billion this year. That is an incredible sum. What is clear now more than ever — it has been clear for some time — is that we need the much talked about reform of our health service if we are to protect our NHS and the service that it provides, free at the point of delivery. The Health Minister has, understandably, been preoccupied with COVID, but I encourage him to press ahead with reform as a way of responding to COVID. COVID is not going away. We cannot continue to spend the vast sums that we have been in the short term. We need to adapt, find efficiencies, restructure and be innovative. We also need to, dare I say it, look at ways of raising revenue. We ought to look at how our GP services are provided, whether reform can make that service better, and examine what positive role pharmacy and our allied health professionals can play in transformation.

These difficult days need to be met with resolve, and the resolve that our front-line nurses and healthcare staff have shown should be an example to us. We need to look at pay again. Nurses need the recognition that they deserve. In the context of public-sector pay scales, they deserve a fairer deal. Indeed, we need more nurses and doctors. Key to achieving that will be funding, but also pay that makes foreign climes less enticing. We need to keep our front-line medical staff here to serve their community.

There are a number of additional funding areas that the Minister should prioritise. As Members know, I recently held a public consultation on autism. It garnered the largest ever response for a private Member's Bill in the House. That reflects the depth of need and the cry for help from so many people across our society. It is a public priority; it ought to be a departmental priority, too. I trust that the Health Minister will look at behavioural intervention, speech and language therapy, and at training and appropriate support services. There is so little provision for the need.

We must never forget the challenges of an ageing population. We need to ensure that lung health is addressed, for example, and that an NI strategy is developed, especially now, given the added impact of COVID-19 and the long-term effects that we now know come with that disease. We have issues with care and supported living and with tackling issues such as dementia. Those must be looked at seriously now. Domestic violence and support for victims' families are also acute issues, and they need to be analysed and the needs for them met.

There will also be a legacy from COVID for cancer care, treating heart disease and mental health to name but a few vital areas. That will take significant resource, but we need to recognise that the longer we close services now, the bigger the ticking time bomb. The reality is that early intervention for many will be missed. We need to ramp this up.

Connected to that is the need for support for charities, particularly those for people facing a health crisis. Those charities include Macmillan, Marie Curie, the British Heart

Foundation and Chest, Heart and Stroke. Those charities are on their knees, but they provide advice, support and care that we cannot manage without. I urge the Minister to see what he can do to support them at this time in order to ensure that their services are funded and sustainable into the future. I also urge the House to ensure that the test, trace, protect programme for COVID is receiving the resource needed to deal with the demand that is faced by the Public Health Agency (PHA).

I back the call from the Commissioner for Older People for Northern Ireland to increase the frequency of testing in our care settings. We owe it to our elderly population to give them every protection. We also need to ensure that resources are made available to allow safe visitation in those settings. We know the positive impact on mental health, emotional well-being and people's life that visitation from family members can have. We also understand that many of the people who are in care homes are not there for many years but sometimes for quite short periods. We owe it to them to ensure that the time that they have in their life is of good quality.

Those are our challenges today, and a united approach across this House can meet them.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I will speak first as the Chair of the Economy Committee.

This is now almost a cliché, but we are living in unprecedented times and are likely to continue to do so for the foreseeable future. The Economy Committee has been consistent in its message over the past number of months that these times call for a creative and brave approach.

The Department for the Economy is at the centre of the response to COVID-19, and, as a result, the Committee has found itself at the very heart of scrutinising the Minister's and, indeed, the Executive's economic response to the crisis. As well as receiving regular updates on the budget flows to and from the Economy Department, the Committee has spent a great deal of time engaging closely with its wide range of stakeholders in order to seek their views and to relay them back to the Minister and the Executive.

The Committee has been assiduous in its scrutiny of the Department's response to the crisis and of its input, including bids, to the various monitoring rounds and the Department of Finance's summer exercise. The Committee has also been dedicated in its challenge function regarding the Department's budgeting and response to the COVID crisis, holding a significant number of briefing sessions. I will not take up valuable time by recounting those sessions in detail or by going through the minutiae of the DFE budget.

The Department's most significant spend area during the crisis has been assistance to business. The Committee is agreed that it is vital to ensure that our economy is protected, and members are supportive of the wide range of measures and supports that have been put in place. However, the Committee has called a number of times for the creation of a support fund that is directed to the many individuals, businesses and sectors that have received no support as yet — the so-called excluded. Mechanisms to process support to those who need it have already been developed, and criteria need to be widened in order to

ensure that the assistance reaches more people and is more equitable.

The Committee has made the observation that many of those businesses are still viable and need support in the interim until economic conditions return to a greater degree of normality. Additionally, the Committee has written to the British Chancellor to advocate greater cooperation on the part of Treasury officials to develop mechanisms to help.

The Committee is very supportive of the budget bids that the Department has made for skills. Those are funding a range of programmes that include supporting businesses to bring back and recruit new apprentices, as well as other training, upskilling and reskilling programmes. The Committee has urged the Department to make every effort to ensure that apprenticeships and training schemes are available to those above the age of 24 and that more support for reskilling be made available to those who have lost their jobs.

12.15 pm

The Committee has engaged heavily with the further and higher education sectors, including student and lecturer representatives, to understand their needs better during the crisis. It has corresponded with the Department and reflected those needs, including support for students who are isolating and those trapped in contracts for accommodation that they can no longer afford or do not need.

The Committee has worked closely with the hospitality and tourism sector, which is one of the sectors that has been worst hit by the crisis, to ensure that members understand the support that it requires and communicate that to the Executive.

The Committee has urged the Department to bring forward projects and programmes that will create jobs and those where there is capital spend. Greater efforts must be made to utilise FTC to support jobs. In addition to that, the Committee has identified the importance of Project Stratum to widen access to high-speed broadband in the context of increased working from home and the ongoing issue of digital poverty.

The Committee is conscious that the current crisis allows us to consider how to do things better, and members advocate that that be part of the Minister's and the Executive's thinking in seeking to rebuild our economy.

The Committee is looking at the benefits of investing in green industries and jobs, and in building and capitalising on the local community efforts that have got us through this crisis. Where possible, localisation rather than globalisation must surely represent the way forward. Our communities have shown themselves to be resourceful and innovative. Businesses have been repurposed, and social enterprise is clearly the way forward in so many sectors and for so many businesses.

The Committee understands that the Budget envelope that the Executive have at their disposal is finite. However, members have heard from many stakeholders about the ways in which we can and should use it better and more sustainably.

The Committee is acutely aware that we are nearing the end of the EU exit transition period. Businesses are urging the Committee to seek certainty on the rules under which

they will operate. The Committee has communicated this to the Minister, the Executive and British Ministers. It is clear to the Committee that it will be important to budget for support for businesses not just to respond to COVID-19 but to respond to the situation that they will face at the end of transition, potentially under WTO rules.

In short, the Committee believes that the role of the Department for the Economy is pivotal in the responses to COVID and Brexit. It is therefore imperative that the Department is at the heart of the Budget process and that its bids are seen against the backdrop of the uncertain times in which we live.

The Committee will continue to engage with stakeholders over the next number of weeks and months to come through a series of mini inquiries, which will be conducted via virtual discussion forums. The Committee intends to use those to respond to the Economy Minister's invitation to help to shape her Department's and the Executive's response to the crisis. Moreover, the Committee seeks to use those to help to shape the forthcoming Programme for Government and the economic and investment strategies.

The Committee has listened to the Economy Department's officials' concerns that money made available for the response to COVID must be allocated and spent quickly, as there is an ever-narrowing window of opportunity to spend funds within the current financial year. It is therefore imperative that the Executive act not only bravely but quickly.

I will make some remarks in my role as Sinn Féin economy spokesperson. I addressed a number of points in the debate on the Estimates yesterday, so I will not repeat them. However, I want to touch on a few issues, following Members' contributions.

It is clear that there is broad support across parties and Members — I mentioned it previously in relation to the Committee — that those excluded from schemes to date should have support extended to them. I have been contacted by many business owners and individuals in my capacity as an MLA for East Derry and also as Chair of the Economy Committee. Many have had no support and are in real financial difficulty, and at this point they feel let down, frustrated and angry. It is vital that Ministers with responsibilities bring forward proposals as quickly as possible to protect jobs, workers and families. It is clear that many businesses are trying to survive. In this crisis, we are still very much at the mitigation stage. We are trying to deal with the impact of COVID-19 on our economy, and that is where funding needs to be directed. Those businesses were viable and functioning, prior to COVID-19, and were supporting jobs. They deserve to have the opportunity to recover, to keep those jobs and to create new ones.

I will not repeat all that I said yesterday, but, as many Members have said, the furlough scheme should not be ending at the end of this month. Elsewhere in Europe, equivalent schemes are continuing into next year. The job support scheme and the extended job support scheme offer only limited support. Unfortunately, we face tens of thousands of redundancies at a time when job opportunities are very limited and active economic recovery is some way off. It is critical that workers and their families have incomes and that people are not forced to choose between their health and putting food on the

table. Core to limiting the spread of the virus is test, trace and isolate, and people need to be able to afford to isolate.

I urge the Minister to keep the pressure on the British Government for supports designed to protect jobs and incomes. I urge all other parties to support him in that, because there is strong support across the political spectrum in Britain on this too. Andy Burnham, for example, in Manchester, is making the case to protect and support low-paid workers. It is important that the case is made loud and clear on that.

We need to look towards our economic recovery and having a recovery strategy that is multi-layered and phased. Businesses impacted by restrictions need to be supported. Many have already put in place health and safety measures; they take public health responsibilities very seriously, and that needs to be recognised. We also need to support new ways of working. We all want to get our economy open and working, so there needs to be a focus in this period on planning the way forward for reopening and living with the virus.

Mr Givan has left the Chamber, but there is no place for finger-pointing at sections of our communities, so let us not muddy the waters with mixed messaging and scapegoating people. People want and respond to leadership and a united message from the Executive. We should all be very mindful of our words in respect of that. In the past number of months, there was strong community solidarity and buy-in, and that collective effort got us to the point where we were able to reopen; we need to get back to that.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. She is correct that words are important, but so are deeds. Does she accept that the actions of her party, in attending the Bobby Storey funeral, paid great damage to that message and the attitude of the population?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I remind all Members that the debate is about the Budget Bill.

Dr Archibald: I thank the LeasCheann Comhairle for that. We all need to look at how we move forward and, collectively, take responsibility and put our efforts towards getting the virus back under control.

On our economic recovery, some sectors have continued to operate and have expanded during the crisis. They need to be supported and encouraged to be innovative and flexible, where they can be, and to develop new talent and create jobs. I spoke yesterday about the need to look at the role of Invest NI and how the economic development agency needs to be at the core of our economic recovery — driving our recovery, supporting SMEs and entrepreneurs and supply chain diversification and innovation. Invest NI should be key in delivering the programmes that support recovery, but there needs to be a change of focus from prioritising FDI and helping a select few to addressing all sectors of the economy and all areas across the North, particularly those that have suffered from underinvestment and economic inequalities.

There is a role for the Executive too in expediting, where possible, capital infrastructure projects and building an economic recovery on the basis of green energy projects and infrastructure. I have said before that a retrofitting programme is one example of how we can meet multiple priorities and highlights where there are real benefits from true, cross-departmental working.

That brings me to my final point. We are limited due to a lack of fiscal and borrowing powers. Investing in capital infrastructure and skills development can be big drivers for our recovery. Much discussion is taking place in monitoring institutions about the role of the state in recovery. It is no surprise that I think that that is a positive discussion and one that we should seek to develop because of the huge economic challenges that we face and the need to encourage and drive a recovery that serves all our citizens. The Minister has spoken about putting a fiscal commission in place, and he has made representations on increased borrowing powers to the British Government. Those things are no-brainers, and it is vital that the Executive are given some levers to try to shape our recovery.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Before I call the next Member to speak, I highlight to Members the need for social distancing while in the Chamber.

Mr Catney: I know that there is social distancing, but I am disappointed, after what I had to listen to from my fellow MLA from Lagan Valley, that there were only three on the DUP Benches as I rose to speak. His party's name has "Democratic" in its title, and that will inform part of my speech, if you will bear with me, Mr Deputy Speaker. I may not agree with everything that he said, but, as a democrat, I believe that he should at least have had the decency to stay and listen to our answers.

I wanted to be positive today. I wanted to start this speech in a positive way. I know that our people want our Executive — note the word "our" — to be united and to stand together and for us to show them as much support as we possibly can as they make difficult decisions. I am not privy to the goings-on at the Executive, but I know that, during the pandemic and with this Budget, the community wants us to have a united voice. I am afraid that a united voice has not been shown to me today. What I heard was destructive and dangerous.

As with the pandemic and these budgetary measures, what the Agriculture Minister came out with shows no united voice. I do not want to play orange and green politics.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Sorry, but, as I said earlier —

Mr Catney: I know. I am sorry.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): — I am not getting into —

Mr Catney: Yes, I understand, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): — a narrative that is outwith —.

Mr Catney: I set out last night —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member resume his seat? As I said earlier, and I am being consistent, we are not getting into a narrative on something that is outwith the Chamber. We are sticking to the content to the Budget Bill today. Thank you.

Mr Catney: Last night, I wanted to make a really positive speech today. I did not want to go over things that have already been debated and points that have already been well made.

Suffice it to say that no one could ever have imagined a year ago the position that we are in today, with the dire facts of the pandemic and the threat of no trade agreement with the European Union looming. I want to consider the opportunities we will have in the future, however. It is apparent that the Treasury is in no rush to act in the interests of the devolved Administrations, so it is up to us to find flexibilities in our Budget to best support the economy and public services here.

I note that 500 additional Translink buses were provided for schools. Minister Nichola Mallon wrote to Minister Weir about using private buses. He has not come back to her on that, and he has not acted. School transport is a decision for an Education Minister to take. He perhaps needs to speak to his party colleagues about that.

We need to continue to do work to establish an effective fiscal council that will provide extra scrutiny of our Budgets and help the House provide more effective funding to our Departments.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. He mentioned private coach hire and its ability to help with the social-distancing problem in getting to school. Will he accept that the private coach industry has been badly let down by the failure of the Infrastructure Minister to provide adequate funding for those businesses that are about to go out of business? They are on a lifeline as it is, and they have been failed. There has been much bluster in this Chamber about what can be done, but the help has not been forthcoming.

Mr Catney: Thank you. Speak to the Economy Minister. I agree that the private bus sector should be redeployed to help, but ask Minister Weir to do it. That is his job. That is his role. Look, I want to be productive and talk about what we are meant to be talking about.

We must continue to look at how extra budgetary mechanisms can be used to tackle effectively the issues of today. There is still at least a £70 million shortfall in the uptake of FTC funding. That is an issue that comes up every year. Furthermore, we must find ways of harnessing our borrowing powers to best serve our community. Those are only two areas in which we can make big changes.

It seems that more and more Governments are beginning to realise the benefits of the green economy and green infrastructure. In my area, great work has been done to bring forward plans for the Knockmore halt and to facilitate the extension of the train station and pathways in Moira.

With proper funding, we can turn that into a first-class transport system that will ease road network pressures and help us to reduce our emissions. If we could look at combining that with an extension to the bus rapid transit (BRT), we could have a sustainable, economic reduction in cars on our roads and effective and affordable transport for the entire area.

12.30 pm

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Several DUP Members have intervened. One Member who has left the Chamber now — Pam Cameron — said that one of the issues in relation to the Budget Bill was the need to keep healthcare staff in Northern Ireland. Does the Member agree that one of the biggest drivers of people leaving Northern Ireland is rancid sectarianism?

If DUP Members want to keep people in Northern Ireland and bring people back here, they should speak to their colleagues about lurid displays of sectarianism *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We will not have any commentary from a seated position *[Interruption.]* Will the Member —

Mr Givan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Member for South Belfast makes outrageous allegations about “rancid sectarianism”. The Member needs to explain what he is trying to say if he is going to use that kind of language in the debate, lowering the tone, heading into the gutters. It is no surprise from the Member for South Belfast.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Order. I believe that —

Mr Givan: Disgraceful comments.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): — is not a point of order nor is it material to the debate. We will bring the focus back to the debate, which is the Budget (No. 3) Bill. I ask Mr Catney to resume.

Mr Catney: Thank you. Work has already been done on creating and improving greenways, particularly the new one at Blaris. I am lucky to have a number of great cycle paths in my area. However, work and funding are needed to connect them to improve our cycle network so that it provides a viable alternative transport option.

Work must also continue to secure the use of Lagan Valley Hospital in a modern and effective health service. I welcome recent announcements on the use of that site. We now need to look at the access to the site and how it can be made fit for purpose to improve availability for patients in the future.

One of the biggest questions that we will face over the next 18 months is how we can secure jobs, innovation and enterprise in the face of the pandemic. Members will all be shocked to learn that there are 350 acres of prime land in my constituency with the possibility of securing 5,000 jobs and delivering more than £300 million of investment. After years of indecision and countless millions squandered on plans that could not be agreed, surely now is the time to deliver at Maze/Long Kesh and create some prosperity for Northern Ireland — the place that we call “home”.

Mr Beattie: I shall be mercifully brief. I have always been told to raise two or three points and nothing more or lose your audience, so I shall try to keep it to two or three points. That is not to say that they may not be contentious.

It is difficult to overplay the financial pressures that we are under regarding COVID and Brexit. We have had to redirect funds from various areas to support our public services and our economy and to shore up our NHS. It is difficult for anybody in the House to say that that is not the right thing to do. It is absolutely the right thing to do. Yet, as we salami-slice our Budget, at times, we are still like children in a sweetie shop. We see everything around us and we want it all. We are like the consumer who gets his first credit card and spends and spends and does not realise that, eventually, he will have to pay for what he has spent.

I have concerns regarding how we scrutinise costed outputs from one Department and costed outputs from

another Department. What I am really trying to say is that one Department can have an output and there are costed moneys for it, which is right and proper, only for another Department to do something that is completely at odds with it. I will try to explain what I mean. Money is set aside in the Budget to deal with communities in transition and tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime. That money is to stop paramilitaries destroying our communities and to treat them as the criminals they are by putting them through the justice system and putting them behind bars. We spend £8 million on that each year, and the Westminster Government give us another £8 million. That is money well spent. It takes the “brigadier” tag off those people, calls them “criminals”, puts them through the justice system, which does not give them that huge tag, and puts them in jail. Then we spend up to £2.5 million every year on a separated prison regime, giving the “brigadier” tag back to them. We simply give it back. We spend nearly half a million pounds on accommodation for three people. I live in a three-bedroom house that cost £125,000. You could have built three of them, and they could have had a house each. The big issue is that, having spent money on transition, on supporting our communities and on getting those people off the community’s back, we put them in a separated regime and give them back that tag. When released, they go back into the community, and we are back to community transition. All the money that we spent has to be spent all over again. That is ridiculous, but we can stop it.

As an Assembly and Executive, we can come together and say that it is time to move on and that we will not pay for a separated regime any more. Some £2.5 million is spent on 40 individuals. Who is suffering? The other 1,500 prisoners suffer because the resources are not there for them. Prison staff suffer because, when money goes to a separated prison regime, staff numbers reduce. When staff numbers reduce, the workload increases. When the workload increases, the mental health of staff suffers. Imagine £2.5 million a year going to the Prison Service to address the mental health of prisoners and prison officers. It would be absolutely transformational.

Mr Muir was absolutely right: we are spending money on division. We deliberately spend money on division, and we continue to forecast that we will spend money on division. We need to stop. We need to be robust. We need to make difficult decisions about division in our prisons and in our communities. If we stand together, we can do it. Who will be the first Minister to bring that forward? That is the point. Who will be the Minister to dare to take that to the table and say, “I will make a change”?

Minister, I also have concerns about the financing of legal aid in Northern Ireland. As it stands, legal aid spend in Northern Ireland is, per head of population, three times that in Scotland. I am not saying that we just reduce it. The important thing is to make sure that legal aid gets to the people who need it. Access to justice is incredibly important, so I am not saying that we should just cut our legal aid budget. The reality, however, is this: our legal aid budget is so high because justice takes such a long time to deliver. We must reduce how long it takes to deliver justice in Northern Ireland. It is extraordinary how long it takes some cases to come to fruition and how high the bills associated with those cases are. If we can speed up justice, we can reduce that bill. It is incumbent on the Finance Minister, as our money buffalo, to ask the people

concerned, “What are you doing to fix this?”. For the last 10 years, our legal aid accounts have been qualified because of fraud and error — 10 years. Somebody has to ask, “What are you doing to fix it, and, when you have fixed it, when will we see the outcome of a reduced bill for legal aid?”.

There are many other issues, known and unknown, that we will have to deal with in the coming months and years beyond COVID. Life does not stop at COVID. The implementation of the Stormont House Agreement legacy mechanisms has not been costed into the future. I put it on record now — other people have said differently — that the Ulster Unionist Party does not support it, but it is there, others supported it and it needs to be costed. Likewise, the victims’ payment scheme and the institutional abuse scheme need to be costed into the future.

The issue here, as many have said, is how we scrutinise a Budget. If it is a one-year Budget, we scrutinise a one-year Budget, but what we really need to do is to scrutinise the Budget next year and the year after and the year after that. We need to look at five-year Budgets.

What am I really saying? We need to prioritise our spend. In justice, we have to reduce wastage. In the Executive, we have to prioritise outcomes. What we cannot do is spend money doing one thing, only to spend more money to undo what we have done. That makes absolutely no sense.

Mr Newton: I speak as a member of the Education Committee and will make some remarks about my constituency.

The Budget (No. 3) Bill is coming forward in probably the most challenging and difficult economic circumstances that we have faced for many years — possibly for generations. The budget pressures that are on the Minister and the Executive are enormous. We do not know what is coming down the line to hit us, perhaps in the near future. In saying that, I understand the frustration of the Chair of the Finance Committee, who is not in the Chamber at the moment, in carrying out his responsibilities and his scrutiny of the work of the Finance Minister. I also understand Mr Matthew O’Toole’s position on long-term budgeting and, indeed, financial planning. He described it as “multi-year budgeting”. That seems to be just common sense. As a member of Belfast City Council, I found that, in the rates-setting process, instead of looking a few months down the line when you have to set the rate, you look two or three years down the line and try to plan for what is coming.

Mr Girvan, in his wide-ranging remarks, seemed to touch a few nerves. I do not want to comment except on the education end. He spoke passionately about the need to educate our children, to invest in our children and to ensure that our children attend school. I think that that is what we all want to do, regardless of the situation that we find ourselves in: invest in our children at school. I agree with Mr Catney, although he took exception. He said that he wanted to be positive, and I agree that that is where we should go. We should be positive about how we handle our education system. As a member of the Education Committee, I pay tribute to my party colleague Peter Weir as Minister. He has given generously of his time to attend the Committee and, indeed, to clarify, outline and detail actions, as well as answering questions from the Committee.

In speaking on education and the Budget Estimates, I want to dwell for a few moments on the value of education and what we are investing in.

We should never think of education as a cost; it is an investment in the future of all of us. There is an absolute requirement to invest in education. There is also the requirement to revise education investment. In the Budget, it is appropriate that we look at each element of education investment, scrutinise where we are and, indeed, measure the outcomes and success of where we invest and support our education professionals and appreciate our teaching and teaching-support staff. We must recognise the valuable contribution that our principals have made in the health crisis and understand that education is a building block for the future of everything: the economy, health, communities, the arts and every other sector.

12.45 pm

Education is not just the three Rs. I look at the analysis of education spend under “Subhead Detail and Resource to Cash Reconciliation”: what do we get for that investment?

“Ensuring that all young people, through participation at school, reach the highest possible standards of educational achievement”:

that is number one. It is why they go to school. However, for a rounded education, we also want to give them

“a secure foundation for lifelong learning and employment”.

We are looking at the opportunity to

“develop the values and attitudes appropriate to citizenship”.

Our schools have a responsibility to turn out good citizens. That is what we ask them to do; that is what we invest in. Through our Youth Service and our children’s services, we aim to assist our young people to

“gain knowledge, skills and experience to reach their full potential as valued individuals [and to encourage] children and young people to develop mutual understanding”

across communities, with respect for the opinions of other people, and, indeed, to respect

“cultural diversity, human rights, equality of opportunity and social inclusion.”

It is not just about the three Rs; we are investing in a swathe of issues in our education system.

With regard to the schedule detail on resource cash allocation, I want to mention two items that are relatively small in the Department’s overall spend. It is appropriate that, as we look at the Budget and look forward, we should, at least, pay tribute to a man who has invested his own money in our education system: Chuck Feeney, a billionaire who, I understand, has now reached the end of the process of giving away £8 billion. He invested in Northern Ireland’s education system.

The other area relates to the European Union Programme for Peace and Reconciliation. I am not a European in the sense that I want to be part of Europe, but, like many other people, I want to share with Europe what we have

here and what Europe has. I have some experience. I will use this expression and hope that I do not offend anyone by it. When I was working for a living, before I became a politician, I spent a lot of my energies on European funding programmes that provided young people from Northern Ireland — not just those at school level, but up to postgraduate level — with opportunities to enjoy, learn from and acquire skills from an experience in Europe. I had the privilege of working around Lake Como for most of it. Members will understand that it was difficult being in Lake Como. We need to find a way to support the European initiatives that will come forward.

I represent a constituency that has excellent schools. It has high-achieving schools that offer a wide curriculum. Some of them can touch every part of what the Department sets out to do, and they produce excellent results. They are oversubscribed and difficult to get into, and they turn out young people who are mentally and physically well-rounded and well-resourced. They are schools that have a long history of providing young people with opportunities and encouraging them to go to university. However, many of them require investment. Classrooms are draughty, and roofs have been leaking. They go on from one year to another, and, historically, the money has not been there to address those issues. We cannot allow the principals and teachers to work in such facilities. It was said to me by a teacher at one time, “If I was not in school but in industry, I would not be able to use this classroom, because it is not fit for purpose”. I do not know whether that was true, but she said it. That is how many schoolteachers feel.

I want to talk about some of the primary schools. I know that this is not particular to my East Belfast constituency, but many primary schools are in historic buildings or buildings that, by today’s standards, are not fit for purpose. They are in buildings, particularly in inner city areas, where principals and teachers can face many difficulties through challenging behaviour. In that situation, money needs to be set aside for the principals and teachers who face the challenges of some pupils’ behaviour. As Mrs Cameron mentioned, there should be a joined-upness between the Department of Health and the other Departments. If we do not address challenging behaviour at primary level, we run the risk of those behaviours becoming more and more intense and costing us the whole way through the system.

I thank the teachers. Many of them are dedicated. I am often surprised at the number of teachers who dedicate themselves and work well beyond the school hours, although perhaps not so much today, when we have somewhat restricted views.

I appeal to the Finance Minister. COVID-19 has been challenging. There is no doubt, Minister, that, as the Budget is rolled out, there will be times when school principals and school boards will need specific support to address COVID-19 issues. It has been said, “It hasn’t gone away, you know”. It has not gone away, you know, and there is an ongoing need for investment in this area. Perhaps, as Mr Girvan said, we need to learn how to live with COVID-19, but that, Minister, will require further investment in our schools.

I welcome Peter Weir’s initiative in tackling underachievement. In my office, I have seven or eight local studies on tackling underachievement. Some were done by individuals or groups, and some were done professionally. We need to invest in tackling underachievement, whatever

budget is determined on the initiative coming out of the Minister's work. It is always said that, if you do not tackle issues at the beginning of a process, you pay five or six times for them down the line. Tackling underachievement is a priority for the Minister. He has set up an expert group. I have no doubt that it will receive the support of the Education Committee and, I hope, the support of the Chamber. That is likely to reveal that Education on its own cannot address the issue; other Departments will need to be involved, particularly the Department of Health. I think more of the joined-upness of Education and Health via family intervention teams, which deal with —

Mr Allen: Will the Member give way?

Mr Newton: I will give way.

Mr Allen: The Member mentions the joined-up approach in supporting children in the education system. Does he agree that Communities also has a vital role to play in providing quality and affordable social housing? In many properties across Northern Ireland, children live in conditions that would be described as unacceptable, and that can have a knock-on effect on the education system.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I indicate to the Member that the intention is to suspend the Assembly in about two minutes' time. We can continue with your contribution after Question Time, if you want to give a quick answer.

Mr Newton: I agree with Mr Allen. I know that, particularly over the COVID-19 lockdown period, children who lived in overcrowded houses suffered most.

I will leave it at that, if that suits, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thanks very much. That is a bit of experience coming through.

The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I propose, therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. We will resume the debate after Question Time with the present contributor, followed by Mr Maoliosa McHugh.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.59 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Health

Mr Speaker: Questions 5 and 7 have been withdrawn.

Outpatient Waiting Lists

1. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Health how he plans to address outpatient waiting lists. (AQO 935/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): I thank the Member for his question. I fully appreciate that every patient should be able to avail themselves of the best treatment that the health service can provide, and in a timely manner. It is regrettable that any patient has to wait longer than is clinically appropriate for outpatient assessment. I fully understand the distress and anxiety that long waiting times cause, particularly when patients are suffering pain and discomfort.

I assure you that waiting times for elective care remain a key priority for the health service in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, elective care activity had to be reduced during the first wave of the pandemic as medical staff were redeployed to treat COVID-19 patients. That inevitably had an adverse impact on outpatient waiting times, which were already unacceptable prior to the pandemic.

As part of the process to rebuild health and social care (HSC) services in the wake of the first wave of COVID-19, I published the 'Rebuilding Health and Social Care Services Strategic Framework' in June. The framework outlines HSC's plans to rebuild services and sets out the approach of resetting elective activity in an environment that is safe for staff and patients, while planning for a second wave of COVID-19.

In developing those plans, trusts have taken account of the new innovative practices that were introduced during the first wave of the pandemic. For example, trusts have adopted the use of technology such as telephone and virtual clinics to a much greater extent. Outpatient appointments have, where possible and where appropriate, moved to telephone appointments. In addition, a growing number of specialties are adopting virtual clinics using videoconferencing. Embedding those recent innovations will be essential to maximising outpatient activity during a second wave of the pandemic.

It is important to emphasise that the impact of COVID-19 on elective care services will be profound and long-lasting. It has been acknowledged that services will not be able to resume as normal for some time due to the constraints imposed by COVID-19, including social distancing and the use of PPE. The increasing prevalence of COVID-19-positive cases in the community and our hospitals in recent weeks is impacting on the rebuilding of elective services. Staff are being redirected to respond to those pressures or are required to self-isolate, and, as a consequence, some cancellations have been required. That may continue in the short to medium term. It will inevitably have an adverse impact on outpatient waiting times for some time to come.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I remind the Minister that he has two minutes to answer a question. If the Minister believes that he needs extra time, he can get an extra minute, but we have to try to keep this consistent for all the Departments.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Even before COVID and even before his time, waiting lists were a disaster for absolutely ages. Does the Minister agree that it will be incredibly hard to get the waiting lists down, especially when we do not have enough nurses or doctors? Even with independent sector providers' help, the waiting lists were hardly moving before this. What more can we do collectively to try to get waiting lists down once we get through the COVID pandemic?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his supplementary. Mr Speaker, before I move on to answering it, may I thank Mr Easton for his service on the Health Committee? I am led to believe that he will be moving to another, more important Committee some time in the next weeks. He has served on the Committee since 2007, and I thank him for his service, dedication and detailed knowledge, which we heard in the question that he just asked.

He is right. The lack of nurses and doctors in our current system is a subject that he has often raised. When this place came back on 11 January, one of our big achievements was to put in place 300 nursing training places every year for the next three years. The Member has highlighted many times that that would not even fill our current gap. So, it is about filling the gap in the staffing vacancies but also embedding the creative and innovative solutions that we have seen, such as the establishment of the elective care centre in Lagan Valley, the orthopaedics network and the cancer reset cell.

It is about looking outside of what has been the norm in our health service. It is about breaking down the silos that were not intentionally but artificially created in the system, when we did not look across all our trusts and services to see how we could react collectively to challenge waiting lists. It is also about challenging surgeons, doctors and other health professionals to travel to other sites. Out of a meeting with the Royal College of Surgeons and other health professionals last week, there was an indication that they are prepared to do that in order to get to grips with our waiting times.

Mrs D Kelly: Minister, are you aware that over 100 people were waiting in the emergency departments of Craigavon Area Hospital and, I understand, Daisy Hill Hospital last night? Have you done any evaluation of that? People are finding it hard to contact their GP and are again choosing to use emergency departments instead of outpatient services or their GP. That is happening because of the breakdown across the system or the difficulties that each area is experiencing.

Mr Swann: The pressures on our emergency departments are historical. A piece of work was done to review emergency departments, and I announced on Friday that that is now available on the Department's website. It is about how we look at the reformation of our emergency care services. Doing that will be a challenge, especially at this time. Something that we are doing through our COVID-19 urgent emergency care action plan, 'No More Silos', is looking at how we can work across all our services. We have seen over the past six months how

primary and secondary care have really come together to work collaboratively. That was demonstrated in our COVID centres, and it is vital that that continue in this next phase.

Ten key actions are set out in 'No More Silos', including:

"Keeping Emergency Departments for Emergencies ... Rapid Access Assessment and Treatment Services ... 24/7 Telephone Clinical Assessment Service — 'Phone First'".

We have seen some of those things introduced in Daisy Hill Hospital as its emergency care provision has reopened.

It is about how we utilise a very limited number of staff on a smaller footprint because of social distancing. It is also about making sure that we can get patients seen by the right person at the right time in the right place.

Mr Sheehan: Many people are very concerned about the cancellation or pausing of outpatient services. Will the Minister tell us how he will prioritise pressing and urgent cases, particularly in neurology and pain clinics?

Mr Swann: I am sure that the Member is aware that a number of medical royal colleges issued a joint press statement this morning. I and officials from the Department have met representatives of the colleges and discussed with them how we can re-engage and make sure that some of the services that we put in place in our surge plans can continue. Those include pain and neurology clinics, as well as urgent flags for cancer. Services will be dependent on the availability of staff and premises, however.

In their press release this morning, the royal colleges summed it up better than any of us can when they stated:

"Pressures on services are already growing rapidly, and GP surgeries and Emergency Departments are coming under increasing strain to safely meet demand from patients. With elective care waiting lists at unacceptable levels already, it is essential that every single person in Northern Ireland complies with the government guidance to help stop the virus from spreading, so staffing and financial resources aren't pulled from routine operations and treatment."

That also responds to what the Member asked. The more of our health professionals that we can keep concentrating on their specialties without needing to divert them to COVID services, the better that it will be for the people of Northern Ireland. As the royal colleges asked for in their press release, it is vital that the people of Northern Ireland respond and react to the asks in the government guidance so that we can drive down the spread of COVID-19.

Diagnostic and Cancer Treatment Services

2. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Health whether diagnostic and cancer treatment services will be protected and delivered during the surge planning period. (AQO 936/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. COVID-19 has undoubtedly had a severe impact on diagnostic treatment services. However, urgent cancer diagnostics and treatments were delivered during the first wave, and they will continue to be delivered during the second surge, as safely as possible, in COVID-19 safe spaces

and using the independent sector hospitals where it is appropriate. The COVID-19 surge planning strategic framework provides the overall structure and parameters within the HSC trusts, and they will develop further plans for managing the response, in the event of further waves of COVID-19. The framework can be viewed on the Department's website.

Lessons learned from a first surge of coronavirus combined with the aforementioned regional approach have the potential to continue to improve resilience against COVID-19. However, we should be under no illusion that there are challenging times ahead. Services are already coming under pressure, and if the number of COVID-positive inpatients increases, that will have a negative impact on the ability to maintain other services. One of my primary aims in the difficult weeks ahead will be to ensure the continued delivery of high-quality diagnosis and cancer services, provided, of course, that it is safe to do so.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, there are chinks of light amid all the doom and gloom, and the reopening of breast cancer surgery in Daisy Hill Hospital for the first time in 10 years and the reopening of our emergency department (ED), notwithstanding the issues around queueing experienced last night, are to be hugely celebrated.

Minister, I declare an interest, and I have been in touch with you before about this, as my aunt has had her life-changing operation postponed twice, just a matter of days before her operation. She is not the only one in that boat, as there are multiple women and men, waiting at home, who are scared that their operation is going to be, or has already been, postponed. What comfort or reassurance can you give them, Minister? What support has been provided to your Department from the Department of Finance to make sure that you have all the resources in place to ensure that nobody is waiting at home, that no more operations are postponed, and that the diagnostics are in place to ensure that there is not a future pandemic as a result of this pandemic?

Mr Swann: The Member articulates that sense of frustration, hurt and anxiety that many families across the province have been feeling since we had to cancel surgeries, diagnosis and screening programmes. However, it is not simply, at this moment, about throwing money at my Department. I need the nurses, staff and trained clinicians. One of the largest impacts that we have is that the more people we have going into ICU, the more need we have of anaesthetists, who are moving from theatres to support people who are being put onto ventilators. Highly skilled theatre nurses are then transformed and transposed to support additional ICU beds as well. Every ICU bed that we have to open and support through staff has that knock-on effect.

The Member mentioned the surgeries that are potentially going to take place in Daisy Hill Hospital, and that is where we look to our proactive and reactive service so that we start to utilise our footprint around the Province, no matter where it is. It used to be the case, when I came into this place, that the biggest cry was that patients would not travel; they always wanted the service on their doorstep. Patients are now willing to travel, as are our surgeons and nurses, but I really want to stop the travel to stop the spread and contamination of COVID-19 in this society. Doing that will allow me to release more of those front-line

and critical service health workers back to the jobs and the service delivery and the likes of the services for your aunt, which is where they should be.

Mr Chambers: Will the Minister update the House on cancer screening programmes?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for raising that point because it is one of the more challenging aspects, especially with regard to where we were in the first wave. The bowel, breast and cervical cancer-screening programmes were paused from mid-March to the end of June 2020 as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. All paused screening programmes have recommenced. The immediate priority is to clear the backlog of patients who are waiting for diagnostic procedures and to issue invitations to those whose screening opportunities were paused. This has been happening over the summer, and good progress has been made.

A key aim over the coming month is to develop a screening contingency plan, and that will outline the measures and steps that are necessary to maintain population screening during a resurgence of COVID over the months ahead. It is likely to take some time for screening services to return to pre-COVID levels, and, inevitably, the pace of rebuilding will be influenced by the progress of the pandemic.

The need to maintain social distancing in clinical settings, the implementation of enhanced infection control measures and the continued requirement for personal protective equipment will also present challenges for service restoration.

2.15 pm

Dealing with the pandemic continues to create additional pressures on health services. However, the recovery and restoration of screening services remain a priority. It is vital that anyone who has experienced any of the symptoms associated with early-stage cancer contact their doctor rather than waiting for a screening test.

Ms Bradshaw: Given how critical time is with cancer, does the Minister intend to use the independent sector more in the winter to bring down waiting lists and waiting times?

Mr Swann: We utilised the independent sector during the first wave, and it is my intention to do so again. The impact of COVID-19 on HSC's operating capacity and the significant reduction in productivity that resulted from that mean that HSC has continued to require access to the independent sector's capacity to deliver core services.

The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), on behalf of HSC, entered into contracts with three independent hospital providers from 1 April to 29 June. The contracts were agreed on a not-for-profit and full cost-recovery basis, and they provided trusts with full access to those independent sector hospital facilities. That arrangement ceased on 29 June as the independent sector moved to restart its services for privately funded patients.

Theatre capacity was prioritised for category 2 cancer patients from 29 June to 20 September. In addition, £12.1 million of non-recurring funding has been made available for 2021 for elective care and has been targeted in the first instance at patients with the highest clinical risk who are waiting for a diagnostic test, including those with suspected or confirmed cancer. In the main, that activity will be undertaken by the independent sector providers.

Mr Buckley: Data and evidence are important. The Minister may be aware that figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) show that non-COVID deaths in England soared between March and September, with diabetic deaths up by 86%, prostate cancer deaths up by 53% and breast cancer deaths up by 47%. Sadly and undoubtedly, COVID kills, but so does lockdown. Does the Minister have any data relating to the non-COVID impact on Northern Ireland?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his point and welcome him to the Health Committee, where he has, I think, taken over from Mr Easton.

The Member will be aware that, every Friday, the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) produces a weekly update on excess deaths, including those from cancer. NISRA is the official recorder of statistics in Northern Ireland, and, using the information recorded on death certificates, it provides a breakdown of additional deaths and their causes. NISRA provides that data to my Department.

Cataract Surgery: Waiting Lists

3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Health what steps he is taking to reduce the 48-month waiting time for cataract surgery. (AQO 937/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. Demographic pressures and a misalignment of demand against funded capacity have created challenges across many aspects of elective surgery, including the requirement for cataract surgery. It was for that reason that the Department moved to establish elective care centres, which are now called day-procedure centres. Working across traditional trust boundaries and acting as a resource for the region to improve access and reduce waiting lists, these centres will provide high-volume, non-complex surgical treatments and procedures.

Cataract surgery was identified as a prototype model, and three elective care centres for cataract surgery were established in December 2018, offering assessments and treatments at the Downe Hospital, the Mid-Ulster Hospital and the South Tyrone Hospital. The centres are designed to improve flow whilst maintaining quality and safety, with the efficiencies gained aimed at improving productivity and reducing waiting lists. Inevitably, COVID has impacted on that performance, although the centres remain open for business.

A combination of reduced capacity due to workforce shortages and infection control measures, including social distancing and the use of PPE, has impacted on the service delivery. In addition, the redeployment of theatre, medical and nursing teams, patient cancellations and the need for patient testing prior to surgery have further reduced performance delivery.

As a second COVID surge and associated winter pressures continue to have an impact on all areas of service delivery, the cataract day-procedure centres will continue to play their part in reducing waiting lists. It is anticipated that, where other elective surgeries may need to be downturned in acute hospital sites during the second surge, the day-procedure units will continue to act as a resource for the region.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. I am sure that he will agree with me that four years' waiting time for cataract surgery is totally unacceptable.

Mr Swann: I do. I have said that many times about the length of our waiting lists across all sectors in the health service. I said that when I took over as Minister. That is why it was important that New Decade, New Approach, pre-COVID, assigned £50 million to tackling waiting lists, and cataract services was one of those key priorities. COVID overtook that, but so did the underfunding of the health service over the past number of years, which left us in a position where we were seeing ever-increasing waiting lists due to an ever-decreasing availability of staff and a reduction in staff numbers.

Ms Sugden: I wrote to the Minister recently about clinical placements for optometrists in independent prescribing, and I understand that there is an issue with securing such placements across all the professions. Is he able to give me an update on that, and is there a way to take that forward? I believe that it could have an impact on waiting lists in a positive way.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. She wrote to me with a suggestion that was not about a complaint or what we are doing, but actually offered a solution or a different way to look at things. I know that her offer on behalf of that client body has been taken forward and is being advanced in the Department.

Mr McGrath: Does the Minister agree that the ability of the Downe Hospital to deliver cataract services is a fantastic success story? Will he undertake a quick review to see whether there are any additional cataract services that could be delivered on the site? The staff are willing and ready to deliver the service and, if it can be done, they would love to be able to do that for the people of the North.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member and welcome him to his usual place as the champion of the Downe Hospital. He never misses an opportunity in the House to extol the skill set and dedication of the staff, of which I am highly appreciative. As I said in an earlier answer, as we get into the second surge over the next couple of months we will continue to look at where we can deliver services safely. If the Downe Hospital's footprint is one that we can use, I am sure that it will be explored.

Ventilator Capacity

4. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health for an update on current ventilator capacity compared to March 2020. (AQO 938/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. Since March 2020, the critical care network has procured 180 intensive care ventilators and 24 advanced patient transport ventilators to supplement the existing devices in the treatment of the most sick patients. Of those orders, 124 ventilators have been received, allocated and commissioned for use across our trusts. The remaining 80 ventilators are awaited from the supplier, with the order due to be fulfilled by the end of this month. An additional 145 non-invasive ventilation devices have been procured for use by respiratory services in the region, along with 300 high-flow oxygen devices. On 6 October, I published individual trust surge plans alongside the Department's surge planning strategic framework. The regional inventory

of 348 invasive ventilation devices, which included the 80 ventilators that are expected by the end of October, exceeds the currently anticipated demand.

Whilst it is vital that we have the necessary ventilators and other equipment in place to meet the needs of patients, that equipment is unlikely to be a limiting factor in the provision of critical care to patients in Northern Ireland. The most considerable stress across the health and social care system comes from pressures on staff resources, including those staff contracting, or self-isolating because of, COVID. That is why there is no room for complacency and we must all play our part in the efforts to control the virus.

Mr Gildernew: I thank the Minister for his answer. I, too, would like to acknowledge the commitment and work of Alex Easton on the Health Committee, and I welcome Jonathan Buckley to the Committee. The situation today is that we have now had 624 deaths as a result of COVID. I want to pass on our condolences to each and every family that has lost a loved one as a result of the virus. I am acutely conscious that, as we stand here today, we are now at 95% occupancy rate in the hospital system and that we have only 16 ICU beds available. Given the importance of access to vital equipment, including ventilators and extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) machines, with all the adequately trained staff that are required to operate that equipment and to deliver that care, can the Minister outline how he intends to ensure accessibility to this vital equipment and care as we move into the second surge?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that point. It was a challenge. However, one of the inbuilt solutions that we produced, during the first wave, was the Nightingale facility at the Belfast City Hospital tower. During the first wave of COVID-19, detailed plans were developed to increase our ICU surge capacity at incremental stages, producing a regional model for those patients who needed intensive care and ventilation. It used the Belfast City Hospital tower and the regional ICU Nightingale facility. That will continue and has been stood up to be available during future stages.

The introduction of social distancing and other measures to control the spread of infection ensured that the number of patients in Northern Ireland using this facility did not get close to full capacity in the first wave. The ICU bed usage reached a peak of 96 occupied beds in total. That included 57 COVID-19 patients. However, maintaining services at that level was challenging for ICU staff and required significant redeployment from other services. During future surges, I will not hesitate to recommend proposals to the Executive on reinforcing control measures where necessary to ensure that the HSC does not become overwhelmed.

The revised regional ICU surge plan provides the ability to flex capacity to a maximum of 158 ICU beds. It is important to note that the level of staffing required to deliver that level of ICU capacity would be impossible to sustain for long and would have a major impact on other services, including complex elective surgery.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Minister, no matter how many ventilators you have on order or receive, it does not appear that you have enough trained staff to operate them. Have you asked for army

medical assistance, should that be necessary, in order to keep people alive on those ventilators during the worst of this wave?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. I have said in the House before that, when I need to, I will not hesitate to ask for help, no matter what source it comes from, as it would be a dereliction of my duty as Health Minister not to do that.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his answer. Given that we are at the bottom of the global league table for ICU capacity and that warnings were made prior to COVID-19, does the Minister agree with me that more needed to be done prior to COVID-19, and now, to increase our ICU capacity?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. I keep referring to the Nightingale facility at the Belfast City Hospital tower. When other places looked to build temporary hospitals, we utilised the footprint that we had. We utilised the staff that we had and we produced that on a regional basis. The surge capacity is still there in that facility to go up to 158 ICU beds incrementally. If we were not utilising those ICU beds for COVID-19 patients, we could be using them for something else or for somebody who needed elective surgery or who needed to use that facility. The fewer COVID-19 patients we have coming through, the more our service can do.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Allister. I make the Member aware that we have very limited time.

Mr Allister: Thank you. When this is over and it comes to reviewing how things went, will it include a review of how well, over previous years, the Department prepared for a pandemic? Will it include a truthful review of how many hospital beds, including ICU beds, were removed from our system over the years?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point. It is something that I have said in previous answers, even here today. It was the reduction of the staff — not the beds — who could maintain the beds and who could look after the patients who needed to utilise those beds.

This place has to be honest and open about what that review looks like and the questions that it asks. It needs to see what more we could do for our National Health Service. No matter how many people try to denigrate some of the service and some of our delivery, I maintain that the National Health Service that we have in Northern Ireland and the people who work in it is something that we all should be proud of and be behind.

2.30 pm

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

Schools: PHA Support

T1. **Ms Mullan** asked the Minister of Health whether he recognises the figure that fewer than 10 schools have required Public Health Agency (PHA) contact-tracing support for two or more incidents of COVID-19. (AQT 561/17-22)

Mr Swann: Some of the support mechanisms that the PHA put in place to support our schools and allow them to keep open and the collaborative approach between us

in the Health Department, the Department of Education and the Public Health Agency have demonstrated that, although the Education Minister reported that there were 1,500 positive cases, such joint working was a benefit and showed how Departments worked well in a short space of time to ensure that the schools could remain open and that we could support the staff and pupils who tested positive and who were contacted.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. That figure was reported by the Education Minister, but it does not reflect what I know to be the case in Derry. I contacted post-primary schools in the city and found that six of them had contacted the PHA 55 times between them, with 50 confirmed cases. They also reported to me that 1,242 pupils were self-isolating, yet I could not get that detail. Minister, can you tell me who is responsible for contact tracing in schools?

Mr Swann: A joint piece of work was done in which schools supported the contact-tracing programme within schools, supplemented by the Public Health Agency. The Public Health Agency, as far as I am aware, supplied information to the Department of Education and the Education Authority on the number of positive cases and the number of outbreaks, and that allowed the Education Minister to provide that information yesterday.

In regard to the specific details of how contact tracing works in schools, intensive work needs to be done during this two-week period to make sure that we provide a safe space for our schools to get back and support the principals and teachers who want to get back and educate our children in a safe environment.

COVID-19: Nationalist/Unionist Spread

T2. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister of Health whether there is any evidence to show that the virus is more likely to be spread in nationalist areas than it is in unionist areas. (AQT 562/17-22)

Mr Swann: That is not evidence that we hold in the Department. What we look at and provide is a breakdown of incidence per council area and now by postcode. We do not ask anybody who has contracted COVID-19 about their political or religious affiliations.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that retaining public confidence in such a crisis is essential and that, at times such as this, all Ministers should ensure that, when they speak in public, they do so on the basis of fact rather than generalisations?

Mr Givan: He did.

Mr Butler: I am asking the Minister.

Mr Swann: One of the things that we all have to do — [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order, Members. Just a wee second, Minister. I remind Members that everybody has to be treated with respect. There is to be no talking from a sedentary position. The Minister is on his feet. Have respect and let the Minister respond to the Member's question.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. The crucial point that he got to was that, for Northern Ireland to get back to where we were after

the first surge of COVID-19, we have to do it jointly. We have to do it as one society, one Assembly and one Executive. It is vital that the health message that is put out is consistent. Any weakening or undermining of that message gives succour to those who do not believe it, do not want to believe it or want to undermine it for the sake of undermining it. It is a vital message. We have to come together to support our health service and the front-line workers as they support patients who contract COVID. Our nursing staff, doctors and hospital porters do not care about the religion or political affiliation of their patients, and nor does COVID. The critical point that we need to get through to anyone listening is that the virus is no respecter of political persuasion, religious belief or economic or social background. As our party leader said, it is an equal opportunities killer.

COVID-19: Scientific Data

T3. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister of Health, in the light of the huge demand, whether he will provide the House and the wider public with the crucial, factual data regarding transmission spread across hospitality and other close-contact services, given the huge impact that lockdown and the restriction measures have had on livelihoods across Northern Ireland and the fact that it is only right that those whom we are asking to face the brunt of the restrictions be provided with the evidence that led to them. (AQT 563/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. This afternoon, there will be a section on my Department's website that publishes data and scientific evidence that we have received and that we have provided to the Executive. That will be supplemented and updated with a more detailed breakdown as time goes on.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for his answer. It is important that the House gets that information as soon as possible to help to inform the general public.

Does the Minister share the concerns of many working people across the country who fear the loss of their jobs and businesses and the knock-on effects on their mental, personal and physical well-being during the crisis?

Mr Swann: I do, and I do not think that that should even be questioned. I welcomed and highlighted it when the Executive unanimously endorsed the steps that we took on restrictions for four weeks and the extended two-week holiday for schools. It was a unanimous Executive decision because we recognised the difficulties that taking those steps and making those decisions had across Northern Ireland society, whether it was the impact of COVID-19 on our health service, the economy and even on social interactions among children and in wider society. The Executive did not take the decision lightly, but it was unanimous. The First Minister made a statement here last Wednesday on behalf of the Executive. I was in the Chamber to support her in making those recommendations because, as an Executive, we realised what had to be done. What we did last week has now been proven correct, and other areas are following us. We have seen the actions taken in the Republic of Ireland, in Wales and in large parts of England. I am sure that Scotland will shortly take steps in the same direction. What Northern Ireland cannot afford is what we see elsewhere across Europe. The Health Minister in Belgium has, I think, said that

coronavirus is now out of control in that country. As Health Minister here, I do not want to have to stand up and say that.

COVID-19 Regulations: Delay

T4. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister of Health to explain the regrettable delay behind the fact that the health protection regulations that govern the newest restrictions were commenced at 10.30 pm on Friday, four and a half hours later than they were due to come into effect, even though the First Minister had announced them two days previously. (AQT 564/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Member asks a valid question. I shall answer simply: the regulations supported a five-party agreement and plan that had come together earlier in the week. The implementation, drafting and detail of the regulations was, as anybody who has had experience of drafting regulations will know, more complicated, diverse and intricate than first envisaged because they were not a simple copy and paste of the first lockdown restrictions. They were more detailed, nuanced and targeted on the areas where, we thought, action needed to be taken.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, Minister. Information appeared on the nidirect and Department of Health websites that bowling alleys had to close as well as the other listed businesses. However, the statutory rules that were published on Friday night and the regulations published on Sunday night make no mention of that. Will the Minister put on record whether bowling alleys have to close as part of the new restrictions so that I can advise my constituents?

Mr Swann: My understanding is that the restrictions include bowling alleys, but I will get that in writing to the Member, so that she has it not just in Hansard but in writing.

COVID-19: Health Service Workforce

T5. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister of Health whether he is satisfied that we have the doctors, nurses, anaesthetists and wider workforce to deal with COVID-19 admissions, given that, in recent weeks, we have seen an increase in the number of patients admitted to hospitals and ICUs. (AQT 565/17-22)

Mr Swann: We have that workforce but only because we take it from elsewhere. It is not readily available. We cannot simply divert people from a standing stock of health service professionals who are waiting.

We have put out our workforce appeal again, asking anybody who holds those skill sets to come forward. They would be more than happily accepted into the workforce. We published that appeal a couple of weeks ago, and, so far, over 1,700 people have been successful in their application for work. Of those 1,700, nearly 900 have been appointed. They are deployed in the service, on standby or on bank jobs.

Mr Allen: As you highlighted, Minister, we are seeing an increase in hospital and ICU admissions. That puts pressure on the health service and impacts on other services. Do you agree that the appalling actions of some should not be a benchmark for wider society?

Mr Swann: I very much agree. I can say as much as I want from the Dispatch Box in that regard, but, when you speak

to someone who has suffered from COVID-19 or has lost someone to it, they give the most powerful testimony of the effect of the virus and its impact on our health service. One of the most moving and realistic stories of the experience of people who have had to utilise ICU and ventilation was a testimony given by the Member himself as someone who had experienced it and come through it. With his experience, he would not want anyone in Northern Ireland to have to go through that. That is especially the case with what is termed "long COVID" and the after-effects of infection.

COVID-19: Test-and-trace System

T6. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Health whether he has established an effective, fit-for-purpose COVID test-and-trace system, with adequate backward-tracing capacity, for the people of Northern Ireland. (AQT 566/17-22)

Mr Swann: The test-and-trace facility that we have in place is always subject to review and improvement. We introduced "Digital First" in the last number of weeks, which involves sending text messages to those who have tested positive. That was followed up by being able to do a self-certification using an on-site website. We have established the StopCOVID NI app, which puts out data as well. We have the ability to go back 48 hours. The Member's party leader and the health spokesperson have brought to our attention the usefulness of going back seven days, rather than 48 hours. We have run a pilot, and, as we strengthen the service that our test-and-trace facility provides, we look to introduce and embed that.

Mr Speaker: We have a minute left.

Mr Lyttle: Does the Health Minister accept that a failure to establish adequate backward-tracing capacity in the test-and-trace system costs Northern Ireland increased transmission and infection?

Mr Swann: I think that I have answered that. It is something that was raised by the Member's party leader and health spokesperson, and we have looked at going back not just 48 hours but seven days.

One of the challenges is people's ability to remember where they were seven days previously and whom they were in contact with. Those are the additional challenges for the programme as we expand backward-tracing. We saw that our online system is easier to use because you sit in front of a computer and can come back to it several times, rather than simply doing it through a single telephone call.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: Time is up. Members, please take your ease for a moment or two while we prepare the Chamber.

Infrastructure

Mr Speaker: We now move on to questions to the Minister for Infrastructure. Question 3 and topical question 9 have been withdrawn.

A1 Upgrade: Update

1. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the A1 upgrade. (AQO 950/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I recognise that many in the local community support the safety improvements that are being proposed along the A1 between Hillsborough roundabout and Loughbrickland. In particular, I am very aware of how important the A1 improvements are for the many people who have expressed their support for them, especially those who have lost loved ones.

A public inquiry into the A1 junctions phase 2 road improvement scheme was held from 11 March until 13 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. Although those site meetings were delayed by COVID-19 restrictions, they have now been completed. The inspector issued his report to the Department yesterday. My officials will require some time to consider fully the inspector's proposals and recommendations. When I have been apprised of the findings, I will consider them carefully and decide on the next steps for this important scheme. I am keen to progress the A1 junctions phase 2 road improvement project to the next stage as quickly as possible, once all the necessary statutory processes have been completed and the necessary funding has been secured.

Mr Boylan: I welcome the Minister's answer. She is well aware that many people who use the road daily are keen to have the improvements put in place, especially for road safety. Can she give the House any indication of when the scheme will commence to improve safety on the road?

Ms Mallon: I agree with the Member on the importance of road safety. The A1 is also important for connectivity, given its strategic importance. I assure him that I am keen to progress the scheme to the next stage as quickly as possible. The precise timescale for that will depend on the outcome of the public inquiry and consideration of the report. I recognise the road's importance. I met Mr and Mrs Heaney, who tragically lost their son, Karl, and gave them my commitment to move forward with the scheme as quickly as is practically possible, and I will keep Members updated.

Miss McIlveen: The safety of all road users should be a priority. The Minister will be aware of the work of the Motorcycle Action Group (MAG) in highlighting the hazard that wire rope-style crash barriers present to motorcyclists in the event of a collision with one. Will the Minister give a commitment to meet MAG, with a view to working with it to look at alternative barriers for schemes such as the A1?

Ms Mallon: I recognise the concern that motorcyclists have about wire rope barriers and that the issue exists in many countries. My Department is currently working to the standards that are applied across Europe. Impacts with safety barriers, of any type, represent a very small proportion of road collision statistics for motorcyclists. For all existing motorways and high-flow dual carriageways, my Department specifies concrete barriers for the central reserves as part of any road upgrades and when existing barriers need to be replaced. My officials are currently considering the ongoing maintenance costs for wire-rope safety barriers in comparison with non-tension systems, and this may change the way the Department specifies safety barriers in the future. I will be happy to meet the delegation and the Member.

Mr Beattie: My supplementary question has been asked. Thank you.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Minister, for your answers so far. Can you provide an update not just on the A1 but on the A5 and the A6 flagship projects, please?

Ms Mallon: Yes, and I thank the Member for her interest. The A6 project is progressing well. We had anticipated some impact and delay due to COVID, but construction has progressed very quickly on the site, and we are advancing. I was able to make a bid for capital money during the recent monitoring round.

The A5 was subject to a public inquiry. The report has been passed to my Department. My officials are giving the report careful consideration and obtaining legal advice before submitting the report to me to decide the next steps. Again, this is another strategic project that is of critical importance, not least, to address the regional imbalance in Northern Ireland.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her continued commitment to the long-awaited A1 upgrade project. How does she hope and plan to communicate the next stage of the project to the public, as that is very important?

Ms Mallon: I agree that there is huge interest in the project, not just inside the House but outside it. There is a great will and enthusiasm to see the project progress. As I have said, my Department received the report from the public inquiry just yesterday, and we are giving it careful consideration. I have asked my officials to ensure that any communications from my Department are maximised to reach members of the public as well as Members of the House who are also keen to see that project delivered.

Driving Tests: Backlog

2. **Mr McCann** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she intends to address the increasing backlog in driving test appointments. (AQO 951/17-22)

13. **Mr Stewart** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, subsequent to the reopening of online booking services for driving tests on 5 October, for her assessment of the backlog in applications from learner drivers with provisional licences. (AQO 962/17-22)

Ms Mallon: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 2 and 13 together.

The Driver and Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October, and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time, the DVA has not released any driving test slots beyond January 2021.

As Members will be aware, driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of COVID-19. Following that Executive decision, driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. Motorcycle lessons and tests are not affected by the new restrictions. The booking service is now closed, and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them on how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity, the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for the impacted

customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. The slots, when they are released, will also be available only to the impacted customers.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public-facing services, the COVID-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely, and it asks customers for their patience at this difficult time.

It is my priority to ensure that our staff and customers remain safe, and the DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Mr McCann: I thank the Minister for her answer to that question. Can she tell me in detail how many additional test slots the DVA is providing to address the enormous and growing backlog of driving test appointments?

Ms Mallon: I can confirm to the Member that, prior to the new restrictions and their impact on driving tests, we were working very hard to increase capacity. We are recruiting 27 extra examiners, three of whom have already been recruited. Twelve temporary and 12 permanent examiners are in the process of being recruited. We are offering driving tests on Saturdays and, while ensuring road safety, exploring the option of Sundays.

Mr Beggs: I am pleased that motorcycle tests will continue, given that the instructor follows in another vehicle. I welcome that. The Minister indicated that there will be no tests for this four-week period. Likewise, instructors will not be able to train students. What compensation package will be available to them? They do not have a rateable property and may not have fitted into many of the other schemes that have been presented to date.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his very important question. He is right about the impact of the restrictions on driving instructors. They have been asked to close their businesses, so there is an onus and a responsibility on the Executive to ensure that they receive financial support.

The Member is right to highlight that, in many instances, driving instructors will not qualify for the Department of Finance scheme because they do not have rateable premises. However, the Minister for the Economy is working on a hardship scheme that will include businesses that have been affected by closure. My understanding is that the scheme will include those businesses and the self-employed, who are also impacted because their business relies very much on businesses that have been forced to close as a result of our restrictions.

Ms Bunting: Will the Minister confirm whether employees who have had a dual role, as driving examiner and vehicle tester, will now move back to vehicle testing to help with the number of MOTs being conducted?

Ms Mallon: There are 37 driving examiners. During this period, some will continue to conduct motorcycle tests, and others will be redeployed to other areas and duties,

as she highlighted. Some will be offered the opportunity to take annual leave before the services resume.

Ms Hunter: I am grateful that the Minister has provided clarity on the Executive's decision to add driving instructors to the list of close contacts. As a result, driving tests have had to cease to protect public health. When will the Minister's Executive colleagues bring forward support for the industry?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The Minister for the Economy and her officials are working very hard on this matter. It was discussed at the Executive on Friday, and I understand that the Minister and her officials have been working diligently since then to try to bring forward a scheme that will set out very clearly the eligibility criteria that will ensure that people who were excluded previously are not excluded as we learn to cope with the next four weeks and the new restrictions imposed by the Executive.

Compensation Claims

4. **Mr Allen** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the compensation claims paid by her Department, due to road or street defects, since 2015. (AQO 953/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Before I address the Member's specific question, it is important to explain that, although my Department has a statutory duty under article 8 of the Roads Order to maintain public roads, there is no automatic entitlement to compensation for road users. My Department investigates and defends public liability claims, with every case turning on its own facts. In cases where my officials consider the Department can raise a legal defence, claims will be repudiated.

Turning to the Member's specific question, I can confirm that, during the six full financial years from 2014-15 to 2019-2020, £13.1 million in roads-related public liability compensation was paid in claims for vehicle damage, personal injury and property damage. During the same period, the Department received 18,452 public liability compensation claims and paid compensation in 10,453 cases. However, I wish to make it clear that claims received in one financial year are not always concluded within that financial year. Therefore, the figures that I have provided for cases where compensation was paid out, as well as the compensation amount, will include details for claims received in prior financial years.

It has been independently established that, at today's prices, some £143 million is needed to maintain the structural integrity of Northern Ireland's road network. However, due to budget constraints, that amount has not been available over the period in question.

Mr Allen: I thank the Minister for her answer. The Minister gave a startling figure, and I appreciate her referring to it. Minister, what is the Department's average response time to a reported defect? Does the Department hold any information on claims made in the window between a defect being reported and repaired?

3.00 pm

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that, during that period, the breakdown of compensation payments was as follows: £2 million was paid out for vehicle damage; £10.7 million was paid out in compensation for personal injury; and £410,000

was paid out for property damage claims. The average timescale for a decision in respect of vehicle damage is four months. For personal injury and property damage, the average waiting time for a decision is six months.

Mr Clarke: Given the substantial amount of money that is being spent on compensation, has your Department done any work to find out about the recurring costs of damage in the same areas, as opposed to just providing that global figure of £13 million? Many of us will know that there are accident black spots and particular defects on roads that still go unchecked even after compensation has been paid.

Ms Mallon: For investment in our roads and structural maintenance, my officials use and apply a matrix that is to do with the volume of traffic and defects on a road. We will never have a situation where the Department is not in receipt of compensation claims. The challenge here is that we have systematically underinvested in our road structure, and, unfortunately, this is one of the outworkings of that. I will continue to make representations to the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues to ensure that we can get the funding that we need to bring our roads up to a much better and much more improved standard.

Mr Muir: The Minister's responses are perhaps reflective of an endemic lack of investment in roads maintenance. Can she outline why only £1 million for additional roads maintenance was bid for in the October monitoring round? I have a list the length of my arm of roads in the North Down constituency that require repair and maintenance, and yet people are being told to wait.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. To my recollection, in the October monitoring round, I made a capital bid for £5.5 million, and just over £4 million of that was for structural maintenance. I can clarify those figures, and if they are not the most up-to-date figures, I can provide you with the revised figures. Please be assured that, where there is any opportunity to bid for additional moneys that I can ensure will be spent, I will continue to do that and to make those representations to Executive colleagues.

Ms Kimmins: Compensation figures suggest that my area of Newry and the surrounding areas are among those with the highest number of claims, suggesting that the roads there have the worst defects. Can the Minister outline how she intends to address the issues in the worst-affected areas?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. In this year's annual budget, I allocated £75 million towards structural maintenance, which was in line with last year. I also created a £10 million rural roads fund, because I very much recognise that our rural roads are under pressure and that we need to do more to try to improve them. I assure the Member that I will continue to make representations to secure the necessary funding so that her constituency and other constituencies can see the significant road improvements that they need and deserve.

NSMC Transport Sectoral Meeting

5. **Ms S Bradley** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) on transport. (AQO 954/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The NSMC transport sectoral meeting on Wednesday 7 October was conducted via videoconference

due to current COVID restrictions. Eamon Ryan TD, Irish Transport Minister, Gordon Lyons MLA, as accompanying Minister, and I attended the meeting. I will make a statement on the meeting in the Assembly on 2 November, but I can report that it was hugely positive, and a lot of progress was made.

I can confirm that a number of issues were discussed and agreed at the meeting. These included the implications of Brexit for our island. An agreement was reached on continued cooperation on transport issues in the coming months. Our response to COVID-19 in relation to transport services and operations was discussed, as was the latest EU funding position, including the potential loss of some opportunities due to Brexit and the implications for communities here and our shared New Decade, New Approach commitments.

Importantly, we agreed that the high-speed rail feasibility study would be extended to Derry and Limerick. Minister Ryan and I took that decision because we recognise that the north-west has, for too long, suffered from underinvestment in rail. We are both committed to addressing regional imbalance across the island. We also reiterated our commitment to progressing the A5, the Narrow Water bridge, renewed air services and cross-border greenways.

During the meeting, I also raised the issue of the withdrawal of the Bus Éireann service between Dublin and Belfast. Minister Ryan and I have held a number of bilateral meetings, and we continue to engage positively on how we can work together collaboratively to deliver for citizens and communities across our island.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Minister for her clear commitment to the Narrow Water bridge project. In particular, I thank her for visiting Warrenpoint and meeting the Narrow Water bridge community network. What discussions has the Minister had with the Irish Government on progressing this much needed and highly significant project, not just for south Down but for the whole island of Ireland?

Ms Mallon: As the Member rightly says, I recently met her and representatives from the Narrow Water bridge community network. I know the local passion that her late father had for this project, which she has, and I know that those right across the local community share that passion for this transformative project. I assure her that I share that passion, and all my conversations to date with the Irish Government have been positive about delivering together on this all-island, New Decade, New Approach commitment. At the NSMC, and separately, I have engaged with Minister Ryan on progressing this important project. We will be working closely together in the next few months, and I will keep Members updated on progress.

Dr Aiken: One of the issues that the Minister will have discussed is the importance of North/South communications and trade and the vital need for the York Street interchange to be built as quickly as possible. Can the Minister reflect on where we are with the York Street interchange and on the importance that it has for all-island and, indeed, all-islands communications and logistics?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Yes, the York Street interchange project is critically important. It is a strategic road project, but it also presents an opportunity to have a properly future-proofed design to ensure that it

is inclusive of the communities that live around it and that not only does it meet the objectives that we have as an Executive but it meets the objectives of a Belfast agenda. It is also an important way forward in tackling the climate emergency. The Member will know that I initiated a short, sharp external review to make sure that we were future-proofing the project, and I hope to receive that report after engagement with stakeholders around December time.

Ms C Kelly: Minister, considering the South's recent budget announcement for funding North/South projects, can we expect an acceleration of the A5 construction process and for two phases to commence simultaneously?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I very much welcomed the announcement by the Irish Government of €500 million for infrastructure projects, as it is a huge opportunity for greater collaborative working and to see real delivery on the ground. The Member will know that the A5 was subject to a public inquiry. The report has been submitted, and my officials are carefully considering its findings while obtaining legal advice. When they make the submission to me, and I can give it my consideration, I will decide on the next steps. I want to reassure the Member that I recognise the importance of the A5 project. Subject to the completion of all the statutory processes, I will be keen to move on it as quickly as possible. I will, of course, look to the Irish Government to play their part, given their financial commitment to the project.

Road Network: Congestion

6. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the three most congested points in the road network that have been identified by her Department. (AQO 955/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I recognise the need for improved interconnectivity between our towns and key gateways and a desire to reduce congestion at key points. The term "most congested" is a subjective one and will often be dependent on the season, the time of day and ongoing events. As such, it is not possible to compile a ranked list of the worst congestion points. I am mindful, however, that we cannot simply look to build our way out of congestion by creating more and more roads. Rather, I am determined to offer real alternatives to reduce our dependence on private car use and reduce emissions, including a drive towards modal shift through improved public transport and active travel options.

That does not mean that certain parts of our road network cannot benefit from major works projects. In line with the Executive's commitment to flagship schemes in their Programme for Government and, indeed, the British and Irish Governments' commitments in New Decade New Approach, my Department is advancing major road improvement schemes on the A5, A6, and at the York Street interchange to alleviate congestion and increase journey time reliability. In addition, major works on the A1 are being developed to improve road safety. Those strategically important schemes have been identified as having the ability to deliver for communities and to help to address regional imbalance while supporting connectivity and economic growth.

Mr Chambers: I thank the Minister for her response. I think that if a survey were done of motorists and road

users, commercial and private, they would probably identify the York Street junction as the busiest junction in Northern Ireland. It causes delay to hauliers, and standing traffic causes a lot of pollution in the area. I know that the planning process for the interchange has been completed. However, the Minister has paused development, and she referred to that in her answer to the previous question. Can she suggest a timescale for when that link between the M1, M2 and my North Down constituency will be built?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I know that he has huge interest in the project. As I said, it is a strategic road improvement scheme that will provide a fully grade separated interchange to replace the existing at-grade signal-controlled junction of the A12, Westlink, M2 and M3. I recognise the strategic importance of that project. Its inclusion in the New Decade, New Approach agreement is further indication of its significance to economic and societal well-being, and I am determined to see it delivered.

In advance of the next stage of the scheme and in line with good practice, as I said, I have commissioned that short, sharp external review. It is being informed by stakeholders and specialists to ensure that any scheme is fit for purpose, and it will be completed by the end of the year. We will then move through the statutory processes. I am keen to move this project forward in the right way, ensuring that it is the right project, fit for purpose and future-proofed. I am keen to see delivery of it as quickly as possible for a number of the reasons that the Member highlighted.

Mr Sheehan: Air pollution is a serious issue in the North, particularly in Belfast, where one in every 24 deaths is linked to long-term exposure to air pollution. Given the seriousness of that and that transport is massively responsible for a lot of that air pollution, what is the Department's overarching strategy to deal with air pollution and to make cities cleaner, healthier places to live in?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. My starting point is that everybody has the right to not have the air that is around them polluted. There is a social justice element to that. I can think even of my own constituency of North Belfast. Inner-city parts of North Belfast have the greatest levels of air pollution and, by no coincidence, the highest level of respiratory illnesses among children and, basically, residents of all ages. I agree with the Member that it is an absolute priority.

I am trying to address it through a number of ways: park-and-ride services to reduce private car use; promoting active travel, particularly in and around our schools, with young people; and looking at the development of quiet streets in those inner-city neighbourhoods so that the area is not dominated by vehicles but is actually for children and play. The Member will be aware that Translink also has a strategy on zero-emission and low-emission buses. I have given a significant financial contribution to that in my allocation this year. I am very keen to do what we can to promote active travel and greater use of our public transport network. I am also keen to work with ministerial colleagues, including the Environment Minister, as we try to improve the air quality of all our citizens.

Mr Speaker: There are two minutes left. I call Pat Catney.

Mr Catney: Park-and-rides are one way to remove congestion. The Minister has already done great work to

bring forward new services. Can she give an update on her consideration of a park-and-ride at Moira?

Ms Mallon: I agree with the Member that park-and-rides have an important role to play in tackling traffic congestion, promoting cleaner air and tackling the climate emergency. That is why I was delighted to announce £2.8 million in investment in park-and-rides earlier this year.

The Member is a real champion for Moira. I know that he is determined to see that park-and-ride facility delivered. I assure him that I am too. I hope to be in a position very soon to announce another tranche of funding in the coming months. Yes, subject to all processes being satisfied, my hope is that Moira can be included to help to ensure that his constituents have access to cleaner, greener travel.

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

3.15 pm

Infrastructure Projects: Dublin Government Funding

T1. **Mr Sheehan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, having listened to her answer about funding from the Dublin Government for infrastructure projects and agreeing that that commitment should be honoured, specifically on the construction of the A5, whether, following the Dublin Government's announcement about North/South projects, we have been given an indication of when that funding will be available (AQT 571/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. As he rightly points out, New Decade, New Approach is the basis on which all parties are around the Executive table. We signed up to it in good faith. The agreement contains a number of commitments that need to be honoured: commitments from the Irish Government, the British Government and the Northern Ireland Executive.

I welcomed the announcement of the €500 million, and I am keen to work with colleagues across the island to see delivery on that. I will push through on infrastructure in my engagement at the North/South Ministerial Council meetings and in my individual engagements with Minister Ryan and the Taoiseach. I am sure that that is the same approach that will be adopted by all our ministerial colleagues.

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Minister for that. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. On the subject of all-island connectivity, will the Minister comment on the recent North/South Ministerial Council and specifically on whether the indefinite suspension of the Bus Éireann service between Dublin and Belfast got a mention?

Ms Mallon: In my answer to a question from Sinéad Bradley, I indicated that I had raised the issue of Bus Éireann. Bus Éireann is a commercial service, and it has announced its intention to cease services on 15 November. I am committed to maximising public transport, ensuring that we have all-island connectivity and, in particular, to ensuring that people are able to access public transport, North and South. I am, therefore, working with Translink to see what we can do not only to ensure the protection of the services that we provide but to explore what opportunities there may be for growth. I am due to engage in a number

of bilaterals with the Finance Minister in the coming weeks and hope to discuss the matter further with him.

Driving Tests

T2. **Ms Sugden** asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there is an opportunity to bring driving tests forward sooner, given that, in a previous answer, she said that she will try to facilitate driving tests for those people who had to cancel and rebook during the restriction period and she plans to look at cancellations, albeit that there could potentially be a three-month wait for some people who might have been doing a test today. (AQT 572/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I agree that this is a hugely frustrating situation for learner drivers and driving instructors. The Executive did not take this decision lightly. We were already at a difficult starting point. It is a high-demand service that was closed for five to six months, but we are trying to minimise disruption. We will bring additional slots online through November and December, and, as I said, we are recruiting 27 new examiners. We are also looking to see whether we can enhance testing at weekends, subject to road safety conditions. I am also keen that we try to minimise the disruption to this group of learner drivers. That is why the slots that will be opened in February will be exclusively for those candidates and pupils who have had their test cancelled during this four-week period.

I apologise to learner drivers and driving instructors. I do not want to see them in this situation, but we are in a pandemic. It is a public-facing service, and it has been impacted. I want to do what I can to ensure the safety of all involved and to get the service back up and running as quickly as possible.

Ms Sugden: I appreciate the Minister's attention to the matter, and I see that she is trying to bring things forward as quickly as possible. I am also glad that she is thinking outside of a nine to five, Monday to Friday week. We need to do that across all Civil Service and public-sector services. I want to go back to the question on providing financial support for driving instructors. All MLAs, including my constituency colleague Cara Hunter, have been inundated on the matter. Does the Minister have any role in supporting the Minister for the Economy in bringing forward such a scheme so that we can ensure that driving instructors will get financial support, hopefully by the weekend?

Ms Mallon: When the matter was discussed in the Executive meeting on Friday, I assured the Economy Minister of my support by offering my officials, and I followed up on that assurance in writing. I am mindful of the fact that the Department for the Economy is under immense pressure. We have information relating to driving instructors that I would be willing to share. I am keen to work with all Executive colleagues to ensure that the driving instructors get the financial support that they deserve, given that it is the Executive's restrictions that have closed their businesses.

Transport Sector: Financial Assistance

T3. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on action that is being taken to provide financial assistance to the transport sector, including coach and taxi operators and hauliers. (AQT 573/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. From the onset of the pandemic, I have said consistently that I do not have the powers to create financial hardship schemes. I was not saying that to be obstructive. I was saying it because it was the truth. That fact was recognised when the First Minister and deputy First Minister wrote to me to say that they were considering giving me new powers under the Financial Assistance Act.

Following that, I have engaged closely with the sectors. They have worked with my officials in providing the evidence required by the legislation, which has to determine that exceptional circumstances apply. I set a deadline of 6 October for receipt of that evidence. The sector asked for an extension, which we granted because we want to make sure that we have robust evidence. The extension was until Friday past. I met the First Minister and deputy First Minister yesterday. My intention is to write to them this week to set out the exceptional circumstances, while my officials are actively considering what schemes we can bring forward as required.

I am mindful that people in those sectors were excluded from previous schemes and are experiencing real financial hardship. I am committed to doing what I can, as quickly as possible, to make sure that they get financial assistance. I am as frustrated as them that they have had to wait several months. My view is that we could have included them in some previous schemes. However, we are where we are, and I will do what I can to help them as quickly as possible.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her answer. I have two points. First, I believe that some coach operators have offered up plans and solutions, and those need to be looked at. There will not be a perfect answer for everybody in the industry, and we should not wait until we have the perfect answer. We need to deliver for them and deliver for them now.

Secondly, can you give us a timeline of when they will get financial assistance? I accept that you needed the special powers, but am I not right in saying that the Finance Minister used those special powers to turn around within days financial assistance for those in Derry who came under restrictions just two weeks ago?

Ms Mallon: You are right in respect of the Finance Minister, but he had an existing scheme that was, in essence, straightforward because it relied on Land and Property Services (LPS) to identify businesses of rateable value.

The haulage sector, the bus and private-operator sector, and the taxi sector are diverse. You have the self-employed and companies with multiple employees, so they are two very different schemes. You are right to say that private bus and coach operators provided good analysis and ideas for schemes. In fact, those are the basis on which my officials are working.

I am not in a position to give a definitive timescale now because people need honesty. We need to be open and honest in our engagement with them and in the management of their expectations. My officials were in contact with them as recently as last night, and we will work as quickly as possible to get the money out, because we recognise that time is of the essence.

Derry to Belfast Railway

T4. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, after stating that he very much welcomes the fact that we finally have a Minister who will include Derry and the north-west, for an update on her work with Into the West to get the work on phase 3 of the Derry to Belfast line, which was halted by her predecessor, Chris Hazzard, back on track, particularly because she mentioned her work with her counterpart Minister Ryan on moving forward all-island rail. (AQT 574/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. In December 2016, the then Infrastructure Minister, Chris Hazzard, announced that the planned phase 3 works were not to be carried out within the Budget period 2017-2021 but would remain on Translink's longer-term infrastructure strategy. However, in line with my commitment to improve connectivity with the north-west, I am determined to bring that project back on track. That is why I announced, on 10 June, that I have made funding available for an updated feasibility study for phase 3 of the Derry/Coleraine rail line. While an updated feasibility study is necessary after almost 10 years of delay, I am fully committed to getting the work done at pace and to making progress for the people of the north-west, who have waited too long for action to address regional imbalance and better connection for them as a community.

Mr Durkan: Thank you for that positive answer, Minister. It will be very well received in my constituency. Is there any update on the feasibility study out of the positive discussions that have been ongoing?

Ms Mallon: Last month, I held a second and very constructive meeting with representatives of the rail lobby group Into the West. Following my request to Translink for it to re-examine the timeline for completion of the feasibility study and associated business case, I am pleased to announce that the timeline has now been reduced by six months and the work should therefore be completed in early 2022. I will, of course, continue to do all that I can to make sure that we continue to move forward with the project at pace.

Arc21: Planning Application

T5. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for Infrastructure how we are getting on with the decision-making process around Arc21's "RHI 2" incinerator at Hightown. (AQT 575/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He never misses an opportunity. My response, as it has been before, is that all planning applications have to be processed following the right statutory processes. When those processes are completed, and planning officials have fully considered them, a recommendation will come up to me. As planning Minister, I will ensure that all the statutory processes are followed for all applications on which I have to take decisions.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her response. We will continue to spar on this for a very long time and until "RHI 2" is put where it belongs: nowhere.

There is a significant issue here that I would like the Minister to consider. Will she consider commissioning an independent review of the business case from Arc21, bearing in mind the disquiet among people in Northern Ireland over the renewable heat incentive (RHI) scheme

and, indeed, the renewables obligation (RO) scheme? We do not want to find ourselves in a position in which, yet again, we are subsidising something that will not support the people of Northern Ireland.

Ms Mallon: The Member will be aware that, as the Minister with responsibility for planning, I have very clear processes to follow. I will, of course, fully consider any applications that come before me.

Mr Speaker: I call Colin McGrath.

Mr McGrath: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. *[Interruption.]* I ask the Minister for an update —.

Mr Speaker: Sorry, Mr McGrath. Members, have a wee bit of respect. A Member is on his feet.

Flood Alleviation Scheme: Newcastle

T6. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the flood alleviation scheme that is required in Newcastle after the dreadful flooding that took place there in August. (AQT 576/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. Having gone down and been with residents and having seen the devastation and damage caused by the flooding, I gave a commitment to the residents that I will do everything that I can to see the flood alleviation scheme accelerated. Having been there too, the Member will be aware of that. Work is ongoing. We are moving to the procurement of contractors. Officials are working to a timeline in which construction will begin in early 2021. As I have said to officials and elected representatives there, I have asked my officials to ensure that everything that can be done is being done to accelerate this project.

Mr McGrath: I welcome those comments. As the Minister said, we were there that day and saw the devastation that was caused to people's houses, gardens and streets. Much of that devastation occurred because this work has not taken place. It has been lying around for many years waiting to be delivered. I ask the Minister to reiterate the personal commitment that was given to those residents on that day that the scheme will be delivered and that as soon as it can start, it will start. That is what people want to hear.

Ms Mallon: I very much appreciate that, when your home has been flooded, you will not be satisfied by warm words. As Minister, I will be judged on my actions when it comes to this project. I have given a personal commitment to it. I have asked my officials to give me regular updates on it. I have sent a very clear message to my officials that I want the scheme to be accelerated. There were land issues, which we are working to resolve very quickly. The Member will be aware that we also set up a community resilience group in the area so that we can work collectively to try to protect homes until we get to a point at which we have the flood alleviation scheme in place to provide the prevention measures required.

Mr Speaker: I call Joanne Bunting. There will not be time for a supplementary.

Ms Bunting: I will bundle them together. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

DFI Roads: Response Times

T7. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that she will know from previous experience that the standard response time to elected representatives from DFI Roads is 28 days, and that she may also be aware that, when a reminder is sent to chase the response, a further 28 days is added to the tally, and further given that some issues are urgent and some are time-bound, whether she has considered, or will consider, a dedicated email address or telephone number for elected representatives to allow them to pursue matters of urgency in a more efficient and effective manner. (AQT 577/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. I receive mixed feedback on that, and a number of Members, across the House, have told me that they receive a very effective and efficient response. If Members feel that they are not getting a satisfactory response, I encourage them to contact my private office, and I will look into it. I will take the issue that Member has raised away and consider it carefully, but if you are not getting a satisfactory response, please contact me directly through my private office.

3.30 pm

Dr Aiken: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like to apologise for chuntering from a sedentary position. I may have sounded a bit like an honourable Member from South Belfast, but I apologise profusely.

Mr Speaker: I thought that you sounded like a Member from South Antrim *[Laughter.]* Anyway, thank you very much for that point of order.

I ask Members to take their ease.

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

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 3) Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill [NIA Bill 09/17-22] be agreed. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Newton: I want to begin with an apology to my colleague Mr Paul Givan, who, I understand, I referred to as Mr Paul Girvan. As we know, Paul Girvan is in another place, so I apologise to Mr Givan.

Mr Durkan: You should be apologising to Mr Girvan. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Newton: In the debate, Andy Allen asked a question as I was talking about the Minister's initiative to tackle underachievement. He, very rightly, asked about housing and whether it was a factor in underachievement. Indeed, I would make the point that, as the Minister develops the initiative on underachievement, I believe that two things will come out of it. I say to the Minister of Finance that we need to address urgently the issue of poor-quality and overcrowded housing, not just in my constituency but where it exists across Northern Ireland. Not to do so would be shameful for the future.

The work on underachievement will also require a need to work in partnership with the Health Department, and I believe that that will be in the report of the expert group on underachievement that the Minister has established.

My specific experience is around family intervention teams (FITs): helping families who are finding it difficult to cope, for whatever reason, and children who are finding it difficult to gain the benefit of education. Teachers are spending more and more time on social issues than on education. In that respect, Minister, I believe that tackling underachievement needs a partnership approach.

Budget line A-19 shows that the Budget will support the Middletown Centre for Autism. The Education Committee is aware of the major problems that parents have experienced when having children assessed. Assessment was a long process that frustrated families. We are investing — I cannot remember the figure — in Middletown, but the Education Authority needs to invest further in the diagnosis of and support around autism.

One of the Committee's first informal meetings was with a leadership group of principals from special educational needs schools. It will come as no shock to the Minister that I came away from the meeting feeling quite emotional about the work that they were doing and the circumstances in which some were having to do it. Even though some schools were in fairly modern buildings, the increasing number of pupils meant that they had outgrown them, and facilities such as store rooms had been changed into classrooms. I welcome the work that is being done on special educational needs. However, that is another area that deserves and needs investment.

It is very difficult when you have lost your momentum from the morning session to come back with the same momentum in the afternoon, but it is my intention to finish

with this point. Emerging nations and economies across the world recognise the need to be educated, for the sake of the economy, their people and the health of their people. In developing countries, across the board, primary education tends to be the number one investment priority. Many highly skilled teachers from Northern Ireland are working in schools in developing countries, and, in many cases, they are much better rewarded there than they would be in Northern Ireland. That indicates the value of people who are from here. They could make a very positive contribution to the holistic education and wealth of Northern Ireland, and they are out there doing that. That is not a criticism; in many ways, it is a compliment.

We have got to recognise that education is not just about reading, writing and arithmetic; it is about much more than that. It is not about the cost of education; it is about us investing in education. Matthew O'Toole talked this morning about the need for the Budget to not just be looked at annually and said that there would be much better financial planning with a two-, three- or four-year cycle. I wholeheartedly agree with that, because the various Departments will then know what to expect further down the line, rather than just this annual cycle — in fact, we are not even in an annual cycle at this stage, but generally speaking — of investment.

Obviously, I support the Budget, with all the caveats and requests that I have made over that short period.

Mr McHugh: Whenever one thinks about Budgets, one immediately tends to think of measures that ask us to tighten the belts. Whilst this Bill is not in the same context as other Budget Bills, it is worth reminding ourselves that this is not the time for austerity. I highlighted yesterday the need for funding to be delivered to industry, to education, to meet the needs of our more deprived citizens and, in particular, to our health service. Alarmingly, it was announced today that our health service is almost at saturation point, with 1,700 staff off because of COVID.

In the past, our services have suffered from austerity measures, as the Minister stated himself. Those measures were implemented by successive Tory Governments after broken promises from the same Tory Governments. It is at a time like this that one can identify the benefit of the ability to control our own Budget. We should have the power to borrow or, indeed, the power to raise our own taxes. As a legislature, we should take control of our own finances. In many ways, we would be much better placed to handle many of the problems and difficulties that we face if we were in a position to do that.

Many other Members have noted their areas of concern, maybe ones that they have raised at different times, and I would like to diverge for a second into one area of concern that I have. This is an opportune time, with this new Budget, to seriously address those who have fallen through the net. That is a term that we often use, but yet and all they still seem to be there and, from March through to today, they do not seem to have been provided for adequately. I think of a free local newspaper in my area that operates from a private dwelling and whose workers are self-employed. That business depends on advertising, which is now greatly reduced as a result of businesses closing down, for its revenue and is unable to avail itself of any current grant. It is units like that that provide a community service and deserve our support. I am sure that there are many similar types of unit that

are in the same situation. I hope that those responsible for designing the schemes that do not meet the needs of such businesses will make an effort to ensure that they are brought under the umbrella of support.

Yesterday, I noted that the virus knows no borders or boundaries. I note that, today, the Ibec-CBI NI Joint Business Council released a statement on the growing importance of collaboration, North and South, not only to combat the virus but to address the collective challenges in our economies; collaboration in relation to connectivity, the environment and investment, especially in the face of Brexit, should there be a deal or not.

Given the statements on the news last night, it seems that there is movement, slowly but surely, in the direction of a deal. It would be better for all our citizens that a deal is reached before they get to the stage of a crash-out, which is of benefit to absolutely no one.

3.45 pm

Finally, I would like to reiterate the comments of my colleague, Colm Gildernew, this morning when he highlighted areas of social deprivation that required continuing and additional support, as they are the areas with the highest levels of contagion of the virus. While I accept that there are lies, damned lies and statistics, I suggest that therein — social deprivation — is a much more reasonable explanation for higher rates of infection than that offered by others. On that basis, resources should be applied to those areas, not only to attack the virus but to ensure that deprivation is addressed.

In Irish, we have a seanfhocal, which is a proverb. A proverb reflects the wisdom of a race or people. There is a seanfhocal that, I am sure, people in here have heard of, and it was mentioned on television last night:

“Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireas na daoine.”

It means, “In one another’s shadow, we all survive”. That is as true today as it was when it was first stated as a seanfhocal. We live in one another’s shadow, and we truly depend on one another. We are in this together, and we hope that our Budget will embrace all our people and, in particular, all those in need.

Ms Armstrong: I start by thanking the Minister and his staff for what must have been a very interesting year working on budgets, since every week brought new amounts of money to their table. The Budget comes during COVID-19, and we can say with certainty that no sector, Department or family has been left untouched but that certain groups will bear a disproportionate impact of the virus. Unfortunately, this Budget will not address that.

One of things that I have noticed since joining the Communities Committee — the Infrastructure Committee is happy that I have shifted to Communities — is that we are failing young people under the age of 25. I refer particularly to labour market interventions. The Executive received Barnett consequentials of £6·116 million of resource DEL in 2020-21 to support the Communities Jobstart programme, which was announced on 8 July and is due to commence in November, only a few days away.

The Minister confirmed that she had bid for £4·8 million for labour market interventions in 2020-21 but, to date, had received no Executive allocation. Her Department is

now seeking to manage that pressure internally through reprioritisation and the reallocation of funds. She intends to make a further bid in the January monitoring round for any pressure that remains in her Department for that matter through to 31 March.

I would like to draw everyone’s attention to a very interesting Ulster University report, entitled ‘Labour market implications of COVID-19’. It confirms that one in four say that COVID-19 is impacting on their household finance; 75% say that they face reduced income. Ulster University estimates that 258,000 people have been furloughed or laid off — 30% of all those employed here. People who work in the food sector, in retail, in elementary admin and services have experienced the most severe impact. Furlough saved their jobs, but it comes to an end on 31 October.

There will be a huge upsurge in applications for universal credit. Those most affected are people under the age of 25 who work in those areas. Thirty-six per cent of people who are employed in the accommodation and food sectors are under 25. Under-25s represent one tenth — 12% — of the total employment in Northern Ireland. Therefore, without a commitment to labour market interventions, we are leaving a generation of young people without a job or any hope of getting one for some time to come.

This so-called scarring effect will hurt us for a long time. We may see young people moving away from Northern Ireland because there are no options here for them. Young people and the least well off are more likely to lose jobs and to suffer from reduced income during this COVID crisis. It is worth noting that 57% of those furloughed are men and 43% are women. We need to consider the age profile of those who have been furloughed or who have lost their job. While I mentioned the under-25s, we have to consider that the apprenticeship scheme that has been brought forward by the Economy Minister needs to extend to older people too, because that is an age group of people who are losing jobs and who will not be employed again unless we give them support.

Departments have received a huge amount of money. There is a huge amount of money for the Department of Finance to work through this year, but I have to ask this: is there any headroom? I know that we have not seen the October monitoring round so far, but will all the uncommitted amounts of money that have been given out be spent by each of the Departments? Will there be losers? The losers seem to be the under-25s and those over-55s who will lose their job as a result of the impact of COVID on our economy.

We need to support the so-called scarred youth. We need to support our unpaid carers, who are at breaking point at this stage. We need to support house building in order to meet the growing list of people who do not have a home. Short-term investment in Communities is needed in order to fund the 900 staff that will have to be taken on to address the number of universal credit applications that are just about to hit the Department.

We need investment in real-time monitoring. It is critical for us to understand the impacts. We need to plan ahead for the issues that may be coming because of COVID. For example, has anyone here thought to look at their pension fund and at how much the investment has been hit because of COVID? There are a lot of people in our

community who are citizens who have worked all their life and paid into a pension fund and who may now find that it has been impacted because of investments that have been hurt as a result of the global economic crisis. That will be an important determinant of when they can retire.

I do not think that there is any safety net in this Budget, but I think that there is headroom. Health, for instance, has £600 million set aside. None of us in the House would deny Health money, but there is very little time left until the end of March. If any Department has any money that they can give to and share with where there are pressures in other Departments, I ask them to please do so.

Minister, are you investigating in depth whether all the money in all the Departments will be spent, and, if not, are you recalling it? I seriously hope that in the October monitoring round we have some good news for those who are under the age of 25 and those who are unemployed.

As I said, there is no safety net. This is a crisis Budget, but the crisis is not over yet, and we may have much worse to come.

That is all that I want to say on this. I will not take up too much time, because many people have spoken about the Budget and it was debated yesterday. A lot of money is knocking about in Northern Ireland. There are a lot of people who have not got that money, and there are a lot of people who are depending on it. We need to get it out the door quickly, and we need those Departments that are sitting on it and expecting to spend it to look to see whether there is an underspend so that they can share it out.

Mr Buckley: I rise to speak in my capacity as a Member of the Legislative Assembly for Upper Bann. Like other Members who commented on the Budget, including Ms Armstrong, who just spoke, I am afraid that the picture is bleak. There is no doubting that. Just like COVID-19 has infected every element and sector of our society, every page of the Budget Bill is riddled with COVID-19 and its consequences. I do not say that lightly. I do not say that with glee. I say that with some concern about what the outlook is. While I stand here to say that I support the Budget Bill, and I agree with the Member that it gives us some financial headroom to face the immediate challenges, I have to say that it is all in front of us.

Does the Budget give us certainty as we face into the second wave? The £600 million for Health gives us breathing space, but the societal, mental and economic impacts of COVID will last longer than the money that has been put aside for us. We all know that; we all know the challenges that we face. Unforeseen circumstances have changed the financial landscape and will continue to for many years to come. I said earlier to a colleague that we are facing the bleakest economic period of my lifetime. I think that many Members will concur. COVID allocations have meant that there is a greater need than ever to scrutinise where money is spent and where it will be needed. That goes to the very heart of what Ms Armstrong said.

The very fact that, potentially, we have money in the system that is not being spent and returned to the centre will come as a shock to many Members and the wider public in Northern Ireland. Maybe that is testimony to some of our antiquated systems and financial arrangements. However, at a time when we are stripping money away from businesses as a result of the restrictions that are in

place, the public will rightly ask why we cannot even spend the money that we have allocated in Northern Ireland.

As was mentioned by, I think, Mr O'Toole — it has been mentioned by others in the Chamber — there is a real need for long-term financial planning. I have no doubt that there will be multi-year Budgets in the future, but I have sympathy with the Finance Minister and the Executive on that point. Every time that we come to this place to discuss financial matters, we all agree that the idea of multi-year Budgets or otherwise is a good thing, but every time that we get round to preparing the road for an approach like that, we are hit with another crisis or circumstance that requires quick action. I have a lot of sympathy in that regard.

I will touch on a number of Committees on which the Budget has an immediate impact and some consequences that will cause us much concern on the road ahead. I speak, first, as a member of the Communities Committee, and I will focus on the level of need in our society for financial help. The Budget goes some way to addressing that in the short term, but we know that, in the long term, it is only scratching the surface. Other Committee members will agree that we have heard weekly cries for financial help, whether from the arts sector, charities or those who need social security payments. We recognise that those will only increase as we look ahead to potential redundancies and other potential impacts of COVID in the future. We also look at local government. Many of us can bear testimony to the work of local government in dealing with the COVID-19 response. Its Budget allocations, and what the Budget will mean for it in the future, will concern local government. Its services have been impacted like never before. COVID-19 has been a disruptor in every aspect of our life.

I will talk briefly about sport. Many members of the Committee will have heard me saying that I have serious concerns about the financial future of many of our sporting clubs across all sectors in the wake of COVID-19 and as we deal with the immediate pressures. We heard from the Northern Ireland Football League (NIFL), the Irish Football Association (IFA) and any organisations that wanted to put their concerns to the Committee about how concerned they are about their financial future. We have called for money to be allocated to those sectors. Grants of £1,000 or £2,000 will never cut it. We know that. Their long-term financial viability stands in the balance of the financial packages that the Executive, particularly the Communities Minister, working alongside the Finance Minister, provide to those sporting organisations. It caused me great concern that, at the weekend, hours before the Irish League was due to start, we had mixed messaging. The Communities Minister said that spectators would not be allowed in the club grounds.

They have no idea of the confusion and chaos that that causes for those in that sector as they attempt to do their best in difficult circumstances. The majority of their income is based on ticket sales. They have had no support from the Executive for the loss of money at the gates. We must react positively or we will not have a sporting future in this country. I say that with regret, but that is what they face.

4.00 pm

I turn briefly to education. I know that, regardless of party, Members place the education of our young people at the very heart of our economic and societal future.

Whatever it might be, it starts with education. To say that COVID-19 has placed challenges on them would be an understatement. School closures have placed the school estate and individual schools under pressure that they have never experienced before. Funding is required for essential infrastructure. We know that. A couple of weeks ago, I had an Adjournment debate in the House about the school estate in Upper Bann. It would scare you to look into the school estate — I am sure that any Member could do that in their constituency — and see the need for investment and what is required, but the money is simply not there.

Budgets are about planning ahead, being prudent and providing a sound financial basis for the future, but let us face it: this Budget, as a result of COVID-19 and some actions by the Executive in placing restrictions on schools, is not providing the sound basis on which our children can look to the future with hope. Investing in their future is having them in the classroom being taught directly. That gets to the heart of the impact that this Budget will have. While we can throw money at online learning — we need to — there is no substitute for face-to-face interaction with a teacher in the classroom.

Do you know something, Mr Deputy Speaker? As you probably have, I have heard many criticise the teachers across this country who now face more time out of the classroom. Many of those schoolteachers are absolutely horrified that they are not in the classroom teaching pupils. They fear for them and for their economic future. They are fearful about the short-term impacts, whether it is being at home and away from the classroom or the complex needs at home.

They have absolutely got this wrong, in my opinion. Schools should be open because —.

Mr Carroll: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: I will, shortly. Schools should be open because it is a controlled environment and there is very little scientific data available that shows that schools are the cause of the transmission. I really feel in my heart, Mr Deputy Speaker, that, if we are serious about the economic viability and are serious about Budget allocations to education, we must act with common sense and put the protections in place, whether for the avoidance of transmission at the gate, or whatever is needed, to allow our children to have a future. I believe that that happens in the classroom.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way. Obviously, everybody agrees about the importance of education and it being face to face. Does the Member have any concern about today's reports that there are at least 1,500 cases of COVID-19 outbreaks in schools? That would warrant some action being taken by the Health Department and the Executive. He seems to be suggesting either no action whatsoever or very limited action in schools. That is concerning and may be in line with the Education Minister's approach.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for his intervention. I do not shrug away what the Member said about the cases in schools, but what I am told and what I see is that there is very little impact in relation to transmissions in the wider school population. I say to the Member that, if the problem is not as outlined by the Chief Medical Officer in a meeting that I had with him, and if the problem is at the school

gate and outside the school environment, yes, there is a communication issue. Let us look at that and see what we can do. I will now draw back to the Budget because that has maybe taken me off a wee bit. I agree that measures must be put in place, but the education of our children is paramount — paramount.

I will now comment on the economy. Although the Budget is welcome because it makes allocations to those parts of our economy that are undoubtedly facing disruption, Members will agree that there is no simple answer, because there is no money tree. We have seen what the first wave of COVID-19 did. Support mechanisms were put in place by the Executive, but they were also put in place by the grace of Her Majesty's Government through the financial package that was able to support and sustain not only livelihoods but businesses across the country.

This Budget simply will not go far enough, and I do not think that even the Minister will say that it does. There is simply not enough money in the system. We have to remember that, in the situation that we are in, with limited resources, actions taken have consequences. As I have said, our economy faces its bleakest period in my lifetime.

All Members will have received copies of the three-point plan, 'Finding a Balance to Protect our Community and our Economy', which was released by a number of businesses. Paragraphs in it certainly deserve to be quoted, because they are in line with what we are discussing:

"The Executive's decision to place large parts of the ... economy into another lockdown will, quite simply, result in another round of job losses",

which will ultimately impact on future Budgets.

It continues:

"Those who have had to shut their doors are deeply concerned by the decision after following the Executive's own guidance and investing money they didn't have in making their business"

life viable.

It goes on to say:

"They are understandably anxious about the viability of their businesses and the jobs they have created and so too are the many companies who are in their supply chain or rely on them for footfall ... Our economy is an ecosystem and closing down one part isn't a limited intervention — it harms us all."

It concludes:

"Pursuing a path of lockdown, release and repeat will undo all of the good work we have done to build a strong and diverse economy and protect workers and their families ... A DIFFERENT WAY MUST BE FOUND."

I have heard Ministers, Chief Medical Officers, Chief Scientific Advisers and commentators at large say, "There may be a need for further lockdowns down the line". That simply will not cut it, however. You cannot turn the Northern Ireland economy on and off like a tap. You cannot put people in and then out if their business is to be economically viable. They are here today but gone

tomorrow. Their jobs and livelihoods depend on the decisions that we make in this House.

In looking at this Budget, many people will come to the conclusion, "What is in it for me? I am being told to close my business". I have heard the compelling stories. Many of our self-employed are looking at another lockdown with no money in their pocket, their businesses closed at one of their busiest times, bills still coming in, mortgage repayments, staff costs, and furlough coming to an end. The situation is dire, and they say, loud and clear, that it may be all right for people in the public sector and for, and I do not say this in a personal sense in any way, politicians and medical or scientific officers. They say, "The decisions that you make do not affect your livelihood, but I have a child at home whom I have to feed and put bread on the table for. I have a business that relies on staff who have been loyal to me and worked with me, and they simply do not know where their next week's wage will come from". Those are the issues that this Budget has to deal with and that Members will have to grapple with as we go into the future.

We must bear that point in mind. There has been much discussion in the Chamber about the economic impact of COVID and this Budget on different sections of society, but we can all agree that it will be low-paid workers, in the hospitality industry or elsewhere, some of them in close-contact services, who will be hurt the most. We must have a compassionate response. We must bear in mind that, yes, COVID-19 kills. We all know that; we have seen its devastating impact, but restrictions and lockdown measures will also do the same.

Data is required for planning. In this and other Budgets, we require — and I am sure the Minister has it — information, forecasts and projections that will inform his decision-making on the Budget that he presents. Equally, that means that data on COVID is equally important to feed into his decision-making on where that relief should come from next. It has been released today, in a previous question that I asked the Health Minister, but the data has not been released quickly enough to inform Ministers at the Executive, Members of the House and, indeed, the wider public with regard to the measures that are put in place.

In closing, I will turn to the issue of health; the most important issue of all. I recognise the huge pressure on the Department of Health and the financial allocations that have been made to it in this Budget and others. I think that £600 million was set aside for Health. The impact of COVID on managing staffing pressures throughout the Health ecosystem in Northern Ireland is going to be incredibly critical in the days ahead. Craigavon Area Hospital has 500 staff who are out of the system when it is facing its busiest period. I welcome additional funding allocations to try to address those pressures.

I want to talk about non-COVID services and, sadly, non-COVID deaths, which this Budget will have to take into consideration in the days ahead. I read in a paper this morning that the Office for National Statistics reported a surge in non-COVID deaths in England: diabetic deaths are up by 86%; prostate cancer deaths are up by 53%; breast cancer deaths are up by 47%; Parkinson's disease deaths are up by 79%; and bowel cancer deaths are up by 46%. Never mind the potential impact on our health service from dealing with COVID, the significant allocation from this Budget to Health will also have to realise the

pressures that are facing non-COVID services. COVID kills but so does lockdown. We need the data for Northern Ireland.

Dr Aiken: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Buckley: I am not a Minister, but I will happily give way. *[Laughter.]*

Dr Aiken: I do not know what is going on in your party, you could be. *[Laughter.]* I think Agriculture is looking for a new Minister.

I thank the Member for giving way. One of the questions that we should be considering is the 10 years of active underinvestment in our health service; the last decade. It takes more than 10 years to train an anaesthetist and more than seven years to train an ICU specialist. We must reflect on how we manage to depoliticise Health, going forward, because we have to invest in it. We cannot invent staff, and that is the critical shortcoming that we have.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way.

Dr Aiken: You gave way. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Buckley: Yes, sorry. I thank the Member for his question. I will never shy away from the reality that faces the health service. The Member will have previous colleagues who served as Health Ministers in the last 10 years, as has my party and others. There has to be the realisation that we cannot play the health service like a political football. Equally, we must realise that the decisions that we make in this place have devastating knock-on impacts on people. GPs' face-to-face consultations are down by 92%. What have we missed in the system?

Mr O'Dowd: I appreciate the Member giving way. I have listened to several contributions from the Member today. He asked questions of the Health Minister, he made interventions when other Members were speaking, and, from my room, I listened to him talking about the response to COVID-19. He has spent considerable time telling us what we should not do. I agree with him that we have to learn to live with COVID. We have to create a situation in which our businesses and workers are protected, but our health service also has to be protected. Can the Member enlighten us as to what we should do?

4.15 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage the Member to link his response to the Budget debate.

Mr Buckley: Absolutely, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for Upper Bann for his question. I must have been saying something right, because he ran from his room to the Chamber to listen to me speak. I am all for constituency support, but I did not expect it to come from the Member opposite. *[Laughter.]* I am not shirking from the fact that, in the wider debate, a balance must be struck. However, when making a speech in the Budget debate, it would be negligent of me not to highlight the impact on businesses. I have said it, and the Member for Upper Bann has said it: we have to learn to live with this virus. There are no easy solutions. However, as I said earlier, show the people the evidence and the data.

Tough decisions lie ahead for this place. We have been dealing with a health emergency; equally, we have an

economic emergency. In the month of Christmas, people are asking where the money to pay their next bill will come from. It is up to this place — to the Finance Minister and his colleagues — to provide a sound economic footing for their future and a sound plan to deal with the pressures that we all know are coming.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage the next Members who speak to ensure that their contribution is linked to the Budget. A Budget debate offers much latitude but, please, link your comments to the Budget.

Mr Durkan: After the inability of the last Executive to bring forward a Budget and three years of no government, when cut-and-paste Budgets were brought forward by civil servants with no political input, we all hoped that today's debate would be a much more optimistic affair. However, these are incredibly challenging times for families and businesses across Northern Ireland. Our ability to use devolution to respond to the particular challenges facing us should be at the forefront of our minds as we debate this legislation today.

As the SDLP's social justice spokesperson, I will focus my remarks on our housing crisis, social security, the dire situation facing our arts, culture and sports sectors, and local government. We are in the grip of a housing crisis. A roof over your head is the basis for a healthy life and for cohesive policymaking. There are few areas of public and social policy that housing does not affect. It affects education, social security, the labour market and health. What chance has a child who has to do their homework in unsuitable, overcrowded and unfit housing, or a child who regularly has to flit between different homes in the private rented sector, to fulfil their full potential? The absolute minimum that the Executive should be able to guarantee to everyone in Northern Ireland is a warm, secure home. Yet, nearly 22,000 households in Northern Ireland are homeless, with the greatest number of those — some 2,732 — in my constituency of Foyle.

The Minister's party, Sinn Féin, recently launched a policy paper detailing ambitious proposals for 20,000 social and affordable homes. However, I hasten to add that the proposals are for 20,000 new homes in the Twenty-six Counties. The SDLP is pretty disappointed that the Finance Minister and his colleague the Minister for Communities, who has responsibility for housing, have not set out similar, or anywhere near as ambitious, plans for the North in this Budget. Instead, the social housing build target has been missed by almost 60%, and the 2021 social housing budget has decreased by £19 million on the previous year.

Our housing crisis needs a multifaceted solution. We urgently need more social housing built to house the thousands of people on the Housing Executive waiting list. The low number of social homes built has left many applicants languishing on the waiting list for years, and we all know them. We also need to support people who have no realistic prospect of securing social housing but who will also struggle to buy their own homes, which is why I welcome funding for co-ownership. It is one of the success stories in our housing landscape, and one that must be integral to any housing strategy going forward. It plays a vital role in helping lower earners to get their own homes and to leave the private rented sector and all the associated precariousness that can come with that.

Unsurprisingly, applications to the Co-ownership Housing Association have surged just as banks have reduced availability and are requiring up to 20% deposits in light of the pandemic. I recognise the Department's support, but I urge the Finance Minister to give the NI Co-ownership Housing Association and other housing associations the certainty of multi-year funding through financial transactions capital so that they can more easily navigate the peaks and troughs in our housing market. Given the economic situation that we will face in the coming months and, let us be realistic, coming years, banks will only become more cautious. That multi-year funding could give them the confidence to lend to Co-ownership and other associations. It would also have the knock-on effect of stimulating the construction industry and encouraging private developers to build more homes that come in under that £165,000 mark if they know that the co-ownership initiative will enable more people to purchase them. That can only be good for the wider economy.

On that point, I must draw attention to the severe budgetary pressures facing Northern Ireland Water, which is essential to any new homebuilding programme. The Infrastructure Minister made this plain: homebuilding is being inhibited by a huge strain on our water service, with a lethal combination of the pandemic now increasing water usage manyfold. Around 100 locations in the North are reaching, or have reached, maximum capacity. I note that a number of in-year allocations have been made to Northern Ireland Water, and they are very much welcome. However, those are just about meeting statutory requirements. It is vital for our economy and our communities that there is a long-term strategic approach to this crucial investment by the Finance Department and the Executive as a whole. Does the Minister agree that there needs to be sustained and significant investment in water, as it is the key to unlocking crucial housing and business development.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I support his call. I have no doubt of the future pressures facing NI Water and our infrastructure system, but will he agree with me that it is equally incumbent on the Finance Minister to look at the problems facing legacy developments because of a lack of investment in NI Water? We have a number of developments right across Northern Ireland that have been standing incomplete for some 10 years because of a historical lack of funding.

Mr Durkan: Absolutely. I do not want to lay all the responsibility at the Finance Minister's door, but, obviously, it is the Budget debate and he is the Minister who is here.

Future funding determined by the regulator says that more than £2 billion is needed. Will the Minister commit to approving the investments to the right levels to ensure that water is on a sustainable footing for the longer term and avoid, as Mr Buckley said, the delay of future projects and the decay of existing services?

I will return to housing. As well as helping people to get on the housing ladder, it is vital that we help people to stay on it. There is no sugar-coating the effect that the pandemic has had, and will continue to have, on our economy and job market. We are likely to see many, many families struggling to pay their mortgages, and sadly, inevitably, we will see repossessions. That is devastating for families and puts even more strain on our already overburdened, drowning housing sector. Serious consideration must be

given to a mortgage relief scheme. I recognise that the bulk of the Budget would have been prepared in the early days of lockdown, but, knowing what we now know, the need to look at such a scheme is blatantly obvious.

As I said, there are few policy areas that do not dovetail with housing policy, and chief amongst them is social security provision, which is the second area of the Budget that I want to touch upon. When the Minister's party joined the DUP in voting to hand our welfare powers over to the Tory Government that Mr McHugh has decried, it promised that no social housing tenant would be affected by the bedroom tax. Indeed, in February, the now Communities Minister took credit for Sinn Féin "binning the bedroom tax". Yet, in response to my question for written answer last week, she confirmed that there are 227 households being hit with that punitive measure.

The New Decade, New Approach deal set out a commitment to review welfare mitigations and agree new measures before March 2020 — it is now October 2020 — when the existing package was due to expire. Of course, events overtook us, and the only option has been to extend the current scheme under regulations. However, it is vital that primary legislation be laid before the Assembly as soon as possible for us as MLAs and, indeed, stakeholders, to scrutinise, alongside the funding commitments and requirements. If any questions about or criticisms of last-minute accelerated passage are met with accusations of trying to sabotage the legislation or trying to sabotage mitigations, those will be seen through and dismissed.

I sympathise with the Communities Minister's explanation to the Committee that responding to the pandemic has dominated her Department's workload, and I commend her in her dedication to addressing the plethora of issues as they have arisen. I urge her, however, to recognise that this legislation will be part of that response. The latest figures show that there were an additional 89,250 universal credit claims between March and July of this year. As the current incarnation of the furlough scheme ends, and as our businesses face the double challenge of the pandemic and leaving the EU, the Economy Minister has estimated that up to 100,000 people will be unemployed, while the Communities Minister envisages a worst-case scenario of up to 125,000 claimants. Families will badly need an extension of the current mitigations, but the rise in new applicants highlights even more starkly the gaps in the current package: the five-week wait; the two-child tax credit rule; and the benefit cap. People receiving those benefits, and those making their applications now and in the coming months, need the certainty and assurance that they will be protected against the sort of system that the UK Tory Government would impose upon them.

In order to deal with the anticipated avalanche of people requiring that support, DFC has identified the need for 1,400 new posts, but it is only getting funded for 900. There is no capital bid associated with it, because, apparently, capacity exists in the Northern Ireland Civil Service estate to accommodate those new workers. I do not know whether that takes into account social distancing. I would like to know where they will be based, and, Minister, please do not say, "Belfast". Government must take this, and every, opportunity to decentralise and to tackle ongoing regional imbalance.

I turn now to our arts and culture sector, which has been uniquely affected by the pandemic and the regulations.

I welcome the original £4 million and, indeed, the more recent £29 million that was allocated as a result of Barnett consequentials, but, given the delay in the announcement of that second tranche, it is vital that that money gets out to the affected industries and individuals without delay. I was glad to read in the paper today that that is happening at last. They must be supported not just throughout this circuit breaker but beyond. Mr Buckley described COVID-19 as a "disruptor", but we have to do everything across every sector to make sure that it does not become a destroyer.

4.30 pm

These people and these industries cannot simply press pause. It is not just the livelihoods of the thousands of artists, performers, sound engineers and set designers and such that the industries employ that are at risk. When they go, whether it is into unemployment or, if they follow the Chancellor's "Let them eat cake" advice, to retrain, many of the aspects that we all miss so much during the pandemic — going to concerts, to the theatre or to museums — will not be there when we overcome the pandemic, and we will overcome the pandemic. It is incumbent on the Minister for Communities and the Executive not only to ensure that those people get the financial support that they need from the Executive but to support them to adapt to the regulations, for as long as they exist, to allow them to continue, whether that is through live streaming or using venues for other purposes in the interim to supplement income.

Our sports sector is struggling, from our elite sportsmen, sportswomen and clubs down to the grassroots. Sports clubs and activities play such an integral role in all our communities and in the development of our children as well as in our own physical and mental well-being. Sponsors have been hit very hard, and restrictions on attendances deprive clubs of much-needed revenue and supporters of the pleasure and, in some cases, the pain of getting in to support and cheer on their team, whatever their sporting code. Perhaps, as a suggestion, Northern Ireland's share of the revenue generated through the sugar tax or the soft drink levy, which has been hovering at around £12 million, I think, in Barnett consequentials over the past few years, could be invested in sports, which do so much to promote healthy living and to tackle obesity and the associated problems.

Local government is on its knees too. We need to work more closely with councils to ensure that they have the capacity and the financial wherewithal to carry out their vital services and support communities.

None of us doubt the difficulties ahead, but now is the time to front-load support and to provide protection against the looming economic carnage. We must invest in our communities to offset the worst of this fallout and to prevent the problems that we can see coming down the track. Our constituents will demand no less, and our constituents deserve no less.

Mr Frew: I have sat in for most if not all the debate today, and some valid points have been made. There has been some rough and tumble, as you would expect. I will try to be the voice of reason, as I always am.

This is an important Bill. Anybody with any experience here has seen Budget Bill after Budget Bill, and there is a tendency to take them lightly, but it is fundamental to the governance of this place that finances are placed in the correct columns and for the correct Departments and that, when that money gets to those Departments, it is used in the appropriate way. Scrutiny of a Budget Bill and a process are vital, but it does not start and end in the Chamber. It is vital that our scrutiny Committees get to see the information that they need to see in order to do their job right at an early stage and then to support and advise their Department on how that revenue should be spent. Scrutiny Committees are very useful things, not just for scrutiny but for advice and support. Believe me: our Departments need all the help that they can get.

The Estimates are published, and we go through them here. The Finance Committee does its part. There will be sufficient dialogue and scrutiny there. Then, at last, we get a Budget Bill on the Floor. A Budget Bill is treated differently from any other Bill — most other Bills, anyway — in that, in most cases, it is given accelerated passage. I want to put a marker down — the Chairperson of the Finance Committee suggested this earlier — that no Minister or official in any Department, not least the Finance Minister and his Department, should ever take it lightly or for granted that the Finance Committee, whoever populates those chairs and benches, will give accelerated passage to a Budget Bill as a matter of course. If departmental officials fall into that trap, they may well get a rude awakening some day, because, during my time on the Finance Committee, I have been less than impressed by what I have witnessed of the engagement and information flow that goes from the Department to the Committee. There will be many things that we will miss and many that we do not request, but, when we request information, the fact that we do not get it, that there is delay or that we have to put in the same request over and over again, which is then treated as multiple requests — as if that would get them off the hook for the late delivery of documents and emails — is not good enough. Let it go out loud and clear from the House: no official should take for granted the accelerated passage of a finance Bill. We do it for the greater good, but, some day, the balance of greater good might tip and it might not be for the greater good any more to allow a finance Bill to go through without proper Finance Committee scrutiny, like the scrutiny that we give to every clause of every other Bill that goes through the House. I put that marker down.

Again, even this week, the Finance Committee asked questions about authority. As the Committee Chairperson stated, we saw a scramble whereby authorisation was given at late notice and after we had requested to see the authorisations. It is clear that not all is well in the Finance Department. I have no reason to believe that it is working tickety-boo in any of the other Departments either. There is a lot to learn and a lot for those of us on Committees to scrutinise.

The Bill is the Budget (No. 3) Bill. The title itself sends a signal that we are not in normal times. These are strange times. I suppose that I have a certain sympathy for the Department and the Minister over the massive influx of moneys into the centre that have to be distributed to Departments. I have a lot of sympathy for the fact that the Finance Minister, along with others in the Executive, has been fighting a crisis on many fronts, not least COVID, and

there is a lot of uncertainty, which increases the crisis and escalates the emergencies that we all face. Therefore, I have a certain sympathy for everyone who is mixed up in that process and has to work in it.

I see the blue pages, and may I say, Mr Deputy Speaker, that it is great that the Bill Office is starting to publish Bills again? Imagine a legislature that was not even publishing Bills. It is an absolute disgrace, if you ask me. It is good to have a Bill in your hand. In the Bill, I see figures; I see big figures. I see where there has been a massive increase for some Departments, where it is needed, and I see less of an increase in others, where it is not needed. Of course, that is good, because we need that money. That money has been drawn down from Barnett consequentials, and it is good that we can get money directed to help to fund the support schemes.

Today, we are approving additional spends and flexibilities to finance the support schemes and so on, but it is also to ensure that Departments do not run out of money. Some Departments are getting dangerously close to doing that. That is why we are at the Budget (No. 3) Bill and why we have had to have a couple of such processes in-year. I understand that. However, today is also giving approval to do the same thing over and over again. It is doing the same thing, and it is giving approval to carry on, to carry on like the greatest 'Carry On' movies, but this one is not funny. There is no strategic thought here whatever. We are in the midst of a crisis and an emergency — we are being forged by fire — but we think that we can do the same thing over and over again.

We are thankful for the massive lump of Barnett consequential money: it was £2.4 billion, I think, at the last count. It has been invested in schemes that we required, but we cannot even spend all of it. We are sitting with, I think, £55 million in the centre, and we have £600 million going to the health service. We cannot spend that money, and we cannot maximise borrowing. We cannot even spend or draw down the financial transactions money that is there for us. If everything was running smoothly, you could argue that we did not need the financial transactions money, but look at the crisis in COVID. Beyond that, look at the crises in housing, in NI Water and in Translink, and look at the support required for businesses and sports clubs. I could go on. We have an inability to spend money that is there for us to spend, so who are we letting down? We are letting down the people of Northern Ireland. That is where the buck stops. That is who feels the impact. The Executive are failing those people.

The Member from the party opposite talks about Tory austerity: how much more money do we need to prove that we are not very good at spending it? We have £2.4 billion, but we cannot even spend all of that money, which we surely need. The Member talks about more fiscal power. Why should we have more fiscal power when we cannot handle the money that is given to us here and now? Why would we need more fiscal power if we cannot spend the money that is coming down from Barnett consequentials? Why should we need more fiscal power when we keep doing the same thing over and over again, year in, year out, and when we do not have any creative thoughts on how we could spend our money more efficiently?

The party opposite has not made a hard fiscal decision yet. It has never brought forward a live Budget for the following year. We are still waiting. How does the Member

think we should get more fiscal power? It is bizarre. Why would we put that pressure on a Finance Minister? Should we really have tax-varying powers? What way would the money go, I wonder. Who would it impact on most? How would the money that we raise through tax-varying powers be spent? Would we spend it on doing the same thing over and over again, like we do every year?

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will, yes.

4.45 pm

Mr O'Dowd: The Member's comments on the ability of the system to spend money are valid. It is something that the Executive and the Civil Service need to tackle, because getting money out the door to spend is a vital part of what we do.

When talking about fiscal powers, the Member used the example of the money that we got from the Barnett consequential but cannot spend. One of the difficulties with getting money in-year is that it is very difficult to spend, because you do not have the schemes, operations or staff in place to do so. If you have fiscal powers, you can plan for the long term. You can plan your monetary outworkings.

I will finish on this point: how would the money be spent and the tax raised? The Assembly would decide. Have a bit of faith in yourself as well as in others.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention. That is a good and valid point, and there is a good fiscal debate to be had on that. Would it not be better, however, to go to a multi-year Budget plan than to have tax-varying powers? At least you would then have the scope, space and time in which to spend money effectively and efficiently.

I take the Member's point, however, and it is something that I do grapple with. I know that the Member who made the intervention will grapple with it as well. Yes, let us see how we can do things better. He mentioned the Assembly, but look at the way in which the Executive work. The Executive work on how they spend money. The Finance Minister has said over and over again that he is waiting for bids and that he cannot spend money until he sees those bids. The Departments are saying, "It's not my place to bid. It's somebody else's place to bid". Another Minister says, "No, it's your place to bid". There we go on that merry-go-round.

I am not blaming the Finance Minister for that, by the way, but there has to be a more strategic layout of how the Executive work a Budget and how Departments then bid mid-term and even in monitoring rounds. We see it every time. There is failure upon failure, and we keep doing the same thing not only in the Budget process but in the way in which we spend money. Sooner or later, whether it is me or you or some other Member, party, grouping or Committee, we need to stop the cycle. We need to get off the merry-go-round and do things differently. We need to make decisions that will result in money being spent efficiently, and I just do not see it happening. It has been a long time since I have seen it, to be honest, and that needs to change.

A good lot of the money in this Budget is having to go, and should be going, to the Department of Health. Let me therefore pay tribute to the nurses and the other people

who are at the coalface of this emergency as we speak. Let us think about the grievous shifts and long hours that they are putting in, the horrific sights that they see and the bad news stories that they face daily. No one in the House can fathom what they are going through. Some of us have experience in a care setting, including my colleague Paula Bradley. I am sure that those Members think at night about the horrendous situation that our healthcare workers find themselves in daily. We must do everything that we can to prevent the spread of this disease, to take the burden off the health service in other ways and to make sure that it has the money in this Budget that it requires.

Sometimes, in the heat of battle, forged in fire, out of necessity we can become a different animal on a different plane. That is where our health service needs to get to very quickly. It is not the people who work in the health service who will fail us. They never do. It is the system in which they work that fails the staff. It has to become a different animal. It has to be on a different plane. Sometimes, in the heat of battle, forged in fire, is the only time, through necessity, that that can happen, and it needs to happen. Have we the leadership to do that?

A total of £600 million is set aside for the health service, with £55 million of that still sitting at the centre. Woe betide any Department that hands back money at the end of this financial year, because the people will ask why. They will ask why we are giving money back when we desperately needed it in our Departments.

I get it when the Health Minister says that he cannot just magic up staff, facilities, buildings or equipment. However, I wonder if the Health Minister is going to spend all the money that he receives and if it is not going to go back to the centre at the end of this financial year. I wonder whether there are any other Departments that should have got, and could have spent, that money. I know that there are Departments that may not need the money either, because they have stopped doing some worthwhile things, and that is also criminal. I make this plea: where is our strategic vision? Where is it being displayed that we are doing things differently, more efficiently and with more agility? Where is it? Can we see it?

Not only are the Executive not supporting business and communities at this time, they are working against them. We have an anti-sports Minister. We have an anti-arts Minister. We have a Communities Minister —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I draw the Member back to the Budget Bill, which we are debating.

Mr Frew: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

In this Budget, the Department for Communities is being funded to support vulnerable people who need oral hearings and tribunals for the employment and support allowance (ESA) and personal independent payment (PIP). Some of those people have been refused tribunal hearings, which has knocked their benefits off. Some people have received no benefits for months because they cannot get to an oral hearing. That is a disgrace. It affects the most vulnerable in our society: the people who have ill health and the people who cannot work. Those people have been let down.

We have an Infrastructure Minister who, it seems, did not want to furlough Translink staff to help that company to have the agility to operate efficiently through this crisis. In

this Budget Bill, there is money going to Translink. There is a further request for more money to go to Translink. Is that money being spent well? Is it being spent efficiently? Is there not a better way to operate Translink through this crisis than by throwing money at it like that?

We have swathes of people and businesses that, it seems, we cannot support in this Budget, yet we are able to shut them down within hours and turn off their supply chain and their custom. It is simply not good enough. We had a junior Minister saying on the radio, last week, that driving instructors could continue to work. Two days later, they were told that they could not and would have to stop. How can anyone operate a business with an Executive that change their mind day in, day out and that, even before they have drafted the regulations, have changed their minds twice or thrice? It cannot continue.

Earlier, a Member opposite asked my colleague Mr Buckley for solutions. Of course, we do not have all the information that the Executive have, but we have met the Chief Medical Officer. Even after meeting him, I have yet to see the evidence for picking on some sectors as we have. As for solutions, I point Members in the direction of the three-point plan that 23 business organisations launched today with regard to information, messaging, confidence and support. It should say all of that in this Budget. It should be transparent, and it should have information. It should have people's confidence and support. I do not see that it has much of any of that.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree with me that information is paramount in the budgetary process? Information feeds into the process where relief is needed and where it should not be provided. Therefore, the lack of data, to which you referred, should be every bit as important to the Finance Minister as it is to the Health Minister. Unfortunately, we are not seeing that.

Mr Frew: Yes. The Member makes a valid and correct point. How can we ever think strategically if we do not have the information at hand to make these tough decisions? We do not have it. The data presented to me by the Chief Medical Officer does not tell me where the disease was transmitted or in which venues. We cannot proceed like this. We cannot keep throwing a dart at a dartboard while blindfolded. That is just not the way to do government. It is just not the way to proceed. The Budget Bill refers to none of that.

I will give credit where credit is due. Today, a chart from the Republic of Ireland has been circulating, and it shows the very information that we are talking about. It shows that the transmission of the virus has taken place in households, retail, sporting venues, pubs, bars and restaurants, and it displays that information in the form of a long chart.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will.

Dr Aiken: For clarity, if the Member and other Members cared to check www.health-ni.gov.uk and the detailed evidence papers that are available online, they would realise that that information is now available. I thank the Health Minister for allowing that to be published. I also thank the members of the Northern Ireland Executive, whose decision it was to put that information out there.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his timely intervention. I would love to know from the Member — I will give way to him again if he can tell us — what date that was published.

Dr Aiken: Just today.

Mr Frew: Just today. That sort of proves my point about the Budget Bill that we are debating today.

Dr Aiken: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes.

Dr Aiken: I do not want to chunter from a sedentary position, because I have already been told off for that today. The papers were within the purview of the Executive — the deputy First Minister and First Minister in particular — and it was up to them to decide whether they should be released. The Health Minister has made it very clear that he was more than happy to release the papers and has been for some considerable time. I am glad that the First and deputy First Ministers have decided to allow that information to go out.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, it is not like the Member to point the finger at other Ministers. He has made a very good and valuable intervention, and I welcome it. I welcome getting as much information out there as possible. I will take considerable time to go over it in great detail to see whether I can somehow link the information that is now displayed with the decisions that the Executive made last week. I want to see how they came about. I want to see the linkage to that information. I look forward to looking at that in great detail.

Make no mistake about it: our people are experiencing a lockdown. People have talked about it as a circuit breaker. I am a spark by trade, and I know what a circuit breaker is. A circuit breaker is a useful thing. It is there to save people's lives. If you are hanging on to the power and in danger of being electrocuted, it turns off the power. If you have a damaged piece of equipment, a circuit breaker turns it off so that it does not cause a fire. A circuit breaker is very important. This is not a circuit breaker; this is a lockdown. It is a lockdown because our economy is an ecosystem. If you close down one part of our economy, it affects it all. When it comes to the economy, there is no such thing as a partial lockdown. What we cannot do is to have lockdown after lockdown after lockdown. It is simply unsustainable.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): May I request, again, that the Member come back to the Budget?

Mr Frew: In the Budget Bill, we should have a strategy to counter this emergency. It is the Budget (No. 3) Bill.

This Budget really took hold last April, and yet here we are, in October, and we still have no evidence on paper of how we are dealing with the emergency properly.

Are we at the stage where our only strategy is lockdown? The first time we locked down, we had financial might. We had Barnett consequential money, and we were able to fund the business support schemes and the various aspects of that. We were able to give the rates holiday, which was very important and was a game changer, and we were able to use and avail ourselves of the furlough scheme, which was important. Those measures are now not in play. The rates holiday is a good thing for the full year, but those businesses have no more reserves or capacity left, and you are asking them to immediately shut

down without putting any package of support in place. The only package of support that has been put in place by the Finance Minister just will not cut it. It is just not enough, and it is based on the rate base. There are so many other businesses that will not be able to avail themselves of it, and it is simply not enough.

5.00 pm

Mr Wells: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: I will give way, yes.

Mr Wells: The Member should know that, as long as he includes the word “budget” in every sentence of his contribution, he will not catch the ear of the Deputy Speaker and will be able to continue regardless.

Speaking about the Budget, will the Member accept that there are many businesses in Northern Ireland that, unfortunately, have had to close but are not on the list of those that have been told to close? Typical examples of that are ferry operators and dog kennel owners: they cannot survive in the absence of other aspects of the economy. They have to close, but, because they are not on the list, they do not get a penny.

Mr Frew: The Member makes a valid point. It goes back to my ecosystem point about the economy: if you close down one part of the economy, you affect it all, and you affect more of it to varying degrees. The Member is right. Applying a strategy of “Lockdown, release and repeat” is no strategy at all. It will lead to ill health, ruined lives, destroyed businesses and wrecked livelihoods. Doing it without just and timely financial support is unforgivable, and we should have seen that financial support in the Budget Bill.

In 2020, hotels will sell one million fewer rooms than they sold in 2019, and each day of closure will see a further 7,000 bedrooms slip away, with a loss of around £50,000 per night to the local economy. That does not take into account the loss of food and beverage sales, conference income or the moneys generated from weddings. How will they survive a second lockdown without any financial support? There are businesses that have contacted me over the last few days, and not one of them is in good shape. There is nothing in the Budget (No. 3) Bill that will give them any comfort: none whatever.

Coffee shops and restaurants within wider retail units or golf clubs have had to close: where do they stand? They cannot avail themselves of the rates-based scheme, for the little amount that it is worth. We had a junior Minister who said that driving instructors could carry on: two days later, they were told to close. That cannot keep going on. Personal trainers are reduced to one person at a time and do not have a commercial base: how does the Budget support them? Do you know the way that we used to talk about entrepreneurs and how we would encourage them, how we would help them on and how this country would be built on entrepreneurs? One girl who I was talking to today had turned her garage into a studio for skincare: she has no capacity or funding left. She is left high and dry and has been told to close nearly immediately. She gets no support, and there is no sign of any support.

Look at the money that hairdressers have spent on their premises. It probably does not range into the thousands, but it is certainly in the hundreds. The problem is that they

have no more savings or capacity left because of the first lockdown. Yet they have been told to shut down, even though they have implemented all the safety gear and safety apparatus and with all of the measures that they have put in place. There is nothing in the Budget (No. 3) Bill for them. It is not even about what a hairdresser does — hairdressers do many things — but they might be the only point of contact for a vulnerable elderly person who gets their hair done once a week, once a day or every other day. That is the only contact that that vulnerable elderly person, who is isolated in their home, gets. Where is the support in the Budget (No. 3) Bill for the vulnerable people living at home and sometimes shielding? It is non-existent.

There is a lady who provides a service and space for disabled kids and their parents, a sensory room. It is a good, cutting-edge business. It is entrepreneurial, but it provides a dedicated service for disabled children and their parents and much-needed respite. All the equipment is in the room, and the kids have great fun with their parents out of the house, where all the pressure comes. For that business owner and those disabled children and their parents, where is the support in the Budget (No. 3) Bill?

I could go on. Soft-play areas thought that they would close. They have not, but can they really open safely when all the businesses around them are closing? It may be only a matter of days until they have to close too. If they close and do not get support, will the Budget (No. 3) Bill support them? Will the Finance Minister or the Executive put in place a package to support them? I have seen nothing yet. All I have seen is confusion.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Member for taking an intervention. Does he accept that the Economy Minister also has responsibility for bringing forward proposals for some of the businesses that he has highlighted?

Mr Frew: Yes, I acknowledge that. That is why I go back to my point about a strategic thought and process. This is not the way to do government in a crisis. The Finance Minister took a collective decision, with the Executive, to close businesses without having information about the impact of that decision to hand. Ministers scurried about for days afterwards seeking clarification of the impact on businesses. That is no way to make a decision. Making that decision without the financial support and mechanisms in place to back it up —

Mr Muir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Frew: Yes, I will.

Mr Muir: Does the Member accept that the regulations that he refers to, which have had a financial impact on our public finances and businesses, were made by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and could have been made in a much more timely manner?

Mr Frew: I am not sure what point the Member makes. I will let him make another intervention if he needs to. We have been told clearly, even by the First Minister, that it was a decision of the Executive, a decision by the Executive to bring in the measures last Tuesday.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Again, Members, this is not a debate about the measures; this is the Budget debate.

Mr Frew: Thank you for your guidance. I get waylaid by the Members around me. It is terrible.

I conclude by saying this: we must do much more and do far better. The Member across the way made an intervention that I did not get a chance to respond to. This has to be a strategic thought process that works in quick time, aligned with the emergencies that we face. There is no way that we can justify closing down branches of the economy that affect all of the economy without having in place a strategic plan to fund and support those businesses. Even if we had a programme that had not been launched, it would not be so bad, but the fact that we do not have a programme is criminal. Allowing businesses, entrepreneurs, business owners and employers to fall by the wayside like that is not correct, it is not right, and it is no way to do government.

The Budget (No. 3) Bill will be passed. There may be some shouts from the corner, but it will be passed. We have yet to see a draft Budget for the next financial year. That will have to include measures because COVID-19 will not be done by then; it will not be finished. We will still have a crisis in housing and in welfare, and we will still have all the other crises, such as those in NI Water or Translink and all that. We have not yet seen a Budget for that year, and we need to see it soon. If we do not, how will Committees, the Finance Committee included, do their work? How will we consult the public so that they can inject their thoughts into the Budget process? It is simply not good enough to allow the drift to carry on at the heart of government in Northern Ireland. The Executive and the Finance Minister must do much better.

Mr Nesbitt: I did not intend to speak today, because I spoke in yesterday's financial debate. I made, I think, three points, all of which the Minister acknowledged positively, and I am grateful to him for that.

I was listening to the debate up to Question Time, and I had two issues with it, the first of which was the tone of some of the contributions and exchanges. If there is a public mood, I think that we missed it by a country mile. The second issue is that it seems that the debate on the Budget (No. 3) Bill is not being joined up to the other aspects of Executive government.

I will not argue that money is not tight or that we could not use a lot more, but we are talking about a lot of money. Once we go beyond tens and hundreds of millions and into billions of pounds, people find it hard to understand or to contextualise it. If we had that money in cash in £20 notes, would it fill the Chamber? Would we need the Great Hall? I have no idea. It is a lot of money, and the question is this: how do we agree that we are spending it to best effect? That is difficult. If you are running a business, it is relatively easy. Your board of directors will tell you your purpose in two words: "Make money". You minimise the amount of money that you spend, and you maximise the amount of money that you invoice: that is called profit. But what is the profit that the Budget Bill aims to achieve?

When I came here, I had worked in the private sector for quite a long time, and what surprised me was the lack of focus on outcomes. It was all about doing stuff. It was all about inputs and spending budgets, but there was little focus on what we were achieving. I will give you an example. We have what we call "super output areas" — in other words, we measure communities in terms of poverty,

dereliction and deprivation — and we draw up league tables. We then, quite rightly, put resource and funding into those areas. Over the 20 years of devolution, there are some areas in the top 10 areas of deprivation that have had tens of millions; in fact, there may be one that has had over £100 million. Guess what: it is still in the top 10 on the league table. Does that not tell us something? Does that not tell us that what we are doing is not achieving the outcome that we were trying to achieve?

The problem is that we are debating the Budget (No. 3) Bill without a Programme for Government, which is the measure of success. The draft Programme for Government for 2016-2021 was published four and a half years ago on 26 May 2016 and is still not agreed. It was a marvellous document, because it put a focus on outcomes. It said that we were going to stop just doing stuff and go forward with what we were calling an "outcome-based accountability" approach.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Nesbitt: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Frew: The Member makes a valid point, which I omitted to mention in my speech, about the Programme for Government. The beauty of the Programme for Government, with its outcomes-based design, is that it wedded Departments together to complete outcomes. Without an outcomes-based Programme for Government, those Departments drift apart.

5.15 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for his intervention. I agree totally. There is no point in pointing the finger at the Minister of Finance, the permanent secretary or her staff at the Department of Finance or anybody else in government if we are not operating that joined-up approach. I have previously used the example of educational underachievement. Traditionally, what we do is to point the finger at the Minister of Education and say, "That is your problem. You have to fix it". We know that healthier children will do better at school, so the Minister of Health has a role to play. We know that children in better housing conditions are more likely to do better at school, so suddenly the Minister for Communities has something to say. There are three Ministers. You could make the argument that every Minister in the Executive has a role to play and that the Minister of Education is only the lead in that effort. We are making an effort. The Minister and his staff work hard.

Interestingly, the man who devised outcomes-based accountability (OBA), Mark Friedman, identified why that is not good enough by writing a book entitled 'Trying Hard Is Not Good Enough'. We can all try hard but fail to achieve the outcomes that we want to achieve.

Let me refer you to the Hansard report of a meeting on 11 October 2016 when Mark Friedman came here and presented to the then Committee for the Executive Office. He brought some colleagues with him, including an American consultant called Phil Lee. He gave us the example of a community with a population of one million people and how, before OBA, the Departments of the Government all did the same thing: they lobbied for money and resource. After OBA, they hit a point at which the Government said, "We need a bit of austerity here. Everybody needs to take a haircut on their finances". Six

public health and safety agencies, courts and jails etc got together. They had been told the overall figure that they had to cut and how it was to be cut. They went away, sat down together and had a discussion. They went back to the Government and said, "We are going to cut the overall amount that you want us to cut, but we want to do it differently". Five of the six agencies took an even bigger cut than they had been asked to take so that they could reinstate a programme that worked in the jail system. They all realised that it worked so well that they all benefited from it. As Phil Lee told us, instead of hoarding resources or lobbying for their own piece, they stepped back and saw the bigger picture. They realised that this was the right thing and the best thing to do.

We have had devolution for 20 years, but we are nowhere near that level of maturity yet, are we? When we look at the Budget (No. 3) Bill, it is not only a question of how we intend to spend the money but a question of whether we are spending it on the right things. It is not just about whether we are delivering government programmes as promised but about whether those programmes are the right ones to deliver. Under OBA, we have promised that we might be going out to community groups and to the voluntary and community sector that are delivering a programme for us and saying, "Our monitoring and evaluation says that this is not working, so I am very sorry, but we are stopping your funding". That could apply to a community group in your constituency that you have been photographed with for your local paper and quoted as saying that it is doing a great job. Do we have the courage to do that, because that is what we committed to in 2016?

We have committed to a lot of things that we have not delivered on. We are not joined up. How deeply ironic it is that we are not joined up when 84 of the 90 Members of the House are aligned to parties that are members of the Northern Ireland Executive. Our equivalent of 10 Downing Street or Government Buildings is Stormont Castle down the hill, but there is a big difference. Downing Street is for one man: a Prime Minister. Government Buildings is for one politician: an Taoiseach. Stormont Castle is for two politicians: the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Yet woe betide anybody who says that you should use your single transferable vote to express an opinion about who you want to be First Minister and who you want to be deputy First Minister.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I encourage the Member to come back to the Budget Bill.

Mr Nesbitt: I will, but I am trying to make a point, Deputy Speaker, about how the Budget Bill relates to the governance that we signed up to in 1998. The point is that you can be rivals in an election, but, once the votes are counted, you are supposed to be partners. There has been no sign of partnership working in this debate. I think that people expect us to get over ourselves, not to reduce a global pandemic to a sectarian headcount.

A mile or less from here, if we go out on to Stoney Road, we end up at the Ulster Hospital, where, in the maternity unit, I suggest that at least one child is being born as we speak. I hope that that child never watches this morning's debate or any other debate until we learn to be the partners whom we committed to being in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and we focus on spending the money in this Budget Bill in a way that will improve the lives of those newborn babies.

With your indulgence, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will finish by going back to 1998 and what the parties to the agreement said:

"The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.

We are committed to partnership, equality and mutual respect as the basis of relationships".

That is the leadership that we are expected to offer from this House. I regret that we did not live up to that at times during this debate.

Mr McNulty: I begin by passing on my condolences to the families of the 16 people who have, sadly, passed away with COVID on this island over the past day.

I welcome the opportunity to participate in today's debate. As legislators, we have a number of key roles, including to shape public policy and public spending and to scrutinise the implementation of that public policy and spending by Departments, public and arm's-length bodies.

I will focus my remarks on a number of areas. I am a member of the Education Committee and SDLP spokesperson on sport and public health. I will also refer to Brexit and the COVID pandemic and how we, as an island, respond and build our way out of it.

Nelson Mandela said:

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

That quote encompasses everything that we need to understand about education and the way in which we should approach everything that we do in life. We often hear in this place and beyond that we have one of the best educational systems in the world. I am sorry to say that I do not believe that. Just ask any parent of a child with special educational needs who has been failed by our system. They have to fight for every little bit of additional help and support that they can get, be that literacy support, speech and language therapy, physiotherapy or emotional support. They wait too long for a diagnosis, and then, when a statement of special educational needs is eventually produced, it takes too long to put in place the support that is needed. Children are being failed.

There are also children in disadvantaged areas who, during the pandemic, are struggling to cope. Homeschooling has been difficult. The Executive have had to supply electronic equipment to allow some children to continue their education at home. However, that is a societal issue. Although I welcome the Education Minister's efforts to raise standards, particularly for children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, we must recognise that educational underachievement and disadvantage, just like COVID-19, does not discriminate on the grounds of religious or political background. We need to build capacity, resilience and ambition for all our communities.

Our school estate is in dire need of real investment. Too many children are being taught in substandard facilities. How can we really aspire to deliver a world-class education system if we expect teachers and school leaders to work in cramped and outdated accommodation?

Teachers got their just pay rise this year, but we really need to do much more. We have all witnessed how flexible and adaptable teachers and schools have been, upskilling and adopting new approaches as they switched to remote and blended learning.

As we hopefully move from lockdown back to a new normal, we need to address the impact on people of school closures and periods of isolation from school and communities. We need to see a proactive approach taken to an education catch-up programme, but we also must address mental health and well-being. If we fail to address the issues of emotional health and well-being, our society will suffer the consequences of COVID long after a vaccine is found.

We are in difficult times. Businesses are closed, and we do not know what further restrictions may or may not be imposed in the times ahead. If we are to see an economic recovery, however, we need to ensure that businesses are retained and supported through these difficult times. Although the support announced by the Minister this week for businesses impacted on by their having to close is a good start, it is nothing more than that. We need to have more support for those closed and restricted businesses and, indeed, for those who have not had any support as yet, after more than six months, such as mobile or work-from-home hairdressers and beauticians; those in the arts and entertainment sector; those in the bus, coach and transport sector; those who work in gyms; those who work in retail and in hospitality; and the self-employed. Too many businesses, individuals and families do not know where the next pay cheque will come from.

Let there be no more fumbling about in the dark, no more dilly-dallying by Ministers and no more passing the buck. We saw the Economy Minister abdicate her responsibility for the bus, coach and taxi industry. Other attack dogs in this place pointed the finger at Minister Mallon for months, only for the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to intervene. For the First Ministers to intervene —.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Is it appropriate for the Member to refer —?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. During points of order, Members should take their seats.

Mr O'Dowd: Is it appropriate for the Member to refer to MLAs as “attack dogs”?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Sorry. Can you repeat that, please? I did not pick it up.

Mr O'Dowd: Is it appropriate for the Member to refer to MLAs as “attack dogs”? He said:

“Other attack dogs in this place”.

The only people in this place are MLAs.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): In the course of debate, much language is used. I will review the setting of the words and ask the Speaker's Office to comment.

I ask Mr McNulty to continue.

Mr McNulty: The First Minister and the deputy First Minister then intervened and stripped the Economy Department of the powers and handed them to the Infrastructure Minister. What will be the cost of that delay to the bus and coach operator industry?

I was always told to be careful if you point the finger, because there are always three pointing back at you. In all seriousness, we need to see every Department, led by the Executive Office, plan our way out of this pandemic, from Health through to Education and the Economy, and even Communities through sport.

Our health service had changed and adapted. Society has learnt to value like never before the work of our healthcare staff in hospitals, in care homes and in the community. Where would we be without our healthcare workers? We have all learnt the true meaning of saying, “Your health is your wealth”. Among all the clapping and applauding of our healthcare staff, it is forgotten that it took the nurses taking to our streets earlier this year to get this place back up and running.

The Health Minister has performed admirably throughout this period, but if we are serious about valuing our health service, we need to see it transformed. We need services to be available to those who need them and available where they need them, and we need to see specialist services delivered outside the outer ring of Belfast. We need to see all-island specialties developed without delay, especially for cancer services.

As someone who has been steeped in sport all my life, I value its importance, not just as a game but as a means of building a person, building character and building and binding communities. I was so delighted last night to hear that the restrictions announced in the South will not impact on our inter-county championship, which will continue. The importance of the GAA and sport to the national psyche was brilliantly encapsulated by David Brady, a Ballina man, and Colm O'Rourke, a Skryne man, on 'Claire Byrne Live' last night.

We have seen our sporting organisations right across this island and in every code step up when this society needed them most. They set up food banks. They provided support to the vulnerable in our communities, and they did so with joy in their hearts. They reached out beyond their communities.

Sports clubs and organisations have seen their revenues collapse. Most of those are amateur sports, based in our communities, and they draw their financial support from our communities. They cannot fundraise, yet their costs continue. Support already given is welcome, but it needs to be much more if they are to survive.

5.30 pm

I plead with the Minister and the Executive to support sport. I would have loved nothing more — I am sure that the Minister is the same — to have been at the Athletic Grounds last Saturday night. However, not being at matches is a sacrifice worth paying for public health during this pandemic. Whilst the result was not what we wanted, sport, even from the sofa, gives a release and a sense of community that is good for people's emotional health and well-being. With sport — Gaelic games, rugby, soccer, horse racing — continuing, the national mood will

be improved, and it will help brighten up the dark days of winter.

That brings me to Casement Park, Páirc Mhic Easmainn. I, like every other Gael across this island, was delighted when Minister Mallon approved the plans for the redevelopment of Casement Park last week. However, now the finances must follow, and I urge you, Minister and the Executive, to bring certainty and clarity to the revised financial support package on offer from the Executive. This is crucial for the delivery of the project, but also the jobs in construction that it will bring will be so important in the time ahead. Will the Finance Minister commit to ensure that the entire funding will be available to construct our stadium of dreams in Ulster?

Brexit is still on the horizon. We need the Executive to plan our way through COVID-19 and Brexit. A no-deal exit would be catastrophic for this place, especially for border constituencies like my own. I will not rehearse old arguments, only to say that I remain of the view that membership of the European Union was our best economic and social way forward, and to walk away was a foolish act of self-harm by Brexiteers.

“The European Union is the best example in the history of the world of conflict resolution.”

Words from my former leader John Hume, RIP. We cannot stand by and allow Brexit to destroy our economy and prosperity. I hope that Departments are making necessary preparations for what I still hope will be a deal. Our public services and economy have come through a rough time in recent months. We need to build resilience and support for businesses, services and communities in the times ahead.

I support the Bill. I hope that the Assembly can live up to the expectations that our people had earlier this year when, at long last, it was rebooted.

Mr Wells: I have been in this Chamber 26 years today, so this is my 26th Budget, and I have to say that I have heard it all before. What we have had is a succession of MLAs using the Budget as a platform to pursue their particular pet projects, be it issues in their own constituency or a wider concern. What I have not heard this afternoon — it is rapidly becoming this evening — is anybody suggesting where the pot of gold is that we are going to obtain to fund all these demands. We, as an Assembly, have to be realistic and suggest that we must raise more money if we are going to fund additional services. Barnett consequentials are limited; yes, extra funding has been made available because of coronavirus, but that is for particular, targeted purposes. The Minister cannot grab a couple of hundred million pounds that has been ring-fenced for coronavirus and use it for a new road scheme or extra provision within education.

There are areas where extra money could be raised, and I urge the Minister to address these, potentially for next year's Budget. I will give a few examples. The aggregates levy takes roughly £19 million a year out of the economy of Northern Ireland, and it is sent to the Exchequer. I have close contacts with the quarry industry, and I met two quarry operators from Northern Ireland this year who have paid over £1 million per quarry in aggregates levy. That is a huge amount of money that is being taken out of the economy. The irony is, of course, that, despite coronavirus, our quarry industry is doing exceptionally well.

All of those to whom I speak say that they have never been busier. Why is that? Some suggest that, because people have not been able to take holidays, they are carrying out improvements to their homes or, if they are farmers, to their land. Certainly, the quarry industry is very busy, which means that even more money is going to pour out of the economy through the aggregates levy. When the levy was introduced, the idea was that this money would be used for projects to ameliorate the damage to communities caused by quarries. Quarries, generally, have a very good track record in Northern Ireland of dealing with their local community. However, it is irksome that this money has been confiscated by London — or, probably, by Southend-on-Sea — yet, as far as I can see, not one penny has come back to Northern Ireland. This is important because although Northern Ireland makes up only 4% of the population of the United Kingdom, it accounts for nearly 12% of the quarry aggregate industry. We are a great success in this particular field. I ask the Minister of Finance to find out where that money has gone and why none of it, not even 4%, has come back to Northern Ireland, where it could be spent on important projects.

We have had the success of the plastic bag levy, which has reduced the use of single-use plastic bags by 80%. There is certainly room for that to increase, because it is a voluntary tax. People like me go to the supermarket and do not want to pay a shilling. For the benefit of younger people, that is 5p, but only about three people in the Chamber know what I am talking about. People can avoid paying that by bringing their own multiple-use bag. Why not consider increasing that to a more realistic level?

My point on MOT fees might be controversial. I am a regular visitor to the MOT centres in Newry, Downpatrick and Lisburn. You have only to see my car to know why. Just over £30 for an MOT is an absolute bargain compared with the rest of the UK. I can take a vehicle in — mine is normally worth about £250 — and, if I am fortunate and it passes, I walk out with a vehicle that could be worth treble that amount. All for a £30 fee. Maybe there is scope to address that figure. Of course, the Minister will say that this is all small stuff compared with what is needed to keep Northern Ireland going.

In the 26 years that I have been here, during every discussion on making the water service — Northern Ireland Water — a more effective model for the delivery of that essential service, there have been arguments about privatisation. It has been extremely unpopular. I am sure that even mentioning the word “privatisation” would have Mr Carroll jumping on me and threatening me with all sorts of sanctions because I had sworn. The halfway house is the Welsh model, Hyder, which was very successful in taking the funding of water out of the relevant Department. Here, of course, it is the Department for Infrastructure. The Welsh model funds water and enables adequate capital investment without being a burden on the economy. Today, several Members talked about the chronic underinvestment in water. There are so many examples of developments that cannot take place because of the lack of sewerage infrastructure and because many of the pipes supplying water to our community have long since passed their sell-by date. We need investment in our water, but it does not necessarily have to come from the public purse. In next year's Budget — it is important to keep mentioning the Budget, Mr Deputy Speaker — the Minister should consider a new way of funding our water service.

Several Members said that we need a radical change in how we provide hospital services. Every Member of the Assembly agrees with that statement, as long as it does not affect their local hospital. That is the problem that we face. When I was Health Minister, there was a proposal to change the configuration of the Northern Trust and the Western Trust. What was the reaction? The MLAs representing Coleraine arrived up with a petition signed by 23,000 people, saying, "Do not lay a finger on our hospital." That was the level of buy-in from that community. When there was a proposal to close Dalriada Hospital, I received, as Minister, a petition signed by, I reckon, 97% of everyone in the Moyle District Council area who was aged over 11. In fact, we could not find anybody in the area who had not signed that petition.

I remember going up to see the hospital — it was an excellent provision — and there was a tractor cavalcade in the town. They said that, if I tried to close Dalriada Hospital, the tractor cavalcade would ensure that I would not be leaving Moyle for many months, and I think they meant it.

The difficulty is that important health decisions need to be made. Health can be delivered in a much better way. We are spreading a limited resource over far too many buildings. Others who look at the provision of health in Northern Ireland are aghast at how many structures and buildings we require to deliver the service. Leicestershire has the same population size as Northern Ireland: two hospitals. Yorkshire is the same size: half the number of hospitals. However, if you suggest that to anybody in the Chamber, they will be on their feet immediately saying, "Yes, but don't you dare touch my facility".

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. The Member makes an interesting point that I have heard him make in the House before. Will he accept that, potentially, there is the ability to have that public conversation and make that change in light of the pressures facing our hospitals due to COVID-19?

Mr Wells: As you should know, the Bengoa report was one of many. We have had Compton, Donaldson and Bengoa. All three — and many others, such as Gerry Burns —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to link his comments about COVID and hospital reform to the Budget.

Mr Wells: They obviously outlined the concerns they had about the budgets for health service provision in Northern Ireland. All of those reports said that, if we were to try to bring the budget down to a sensible scale, a major realignment of hospital service provision in Northern Ireland was absolutely essential. Indeed, the First Minister and the deputy First Minister signed up to the Bengoa report and said that they wished to see it progressed. That is fine until you try to close one broom cupboard in one hospital in Northern Ireland. Watch the reaction of those who represent that area. Indeed, gone are the days when political dissension will bring 10,000 people onto the streets of Northern Ireland. Those days are over. However, touch a hair on the head of one hospital in Northern Ireland and you will have the entire adult population on the streets. How can we keep within a budget if that is the attitude that we have as a community?

Here we are 26 years on, 25 Budgets later, and still we cannot grasp that we are pouring a large amount of the

very scarce resource contained in the Budget down a black hole, because the structure is fundamentally wrong. I do not believe that a democracy in Northern Ireland can deliver these changes, because the pressures on the individual representatives are so intense.

I listened with great interest to the comments made by many Members criticising Departments that have not spent the money allocated to them in their budget. They have failed to remember what are called the monitoring rounds. We have a series of monitoring rounds every year — three or four per annum — where the resources that have not been spent by particular Departments, for various legitimate reasons, are brought back into a central pot and redistributed amongst those Departments that are experiencing pressures.

Quite frankly, there are times when Departments could never have made ends meet had it not been for the monitoring rounds. Certainly, when the monitoring rounds are published, there is no shortage of safe havens for the unspent money. It is unfair to say that there is anything particularly wrong in Departments voluntarily giving up money to provide extra funding, rather than trying to keep it within their bailiwick, to meet pressures that are emerging elsewhere. I have been involved in that process. I reckon I must have been involved in about 100 monitoring rounds over 26 years. Therefore, do not be critical of Departments who readily identify unspent funding and give it up. The tendency would be to try to spend it rapidly on some hasty project where there may not actually be a need.

Mr Frew made the point that it is unforgivable, after a series of monitoring rounds, to still be left with unspent money at the end of the financial year. Obviously, that is totally wrong. However, some of those who spoke today clearly do not understand the funding mechanism that the Assembly has to live within. We all face very dark times, and I detect in the Chamber that many Members are very uneasy with the present restrictions that have been implemented and the Budget set out for the implementation of those policies.

5.45 pm

I agree with Mr Frew. The landscape for support, and the Budget that has been outlined to support companies in this particular period of restrictions, is very different from that which was available in April, May and June when there was the luxury of 80% furlough payments for employed and self-employed people. There were grants of £10,000 and £25,000, and there were bounce-back loans. We now face a totally different situation. I believe that many companies will not see a resumption of trading in four weeks' time, and we have to accept that.

I accept that the Minister has a small budget in comparison to fund that. Compared to what was available to the Executive at the start of the financial year and what is available now, it is very small beer indeed. It is a very small amount and it will not save businesses from going to the wall. I ask him to include in his Budget companies that have not been asked to close but which will have to close because of the restrictions. No cognisance has been taken of their needs. I mentioned ferry operators earlier. The Carlingford ferry operator has not been told to close, but it will close.

The business model for soft-play areas depends not only on paying customers but on cafes. Their business model indicates that they have to have their cafes open to make them pay. The cafes are closed; therefore, soft-play areas are in great difficulties. Dog kennels depend on the holiday trade, which has absolutely died. They have not been told to close, but they will have to close because of the situation. The Minister should include in his Budget a scheme similar to the hardship fund in the earlier package that kept some of those businesses —.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. This is a problem that I face daily in my constituency. I have been liaising with the Minister on dog kennels, for example, for a long time. The knock-on impact of locking down the economy has budgetary impacts on many different sectors. To date, the Minister has relied on research, and I understand the need for it at the time, carried out by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, to establish the sectors that should be awarded rate relief. However, that has not taken into account those sectors that have had no support, and because of the sectors that are closed, there is essentially no business there for establishments that have been asked to stay open.

Mr Wells: I think that that is very relevant to the Budget being discussed this afternoon.

The final category that I would like to highlight is that, in the Budget, there is protection for the Department for Infrastructure's transport division and Translink's coaches. They will be protected in the present situation, but what about the hundreds of drivers and owners of private coaches in Northern Ireland who have seen their business dry up to absolutely nil since March? They still have to pay insurance, maintenance, rates and, more importantly, they have to pay the capital repayments for leasing the vehicles. A coach can easily cost £200,000 or £300,000. They have not been ordered to close down, but they have to close and they face wipeout. We could find that, eventually, the private sector is ruined and goes to the wall, which will provide Translink with a monopoly, and, of course, it will have been helped financially.

The Minister obviously committed some sins in a previous life to deserve the position of Minister of Finance at this juncture. There are many difficulties, but until we mature as an Assembly and stop saying, "Please give me, give me, give me" and suggest to the Minister and the Department of Finance where we feel this money can come from, I could be here for another 26 years listening to exactly the same debate and getting absolutely nowhere.

Mr McGrath: Maybe this could be a constituency double act: my constituency colleague detailed the ways to raise money, and I will detail the ways to spend that money. That would work well. I took the time yesterday to speak as Chair of the Executive Office Committee, and I welcome the opportunity to speak today as an MLA for South Down so that I can illustrate a number of the needs that are felt acutely by those living in my constituency.

The Budget is, indeed, a difficult business. The Minister responsible for its implementation is in an unenviable position. MLAs from across the North have spoken at length today, some at more considerable length than others. They also spoke yesterday to outline their constituents' needs and the areas where the Budget can deliver for them. Ministers will defend the financial need for

their portfolio, so all Departments must work together, as I mentioned yesterday, to deliver on a genuine cohesion of purpose.

Our Executive must move beyond the continued silo mentality that prevails. Such an approach stops our Executive being strategic and planned and developing interventions that have the greatest impact. Such a joined-up approach will stop duplication and, worse, interventions being missed. We must work together to see unity of purpose and spend. However, that works and is justified only when those who request moneys take responsibility and accountability for what is delivered. From those who have been given much, much shall be expected.

To place that in context, as I mentioned yesterday, the Executive Office received half a million pounds to work with the press in light of COVID. Initially, we saw how the COVID messaging was working. The public bought in to that up to the point where political leaders began taking the regulations and public health into their own hands and determining what was and was not in the spirit of the regulations.

While our Budget up to this point has been viewed through the lens of COVID, just as our politics have been viewed through the lens of Brexit for so long, we have to at least attempt to look at how we rebuild. I should say that it is absolutely regrettable that we see moneys allocated to the various Departments all too often go towards:

"expenditure on activities that are required as a result of the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union."

I imagine that this was another caveat that our resident Brexiteers failed to mention in the run-up to the referendum: "We will take back control, but, by God, it won't half cost you".

Brexit aside, we need to think big. I am a proud Irish nationalist, and I believe that we should think beyond our borders and the limitations of Brexit and COVID. As I detailed yesterday, we now have the commitment to the medical school at Magee. I want to see the medical school act as a driver for future development. Given that close to £1.5 billion is being allocated to the Department of Health, who is to say that we could not have a state-of-the-art nursing school at the Downe Hospital, as staffing is apparently the reason for the prolonged closure of our emergency department? The Downe Hospital is a fantastic facility and has great scope for further development. The adjacent Downshire complex has scope to be developed for classrooms and as a learning environment, and we could see, once again, a generation of medical practitioners graduate from Downpatrick. Yet that will need investment, and, yes, it will mean effort and work, but the payback could be immense, with more local people being able to avail themselves of the opportunity to train, more supply going into the much-depleted pool of nurses that our health service so desperately needs and a strengthening of our health service so that it serves all our communities and is fit for purpose.

The lesson of the Downe Hospital in recent months serves as a reminder to the Executive, going forward, that, when you place investment for the public at the heart of your portfolio, you win every time. Think of the positive ripple effect of Minister Mallon's delivery of Casement

Park for west Belfast and for the wider community that benefits from it. Think of the benefits of the Ballynahinch bypass, which we have waited for for so long and will, hopefully, see starting soon. Think of the benefits brought about by her continued commitment to the Strangford ferry. Think of the delivery of the Downpatrick park-and-ride facilities, although it must be said that I would gladly continue to campaign for upgrades to the A7 from Belfast to Downpatrick. Such a move would only further the connection of communities and people and provide stability through sustainable jobs, a bit like the exciting news that we heard today about the expansion of Finnebrogue Artisan in Downpatrick at the Down Business Park. It is creative and innovative thinking that will only go from strength to strength, but it is done with the skilful work and financing of its managing director, Denis Lynn, with little to no public investment. How much more could be done with the right support from our Department for the Economy? Today, that was an announcement of 300 jobs in the Downpatrick area. It is very welcome, but there is not much support from the public purse. Those are just a fraction of the benefits that we will be able to enjoy because of infrastructure that Minister Mallon has delivered. However, if we fail to do that —

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: Certainly.

Mr Frew: The Member says that the Minister has delivered: the Minister delivers a planning application that either meets the criteria or does not. How does the Minister for Infrastructure deliver those projects?

Mr McGrath: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, it is taken in the round of my conversations that, when you deliver for the public and deliver public investment, you deliver for jobs. I do not think that the idea was directly to connect two separate parts of my full speech.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can I draw the debate back to the Budget, please?

Mr McGrath: Certainly, because it is all about spend, Mr Deputy Speaker.

If we fail to spend but take the approach of the current occupier of Number 10 and try to progress such hare-brained schemes as a bridge to Scotland, disaster will follow and public confidence will plummet as vital public funds are flushed down the drain.

I welcome the fact that moneys have been allocated in the Department of Health to the Fire and Rescue Service, which protects all of us daily but often with little or no thanks. It is my hope that we will see, as part of this investment, the development of an all-island strategy to combat wildfires, which severely impact places such as the Mourne mountains in my constituency. Much like COVID, the fires do not recognise borders, so our response to them must reflect that.

In this year's Budget, over £300 million is committed to the Department for the Economy. While some of that money will undoubtedly be spent on the response to COVID, I welcome the fact that it will also be used for the delivery of city deals. If we look at ongoing work in Newry, Mourne and Down, we will, hopefully, soon see the delivery of the Mourne gateway project. While the project cannot be completed without the funds, it could not be delivered

without innovation and creative thinking from individuals working on the ground in local communities. Be under no illusion about the transformative power of the Mourne gateway project. We all know that County Down is the most beautiful county in Ireland, and the gateway project will cement its position as the number-one tourism destination in Ireland. The power of tourism is widespread across my area. Downpatrick has the wonderful product of ecclesiastical tourism as the home of St Patrick, world-renowned and pursued. The Lecale coastline is breathtaking, yet we have one of the smallest hotel headcounts in the North. Such investment could bring ripples across our economy.

Budget Bills are a long process, and they are not often the spiciest debates in the Chamber. However, they afford us the opportunity to think creatively and essentially to put our money where our mouth is. I look forward to seeing the North begin to rebuild after the devastation of COVID and, hopefully, find a way through Brexit. In future Budgets, I would like consideration to be given to a small towns budget to help towns like Downpatrick to regenerate and develop. With appropriate investment, even at a modest level, we could see the transformational power of public spending helping towns to have bespoke attributes that would make them attractive to residents and visitors, both those from the local area and from far-flung places. Such investment is always recouped manyfold by the local economy and is a worthwhile investment process. With about 20 to 30 small towns across the North, a rolling programme of a few million pounds each year could see them transformed in a short time.

I want to mention mental health, specifically youth mental health.

Young people are struggling, be it through the trans-generational impact of the Troubles; the prolific nature of drug abuse in communities; the peril of paramilitarism, which is still alive in some communities; or the evolving stress of modern life and the adjustment in online existence with bullying and cyberbullying. We need to tackle that matter now or we will store up problems for the future.

6.00 pm

I would like to see a well-resourced, ring-fenced fund to tackle youth mental health, both in schools and in communities. We have a well-run and well-equipped Youth Service across the North that is well placed to deliver that work. The Facilitating Life And Resilience Education (FLARE) project has had a fantastic impact on young people's lives. Such initiatives should be developed and enhanced. Their reach could be much greater if they were given the chance to enhance their work.

I reiterate: placing investment in the public at the heart of the portfolio wins every time. Investment in young people is investment in the future. Such investment is clearly strategic and beneficial. We can do it if we are willing to work together. I support the Budget (No. 3) Bill.

Mr Carroll: Yesterday, I spoke about the way in which the Executive were using the current crisis to drive forward policy in a way that ignores basic processes of scrutiny, accountability and transparency. The Budget Bill was laid late yesterday afternoon. By the time that I and other opposition MLAs got out of the Chamber and

got sight of it, we had only a matter of hours to look at the relatively scarce detail that is in front of us, making it, in real terms, impossible to amend or influence the process. As was pointed out yesterday, the way in which revenue Estimates and, indeed, the Budget are presented poses more questions than answers and offers little by way of understanding the financial need and projections of support that have existed over the years that preceded the mammoth health and economic crisis in which we now find ourselves.

The whole process says a lot about how the Executive, effectively, expect people to put up and shut up with regard to what advisers have told them and what they present. Frankly, the Executive, their advisers, the layers of management and chief civil servants who sit at the helm of the public sector have shown little ability for independent thought or action outside of what the Tories across the water have presented to them throughout the crisis since March. The Chamber has form in that regard in accepting years of Tory austerity, the privatisation of public services, schemes such as RHI and every other scandal that has engrossed some of those who sit in the Executive now. That Executive are presiding over what may well be the biggest disaster in their and, possibly, my political life as COVID cases surge, workers lose jobs as a result of the mismanagement of economic restrictions, the NHS struggles to provide basic things like the flu vaccine, and we peer into a very bleak winter indeed.

When the history books are written about the turbulent year that we have faced, there is no doubt that one area of agreement among historians will be that, on this island, we entered into the crisis with somewhat of an advantage because we are on an island and had the benefit of witnessing the virus spread across parts of Asia and mainland Europe. However, that advantage was wasted by a political elite of decision makers who are wedded to a for-profit neoliberal model of politics and economics. The same economics that decimated the NHS, cut ICU beds and reduced the public sector in the run-up to the crisis has seen the Executive, effectively, sacrifice public health and preside over a shambolic COVID strategy since March. As I said yesterday, the Executive wasted an important opportunity to reach a zero-COVID strategy in the spring/summer by rushing to reopen the economy before we could control the virus in any real sense.

The extent of the health and social crisis has, of course, seen Governments step in to intervene in their economies in a way that has contradicted the decades-long prevailing economic orthodoxy. Even the British Tories stepped in to pay workers' wages for some limited time because they knew that they needed to keep alive the political and economic system over which they preside.

In that context, there are, obviously, budget increases in some Departments compared with last year's expenditure. We have heard about that already. Anything else would be completely and utterly catastrophic in the period that we are in.

That expenditure clearly does not go far enough, however, if we consider how chronically underfunded this place has been for decades and the deep crisis that we are in, and probably will be in for some time. Increases for the Department for Communities, for example, will no doubt be welcomed by the Minister and the Executive, but they do not go anywhere far enough if we are to overhaul our

benefits system so that people are not falling through the cracks. Where is the payment for hospitality workers who are losing income? Where is the self-isolation fund for workers if their employer does not, or will not, pay them while they are needing to isolate? Where are the greater statutory sick pay levels for all workers who are unwell and have to take time off work?

As figures have shown in recent days, COVID is fundamentally a class issue. Workers are forced to work on the front line whilst billionaires can self-isolate on their private island. Since yesterday, many more workers from the same workplaces whose workers contacted me in March have done so again. They are worried that their employer is not taking the necessary precautions to protect them at this time and is, in fact, prioritising the maximisation of profit over the safety of staff and other people. What measures will the Executive take against non-compliant or obstructive employers? We have fines for individuals who breach the guidelines. Where is the same reproach for big companies that put staff at risk?

After this Budget, we are peering at the disaster of a chronically underfunded health service, if it is not a disaster already. On top of the massive COVID costs, people are concerned about surgeries being postponed or cancelled. As I said, our vulnerable population is being told that there is a shortage of the flu vaccine. That is largely down to the fact that our health service is overstretched, underfunded and understaffed. The Budget, as presented, will not fill that void, nor will it make a serious dent in the mental health crisis in our communities. We learned today that one in eight of our young people is facing anxiety, depression or some other form of mental health problem. How will the Budget tackle that? I do not think that it will.

Today, I was contacted by Civil Service workers who are worried about a lack of mental health support. They do not know where to go to or how to get help. They are worried about paying extra as they follow the guidance and try to work from home. Those issues need to be addressed, but it does not appear that they are addressed in the Budget. On top of that, and as I mentioned earlier, workers from Bombardier, Royal Mail workers in Derry and workers in other workplaces are up in arms about health and safety. I salute those workers for not going into work and for taking action to protect themselves. There is not a major injection of funding into the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). In fact, yesterday's Estimates indicated an actual reduction in spending. That is disgraceful beyond belief.

As I said yesterday, there has been a significant reduction in spending and in public-sector superannuation for Civil Service pensions as a result of the changes in the workforce that have been driven by years of austerity and the disastrous voluntary exit scheme, both of which have put massive pressure on staff, increased expenditure on agencies and impacted on trade union membership.

As some Members have said, the Westminster Government need to step up to the plate. We have been disrespected and underfunded for too long, and all parties should be shouting loudly about that. It is not good enough, however, simply to blame Westminster, when parties here have spent hundreds of millions of pounds on such schemes as the renewable heat incentive (RHI), PFI schemes and austerity schemes, and when they have agreed to increase expenses at the same time as job losses are happening.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Member give way?

Mr Carroll: I will give way.

Mr O'Dowd: The Member rightly talked about workers' rights. The increased expenses that he refers to are to pay his staff, and my staff, a proper wage, however. Is the Member objecting to that?

Mr Carroll: I refer the Member to debates that took place several months ago. One of the first things that the Assembly did on its return was increase pay for Members' staff. Why was sorting out their own staff, who in some cases are family members, the first thing that Members did, when there were workers waiting to be paid? Healthcare workers are still waiting for strike pay that they are owed. There is a list of workers as long as my arm who are waiting for fair pay. Why were party staff paid before those other workers?

Getting back to my point, there is also the issue of borrowing money to cut public-sector jobs and lower corporation tax but not to fund jobs and services. Mr Frew, if I heard him correctly, spoke of money not being spent by Departments. What is going on with that?

The Assembly has revenue-raising streams, including powers to borrow and to lift the cap on rates for the wealthy. These are, as has been said in many debates, extraordinary times, so extraordinary measures must be taken.

Yesterday, the Minister pointed out the need for alternative proposals to address some of the issues that I raised yesterday and today. That requires serious thinking outside the box, which the Department and Executive have not done or do not seem willing to do. Those measures should include an emergency wealth tax to pay for the COVID crisis and shaking the magic money trees that exist in the back gardens of the very wealthy who reside here, in the South and in the UK to ensure that those with the largest shoulders carry the heaviest burden.

We need to make a radical break from the failures of the free market to put people and health before profit. The Minister may say that it is not in his remit to do that, but I would ask him whether he agrees with the point. If he does, he needs to project that, as he has on other issues, with Finance Ministers in Scotland and Wales. A Sinn Féin Finance Minister should be fighting and arguing loudly for the rich to pay their way in a greater sense.

Household wealth has risen by 13% from 2016 to 2018 and stands at £14.6 trillion, or £221,000 per person. That enormous wealth should be used to avoid the austerity disaster that was implemented last time. Why are the Executive not highlighting and trying to reduce that massive inequality that is screaming out in front of us?

Rishi Sunak, the Tory Chancellor, is pressing for corporation tax to rise by 5%, back to its pre-2010 levels, I believe. Why is this Minister, and the Executive as a whole, not pushing for a higher rate of corporation tax, even beyond the 5% that Rishi Sunak is proposing? UK companies are already able to exempt £160 billion of their profits from taxation, in addition to receiving one of the lowest headline rates in the OECD. If that pre-2010 tax rate was implemented, if that £160 billion — even a significant proportion of it — was collected, we would be in a different situation entirely. The Executive and the Finance Minister should emphasise these points. Does he agree with these

points? If not, why not? If so, what is his strategy to press, fight, articulate and argue for them?

Given the extent of the crisis that we are living through, it is unhealthy to have such a lack of political opposition in this place. It is an unfortunate reflection of our political system and situation. For our part, we are elected to be a socialist opposition, to hold the bigger parties to account and to build an alternative in our communities and on the streets. For that reason, we do not, and I do not, go along with this Budget. Whilst I might find it hard to divide the Chamber today, I want to put on record my opposition to the Budget for the reasons that I outlined.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I thank Members for contributing to the debate. I noted down many of the issues that were raised. I know that we are not time-limited, but I do not intend to keep people any longer than I have to.

A lot of Members, as is always the case, have mistaken this debate for a debate that is setting a Budget, rather than one that is approving and legislating for expenditure that was approved in the March Budget, which we debated and passed. Indeed, some Members seem to be highly critical now of the content of what they voted for in March. That probably underlines the central point of the necessity for the review of the financial processes, so that people who come into these debates understand what they are talking about and what is in front of them rather than what they imagine it to be.

A number of points were raised that I wish to address. The Chair of the Committee raised the issue of the sole authority of the Budget.

Yesterday, in response to a question or a point during the debate — I am not sure which part of yesterday's proceedings it was — I said to Mr Allister that I accept that there needs to be a consistency of approach to approval. The fact that the amount was put into the Estimates and voted on is, in effect, approval. However, for good practice, we need to ensure that there is a formal letter of approval. There has been a variety of methods of approval — emails, letters and verbal approvals — and all those are included. He asked about the legislative competence. They are all included in the Estimates, so they are, in effect, voted on anyway. However, for consistency and transparency, we need to see that. The Department will put in place that process from here on in, and I thank the Committee for drawing that to our attention.

6.15 pm

The Chair of the Communities Committee raised a number of issues in relation to the impact on the monitoring round. It will not be delayed for much longer. We faced into a very busy fortnight in which a lot of emergency activity had to be undertaken. The intention is to do the monitoring round. Releasing financial transactions capital (FTC) is not so much about monitoring; it is more about obtaining a decision from the Office for National Statistics on housing associations. That decision is expected in the coming weeks. That will have a marked impact on improving our access to financial transactions capital. I also recognise the request that was made on behalf of Supporting People and the need to process the sign language strategy. I will discuss those issues further with the Communities Minister.

Matthew O'Toole, who is no longer with us, raised a number of issues, one of which was FTC. The Departments are aware of the potential that FTC offers to provide support for the private sector. I have always encouraged all Ministers to consider how best to use funding in that context. Given its nature as financial transactions, it is not possible under Treasury rules to recategorise it as resource or capital. He asked whether I was seeking flexibility from Treasury, particularly on switching unused capital to resource. At the moment, we anticipate full capital spend. However, I am seeking additional flexibility to transfer funding from capital to resource to allow us flexibility within our existing budgets and to respond dynamically to any unanticipated challenges in this year.

Matthew O'Toole also raised the issue of a review of financial process. From my opening remarks, he will know that I think that that would be very helpful. I have now been to several Budget debates in the Chamber. It is rare for them to be responded to in the way that they should be. Possibly, the one in March was, as Members recognised that that was the Budget. However, in responding to the rest of them, Members have been telling us what we should not be doing, even though they voted for it back in March. Ironically, as he will remember, back in 2011, when I was Chair of the Finance Committee, the Committee did a piece of work to review the budgetary process to try to streamline it and make it more transparent and accessible. That work needs to be continued. The more I listen to these debates, the more convinced I am of that.

Andrew Muir and others — including Mr Wells, who made related points — asked about the work to establish a fiscal council. This will also answer some of the points that Mr Carroll made. Of course we want to have tax-varying powers here and to be able to set our own policies. One of the central differences between Mr Carroll and me on this is that he thinks that, if you advocate these things enough, you will get fairness in the system at some stage. I do not believe that we will. I think that the only way that we will ever get fiscal fairness is to create our own constitutional future on this island, not within the current constitutional framework.

Mr Carroll: Thank you for giving way. I agree in broad terms with what, I think, he is outlining. However, does he agree that, as part of the united Ireland approach that he describes, the wealthier must pay a lot more? Positions that the Minister and his party have advocated previously did not seem to indicate that they were for that.

Mr Murphy: No. We have often indicated that we are for a much more radical approach to taxation and a fairer sharing of the burden. Even though I petition the Treasury for fairness and flexibility in its approach, I do not think that that is its instinct. It has not been the Treasury's instinct to take that type of approach for several hundred years. That is why I primarily advocate constitutional change on the island. I think that we can adopt our own approach to those matters.

Mr Muir asked further questions about the money that was set aside and ring-fenced for the health service. We recently received some detail about the spend of that money. I know that other Members raised that, and it brings me to the question about why we are not spending COVID money and are not going to spend it. I do not know where that comes from. We have ring-fenced £55

million out of £2.4 billion for something that everybody in the Chamber has spent the last two days arguing for: to help those who have been left behind. If propositions are not brought forward very quickly by the responsible Departments to help those people who have been left behind, I will allocate that money elsewhere through the Executive. Of course, they will have to approve that. There is no question of not being able to spend the money.

We have received some detail on the money for the health service. It knows the time frame within which the money has to be spent and it will, according to itself, take up the lion's share of that — over £500 million — and release some back for further allocations within the Executive. That is what it asked for. Of course, in their response to the pandemic, the priority of the Executive has been to protect and support the health service, and that money was quite rightly ring-fenced for its use.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for giving way and for his comments. He raised an interesting point, particularly on the cash totals that we have to be able to deal with in what is now a remarkably short period, bearing in mind that we are rapidly approaching the end of the financial year. We must be able to put those bids in place. On behalf of the Assembly, I ask the Minister to encourage the rest of his ministerial colleagues to expedite that process. We do not have time to waste, and we must be able to support our economy and our businesses as well as our health service.

Mr Murphy: Of course. I have said that repeatedly, and I have said that I want to see that at recent Executive meetings. I have listened to all the arguments about "Our Minister is good" and "Your Minister is bad". That stuff does not get us anywhere. I want to see projects delivered. People have now decided who is responsible for what, and I have asked them to bring propositions to me as quickly as possible. Of course, I have also asked that they bring propositions to me for the additional £200 million, which we received only last Friday.

I recognise that the COVID money that we have received — the £2.4 billion — has to be spent in this financial year. That is why we gave Health the time to have a proper look at that £600 million that was available to it and to make sure that it could bring forward properly costed proposals and understood the time frame in which the money had to be spent. That was clearly my intention. In the middle of all that, we have had monitoring rounds for the ongoing allocations to Departments outside of COVID. The October monitoring round will be brought forward very quickly, and we will have a further monitoring round in January.

I am not sure if it was Mr Wells who said that the biggest sin is to return money at the end of the financial year, but I agree with that. That often does not lead to the best spending when we are in an annual Budget system and Departments are forced into trying to spend money because it is a bigger sin to hand it back than spend it on something that, perhaps, is not so strategically important. However, that is the situation that we are in until such times as the comprehensive spending review allows us to move into a multi-annual budgetary situation and plan that better. That is why we have asked for carry-over flexibility if we end up not spending all the money. From my time as the Minister for Regional Development, I know that Roads Service was always ready to spend all the unspent money in January, February and March on road improvements. That was welcome and needed, but it is not a strategic way

to spend our money. Of course, we want to make sure in relation to that.

Mr Givan raised a variety of points, but one question that he asked was about money that had been returned by the Health Department. It returned £2.5 million of capital funding for the mother and children's hospital flagship project. It also returned £6.3 million of resource in the October monitoring round because of a reduction in the Agenda for Change pay pressures. It is not that Health was unable to spend the money, but it is a fact that sometimes either projects do not cost as much as originally thought or money that was anticipated for things such as the Agenda for Change is not used.

Mr Givan went on — Mr Frew raised similar points yesterday and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Mr Buckley raised them today — to challenge the decisions that were taken by the Executive in relation to the interventions that were necessary for next week. I am not getting into that. Arguably, from a benign point of view, that debate is within the DUP. Others might categorise what is going on within the DUP in relation to these measures much more stridently. He said that members of the Executive had wanted to close schools for six weeks. That is not true. Apart from the Health Minister and the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Executive Ministers do not bring proposals to the Executive about restrictions. They are brought forward by the Health Department and are transposed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister into a paper for the Executive. We do not come to the Executive with propositions about the length of time of restrictions, the severity of measures or what is required to reduce the R number. Those are brought forward to us.

That mischaracterisation has gone on for over a week, and I will take this opportunity to clear up the matter, as it was repeated in some media outlets as well, as it was briefed last Monday. We did not, and do not, propose for any longer restrictions because we do not bring propositions to the Executive. We listen to advice, to discussion and to debate, and we take in what the medical experts tell us, what we know the impact will be on society and the economy, and then we take our decisions. There is a responsibility on all of us — not just on those of us who are in the Executive — to argue for those decisions if that is what our parties have backed. If people have a different view in their party, that is a matter for their party discipline.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way. I hear what he is saying. I do not pretend for a moment to think that his job is not highly difficult. However, can the Minister explain to the House how you can make such an impactful decision on a Tuesday night yet have Ministers running about on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday not knowing the implications of Tuesday night's decision?

Mr Murphy: First, if the Member wants context, he should ask his own Ministers, including his party leader, who brought the propositions for those decisions to the Executive. These things are done at pace. The rate of transmission, as he knows, was going through the roof, particularly in certain areas, but right across the North.

We got advice from the Department of Health that we needed to take action immediately. That did not allow people to figure out how to get all their ducks in a row, because the virus, by that stage, had spiralled further out of control, and people would say, "Why did you not take

action sooner?" It is a balancing act between taking the necessary interventions and making sure that we have all the regulations lined up, with all their implications for all the various businesses. It is not a clean or clear-cut process; it is one that requires speed of action and as much clarity as we can possibly bring to it.

Mr Wells: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): On a point of order, Mr Wells.

Mr Wells: Mr Deputy Speaker, you have admonished many humble Back-Benchers throughout this debate because they had drifted from the Budget to a debate on coronavirus. Can I suggest that the Minister is doing exactly the same thing?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Member is attempting to do the job of the Deputy Speaker. This can be a difficult one, but you tend to allow some latitude. In fact, I was doing that so that the Minister could respond to comments. However, I was about to encourage him to come back to the Budget debate.

Mr Murphy: I am certainly happy to take your advice, a LeasCheann Comhairle. However, I am responding to the points that were raised after you gave latitude in the first instance, [*Laughter*] so it would hardly be fair to allow Members to raise points with me without allowing me to respond to them.

As I said, that debate has raged on in the DUP. I hope, for all our sakes, that some meeting of minds happens in that party, because the more clarity we have on the public message, the better for all of us.

Declan McAleer, who spoke on behalf the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, raised the issue of EU exit costs, and, of course, we have continued to press the Treasury to meet those in full, as they have committed to do. We have not yet had that confirmation, but we will continue to press for it. There are concerns about the future of farm payments, and I wrote recently to the Treasury to express my concern about how that is planned to be rolled out. That is a matter of concern for us all.

Robin Newton mentioned EU funding for education programmes. That funding was supposed to be replaced under the shared prosperity fund, but we have yet to receive any clear detail about that.

Caoimhe Archibald asked about the Treasury engagement for the job support scheme. We have rehearsed that many times here. Initially, the job support scheme was not intended to provide any assistance, other than to those who were working for at least one third of their normal hours. That has been changed in recent times to recognise that the further restrictions require greater support. That is welcome. However, it is nowhere near the scheme that had been advanced with regard to job retention earlier in the year. I think that it will inevitably cause people to lose their jobs, and that is a concern for us. She also asked, again, as did many Members, about the sectors that have been left out. As I have said, the £55 million was set aside some months ago by me in a proposition to the Executive to allow space and time for those schemes to be brought forward. It is a matter of regret that some of them have not been brought forward. Again, I encourage Ministers to get down quickly to providing some support there.

6.30 pm

Many points were raised about education, with Robin Newton raising a number. I understand his passion for the subject and do not doubt his sincerity, but I know that he will recognise that 10 years of austerity Budgets mean that schools are in the red with their budgets and that classroom assistants are being paid a pittance on part-time contracts for doing vital work. Those, along with the special educational needs (SEN) budget, which we increased this year, were low-hanging fruit and were the first areas to be hit by austerity. The impact of that cannot be overestimated in the context of the ongoing situation. I agree with him about the value and importance of education for young people. It is not just about the three Rs, as he said; it is about the sense of worth and of having a chance in society that education can provide. We cannot set aside the impact of that.

Some Members, including Kellie Armstrong — I see that she is not with us — and Jonathan Buckley raised the issue of underspends by Departments. Mr Wells made the point that I was going to make: monitoring rounds are a necessary process. If we did not have them, we would be rigidly fixed in our budgetary spend to what we agree at the start of the financial year. For a variety of reasons, some projects do not go ahead as planned, and some budgets are allocated on the basis of anticipated spend and some on on-demand spend that may not materialise. We have to have the ability to reshuffle money as the year goes on, and the objective is to make sure that we spend out, against our own agreed priorities, that money before the end of the year.

Kellie Armstrong asked about the labour intervention. The Executive were unable to meet the bid from the Department for Communities for £4.8 million for labour market interventions due to needs from other COVID pressures that presented at the time. The Department for Communities has funded the initial pressure internally in the short term and is open to bid again in-year and as part of the forthcoming budgeting exercise.

In relation to Mark Durkan's contribution, one of the benefits of being about here long enough — I have been here since 1998 — is being able to remember the positions that parties have taken over the years. One of the downsides is that, over time, one loses tolerance for listening to them. He waxed on about the welfare mitigations and threatened that the Minister should not expect accelerated passage to be accepted. The first Welfare Reform Bill that came through here was brought in by his party colleague Margaret Ritchie, and she asked the Assembly for accelerated passage to bring it through. I remember, because I was part of the negotiations on welfare mitigations between five parties, and it was us that held out for the welfare mitigation package. Sometimes people like him operate on the basis that if something happened more than a week ago, the public will not remember it, but, thankfully, I have been around here long enough to remember all that.

He criticised the Budget for not having a housing plan. Of course, he went on to recognise that the Budget was the same one that he voted for and agreed in March and that had been set in train before the Executive came back and needed approval within a number of weeks of their coming back.

In relation to investment in infrastructure, I assure the Member that the Department for Infrastructure has received its biggest capital budget so far this year. It is up to the Department and the Minister to prioritise that capital budget. I do not disagree about the need for capital investment in water and sewerage infrastructure, but, of course, that is a decision for her. The Department has a capital budget of £558 million, which is by far the largest capital budget of any Department and represents more than 36% of the Executive's total capital budget.

It is a matter of prioritisation. I do not go into the Department for Infrastructure, nor would anyone there expect me to, to dictate how that money is spent. I also recently allocated an additional £15 million in capital that has enabled Northern Ireland Water to bring forward investment in sewerage infrastructure, including a number of waste water treatment works, this year. Of course, I will meet the Infrastructure Minister in the near future to talk about budgetary requirements for next year.

I assure him that we are tracking the location of jobs. The estate that is needed by the Civil Service has reduced and will probably continue to reduce as a consequence of COVID and of more people working from home. However, we also want flexible arrangements, which is why we have been looking at regional hubs so that civil servants can work there. That is more accommodating to their lives, and it also reduces their carbon footprint and the need for transport in and out of Belfast, as many of them work there every day. That will help us to deal with some of the problems that arise in that regard.

I have already said that I am not sure where Mr Frew gets his information that we are not spending the COVID money. We are spending that money, and the plan is to spend it all out. We now have figures from Health about the largest chunk that is left. We have had an additional £200 million and we need economic intervention. Economic interventions are in this Budget. The Member kept asking about the Budget (No. 3) Bill and where the money is; it is in the Bill and he should read it. He has misunderstood the Bill, because the money that we agreed, which he voted for last March, is in the Bill, and the money that we received for COVID is also in it. We have allocated more money to businesses this year than probably ever in the history of the Executive.

Mr Wells: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Mr Wells: The Minister has made that specific point many times. He knows the circumstances that we faced in March, when things had to be rushed through and we were just at the start of the pandemic. I am sure that he will accept that much has changed in the intervening six or seven months. Do honourable Members not have the right to reconsider their position, given the historic events that we are now facing?

Mr Murphy: Of course, and it is up to the Member whether he votes against the Budget (No. 3) Bill, as can Mr Wells if he wishes to do so. However, he must bear in mind that we brought the Budget (No. 2) Bill through since March, so we have been trying to manage the situation. Of course, these are unprecedented times, but the Member argued that there is no money for this or that in the Budget. We have given more money in business support than has ever been

given out by an Executive in the history of this place, and it is all in this Budget.

More money has now been allocated for business support. It might not be enough as far as the Member is concerned, but we have more money allocated and we have more money to allocate. I have asked people, such as his colleague in the Department for the Economy and other Ministers, to bring forward propositions to spend that money as quickly as we possibly can. We recognise, having talked to businesses and dealt with them, that, as well as the key issue of supporting wages, which is about keeping workers in jobs, businesses need cash to keep them afloat. That is what we have been trying to do.

Mr Muir: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Mr Muir: Throughout the debate today, we have heard lots of people calling for action for different sectors and for different Departments to bring that forward. It would bring transparency to know what bids the Finance Minister has received from Departments. Could those be proffered as part of the October monitoring round? It is important to know whether those bids are there; otherwise, nothing will happen.

Mr Murphy: There are two exercises at play and there is an overlap between them. That is just the way that this year has gone. In a normal year, all the action would be in the monitoring rounds because that is when Departments bid for any money that is surrendered. We have also had injections of COVID money that have come across from London, so we are trying to manage both things. The bids are in for the October monitoring round, but there is also COVID money to be allocated, so it will be seen in the totality of all those bids. Of course, when it comes to an allocation, we produce the chart when we make a statement — the Executive agree it — about the money that was bid for and the money that was allocated. Members will be able to see that chart at that time.

As I said, the Budget process for next year will begin as soon as we can get the information from London. The Member berated me at one stage for not going away and setting that Budget. I do not know the time frame for a Budget, nor do I know the amount that I will have, so it would be quite irresponsible of me to start to set a Budget now. That is why we have pressed the Treasury for information about the comprehensive spending review. That will dictate how much money we will have and over what time frame we will have it.

As soon as we have that information, we can start to set the Budget and consult on it. That is the time to have that debate when all the Members who have ideas about what should be in that Budget can have their say about what we should be spending our money on. That is a debate that we should, perhaps, have had this time last year. It was rushed through because the Executive were back only in January, but that is a debate that we will have in the time ahead. I look forward to all the contributions and suggestions coming forward at that stage.

I agree with Mike Nesbitt's point about an outcomes-based Programme for Government. That is infinitely preferable, and I fully support it. He made a point about no leadership being shown in the debate. Again, I have been long enough about here to remember all those issues. The

Good Friday Agreement happened in 1998, and it was 1999 before an Executive was formed. Questions about a dearth of leadership have been about this place for a long time and at various stages.

Jim Wells made various points relating to the fiscal commission issue, the aggregates levy and other things. That is the sort of debate that we need. That is why I want to establish a commission that will look at all those issues and generate a debate in this institution that will allow us to decide whether we can take more tax-varying powers and, if we take them, what we can use them for. That is how all those ideas can be brought to the Floor.

The Member made the point about companies that have to close, as opposed to ones that are obliged to close, as a result of the restrictions. We can consider being more generous, and the Economy Minister has talked about the supply chain and businesses that have been severely impacted. The initial run of money — certainly in the scheme that I brought forward — was to get it directly to those who were obliged to close. Further schemes should try to have a broader support in the economy. The job support scheme that will pay the wages of those people is fairly rigid and is based around businesses that are obliged to close. If people in ancillary businesses decide that it is not profitable enough for them to remain open, we can try to get some support to them, however limited that is, but the job support scheme from Britain will not apply to their staff if they go off.

Mr Buckley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: There is a variety of —. I will go for Mr Buckley since he *[Inaudible.]*

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for giving way. On that point, the University of Ulster carried out economic analysis on the important rate relief that is so essential to the budgets of businesses of that type. Will you consider widening the scope of that to cater for businesses that, unfortunately, may not have been forced to close but are facing the impact?

Mr Murphy: Quite a lot of retail and hospitality already has the rate relief for the full year. They continue to benefit from rate relief, as do a lot of retail businesses. As many people have told us, the effect of COVID will still be with us beyond the end of this financial year. We are already considering rate relief beyond March of next year for targeted sectors.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way again. I am grateful for his time. On the job retention scheme, which he says is quite rigid, there are a number of scenarios in which a large retail unit has a restaurant within it and it is the restaurant that has been forced to close but not the retail unit. Will they still be able to apply for the job retention scheme to pay the wages?

Mr Murphy: It is the job support scheme. The job retention scheme is the original scheme, which is more commonly known as the "furlough scheme". We have been told that the job support scheme is for businesses that are obliged to close under the regulations. If that is a portion of the business within a larger business, it may well apply to the workers who are in that portion of that business. If others in the supply chain decide that it is not profitable enough and that there is no point in staying open and that there is no business to be done, they may not qualify for

the job support scheme. In whatever support that we can put out to schemes, we need to bear in mind that the key thing of the retention of workers for many businesses will not necessarily apply in circumstances where they have closed when they have not been obliged to.

I will give way one more time. I am sure that everybody else wants to get home tonight.

Mr Wells: The Minister is dealing with a very important issue that every MLA has been approached on. I give him one example that he will be very aware of: the Carlingford lough ferry has not been told to close, but its business has collapsed as a result of the lockdowns on both sides of the border. I have been approached by a lady whose job is to supply hotels with equipment and furniture. Again, she has not been told to close, but her business has completely dried up. Would he consider a scheme where, if a company or a business can show that 90% of its trade has stopped as a result of the latest restrictions, they could qualify for funding that comes out of the Northern Ireland block grant rather than it coming from the job retention scheme?

Mr Murphy: There are two difficulties with that. The Economy Minister will bring forward some hardship schemes for businesses that are in what might be considered to be the supply chain and that are affected by the general economic downturn. There are two issues. One is the cost of the wage, which, if we brought in all businesses affected, would be beyond the means of the Executive. The other thing is the data. We do not possess the data to support us to be able to do a job retention or job support scheme. That data is held by HMRC. It has been asked whether it would assist in the development of such a proposal from here and has given a point-blank refusal to that. We do not have the data, and I suspect that the cost of such a scheme would be beyond what we have left of the COVID money.

A range of other points were raised, and I will try to finish those points. One of the questions that Gerry Carroll raised was about the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) staff reduction of cost. Ironically, it is a reduction of cost due to COVID-19, because the events that the HSE staff would have run or attended, such as the Balmoral show or awareness events, have not been able to take place.

All the outreach work that they would have done has therefore not been able to happen. That has reduced the cost. It is not about safety issues but about some of the outreach work that the HSE does. The programme spend has been utilised in other ways, however, such as for online and media campaigns targeting areas of high risk, such as falls from height in construction and aspects of agriculture and manufacturing. It has re-profiled its expenditure in that way.

6.45 pm

A LeasCheann Comhairle, I have tried to answer as many questions as I can without wearing out your patience and that of the rest of the staff here. I will draw my remarks to a conclusion. It is imperative that the legislation debated today continue its passage through the Assembly so that public services here can continue to be delivered to our citizens. I ask Members to support the Bill, thereby authorising spend on public services by Departments for the 2020-21 financial year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before we proceed to the Question, I advise Members that, as this is the Budget Bill, it is established practice that the motion requires cross-community support and that that support be clearly demonstrated.

Question put.

Some Members: Aye.

Mr Carroll: No.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): It would be preferable if we did not have to move to a Division.

Question put a second time and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill [NIA Bill 09/17-22] be agreed.

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

Motion made:

That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.]

Adjournment

Lack of Rail Connectivity in Foyle

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In conjunction with the Business Committee, the Speaker has given leave to Ms Martina Anderson to raise the matter of the lack of rail connectivity in Foyle. The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes in which to speak and the Minister, Ms Nichola Mallon, will have 10 minutes in which to respond. Ten minutes plus 15 minutes is 25 minutes. The debate can last for only an hour, which means another 35 minutes. At present, three Members have indicated to me that they wish to speak, so, in theory, those three Members could have longer than the Minister, should they choose to take that time, but I am not certain that they will. If any other Member wants to participate in the debate, please rise in your place, and I will add your name to the list.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. A chairde, I proposed the Adjournment topic to bring to the Assembly the important issue of rail in the north-west. I thank the Minister for being in the Chamber this evening. We start the debate three hours later than we thought we would.

If you look at a map of Ireland's rail network, you are likely to notice straight away the complete lack of infrastructure in the north-west compared with that on the rest of the island. It sticks out like a sore thumb. You need only to glance at a rail map of the island of Ireland to see a glaring and obvious problem.

From Derry out into the north-west, you can see only a blank space. Where once, before 1960, four rail lines converged in Derry, now there is only one. Derry's railway station is the second most isolated train station on the entire island of Ireland, and it is only one of a pitiful three railway stations in the north-west, out of 53 railway stations in the North of Ireland. Compare that with a hundred years ago, when we enjoyed a much more extensive network that connected communities across the island. Now, old rail tracks and stations are scattered throughout the country, reminding us of what our rail network used to look like. Over the last century, as the economic impact of partition has festered, Ireland's rail infrastructure has rotted.

Over the lockdown, like many people in Derry, I walked out what is called "The Line", for exercise. While surrounded by the beautiful sights of the River Foyle, of ancient oak and wild rabbits, you only needed to look down to see the decaying carcass of the old Derry rail line to Carrigans in Donegal. Thousands of people driving over what is called the Craigavon Bridge from the city side to the Waterside will pass the dilapidated ruins of the old Victoria Road train station that used to connect Derry to Strabane and onwards to Portadown and Dublin. That is the legacy of partition and underinvestment.

Developing rail infrastructure in Derry is essential to draw together the people of the north-west to our natural hinterland. It will erode the devastating impact of partition

and create a safe, clean and durable infrastructure for the people of Derry for many generations to come. If we are serious about developing a modern, thriving, all-Ireland economy, we must be equally serious about building a modern, durable, all-Ireland rail infrastructure network.

For too many years there have been a number of failed attempts to close the Derry rail station. Comments expressed by some, and the attitudes of some officials in the Department for Infrastructure, have concerned many. We were told that, "Rail is too expensive" or, "Rail is an old-fashioned idea" or, "There is not enough demand". Rail, starved of financial support, is not presented as a viable transport alternative by some officials, so what can one expect when officials have been trying for years to get a service of regular timetabling, starve it of financial resources and allow the rail track to crack and buckle by not replacing stretches of it since the 1960s?

Despite the naysayers, since 2011, the number using the Derry service has increased exponentially. Sinn Féin's Infrastructure Minister at the time, Chris Hazzard, did play his part in that we saw passenger numbers increase by 40% in one year, smashing all estimates. Chris Hazzard, as Minister, contributed massively to improving connectivity in the north-west by developing an hourly Derry to Belfast service and delivering the north-west transport hub, not to mention ring-fencing funding for the likes of the A5, as well as getting the A6 under way. All of that was delivered within less than a year in office.

Minister, instead of trying to blame past Ministers, who clearly did deliver for the region, I suggest that you and your party would be better committing to delivering for rail in the north-west in the here and now. Sinn Féin will support you in that. That is what the people of Derry want to hear, and they are fed up hearing this ping-pong blame.

In 2019, the Department for Infrastructure projected that there would be shy of 2 million journeys on the Derry rail line. In fact, there were over 3 million. Not only is there a demand for rail; there is a need for rail. Derry's rail line needs to deliver for workers, families and young people. Yet, in 2020, each train that leaves Derry takes over two hours to get to Belfast, and, believe it or not, that is an improvement on what it used to be. Only a single train leaving Derry arrives in Belfast before 9.00 am, when the workday starts. Not a single Derry to Belfast express train service runs.

We cannot escape from the fact that rail has the potential to play a massive role in the transport of the future. It is not in memory of Victorian antiquity, unlike what some, unfortunately, even some in the Department for Infrastructure, think, or thought, I hope. In Europe, rail is the backbone of major economies, and it helps to prevent the decimation of rural communities whose people would otherwise need to move into the cities to be close to where they work. Affordable rail will cut pollution, reduce our reliance on cars and connect communities.

Earlier this month, I was impressed by the Minister's announcement of a feasibility study into high-speed rail connectivity:

"Derry — Belfast — Dublin — Limerick — Cork".

However, upon investigation, I discovered that this was not an announcement of a study; it was an announcement of a plan for a study. Whatever the outcome of that study, it does not guarantee that work will automatically

commence. Indeed, my party colleague Darren O'Rourke TD's reply from Minister Eamon Ryan specified only a study of rail speeds around:

"Belfast — Dublin — Limerick — Cork line",

with no mention of Derry.

Minister, will you clarify the position, please? You appreciate that the people of Derry do not want piecemeal promises that are polished and spun to conceal inaction. The people of Derry deserve the delivery of high-speed rail from Derry to Belfast to Cork to Dublin and to Limerick. We also deserve the delivery of the western arc, from Derry to Letterkenny to Sligo and to Galway.

If we really want a just transition to a green, sustainable future, investing in rail is not only an option; it is a necessity. A good start would be to deliver the upgrade of the Derry to Coleraine rail line, ensuring that it is future-proofed for generations to come. We need this feasibility study to be completed at pace. It needs to be done yesterday. As the world looks to recover from COVID-19, the first thing that investors and businesses will see in our beautiful city of Derry is our infrastructure and connectivity. Without rail, Derry will once again lose out.

Minister, we talked about this before, and your Department has received its highest ever capital allocation. As a member of the Infrastructure Committee, I acknowledge the pressures, but we need a time frame for when it is anticipated that construction work will begin on upgrading the Derry to Coleraine track. We need another time frame for the high-speed rail feasibility study, and we need a guarantee that work will commence. We need a third time frame for the advancement of the western arc concept.

Minister, I am sure that you will agree that it is time to be ambitious, time to be visionary, time to deliver rail for Derry and time, once again, to unite the people of Derry, Donegal and Dublin.

7.00 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member did not use her full allocation, which gives me 39 minutes. Six Members want to speak, so I can allow a time limit of six minutes and 50 seconds per Member. I just want to clarify that Mr Durkan and Ms McLaughlin wish to participate in this debate. Yes? As constituency Members, you get first call.

Mr Durkan: I very much welcome this evening's debate and thank the Member for bringing it to the House. Ms Anderson has outlined clearly the undeniable and blatant disparity in rail provision between the east and west of Northern Ireland and, indeed, the east and west of the island. A quick glance at a map detailing the rail network across the island shows the gaping hole in the north-west that is a stark image that demonstrates, beyond question, the impact of historic neglect and, quite feasibly, deliberate disinvestment in rail in that area.

It is hard to believe, but that picture would be even starker if the former Department for Regional Development and Translink had had their way 10 years ago, when they signalled that it was the end of the line for the Derry line. Huge credit and thanks must go to the local lobby group, Into the West, who saw not only the folly of that plan but the real potential of the Derry-Belfast or Belfast-Derry line to grow. A great campaign was fought. Sadly, in our

constituency, we are well rehearsed in mobilising to fight campaigns against such injustices, and that campaign was won. How the service has grown, with incremental improvements in timetabling and the use of EU funding to build a new multimodal transport hub. I certainly acknowledge the role that Chris Hazzard played in that. Those improvements, however, have been outstripped by a growth in rail passenger numbers, with a 61% increase in the two years since the hourly Belfast service was introduced in 2017. That is the fastest rate of passenger growth anywhere on the island. If we build it, they will come, and, if we build it up further, even more will come.

I am delighted that the Minister is not letting Translink sit on its laurels. She is pushing it to continue investing in and improving the existing services and infrastructure. That has been evidenced clearly by her responsiveness to issues raised by us as local elected representatives, even something as apparently minor as extending the availability of discounted journeys to Dublin that had previously, bizarrely, started and finished at Coleraine. It was not that minor that Translink could or would fix it without the Minister's intervention. She has looked at and continues to look at timetable tweaks to improve connectivity with Dublin. She has reversed the decision of her predecessor, Chris Hazzard, who removed plans for phase 3 — the renewal of the track between Castlerock and Eglinton — from this Budget period, and she has commissioned a feasibility study. An updated one was required, given that phase 3, as I said, had not been included in the next Budget period by Chris Hazzard. I do not enjoy political ping-pong, as Ms Anderson puts it, but being rebuked by Ms Anderson for blame game politics and negativity is like getting a goalkeeping lesson from Jordan Pickford.

The Minister remains engaged with Into the West, so this Minister has done well to get us back on track in the 10 months that she has been in post. Any time I discuss or debate the issue of rail in the north-west, I think of our late colleague and great friend, John Dallat. He was a true champion of rail. In many ways, unlike the trains, he was ahead of his time, seeing and espousing the environmental and economic benefits that investment could bring. He would be most proud of your commitment, Nichola. However, just as you will not let Translink rest on its laurels, he certainly would not have let the Minister rest on her laurels either, and she is not. In collaboration with her Southern counterpart, Minister Eamon Ryan, she has expanded on the New Decade, New Approach commitment to high-speed cross-border conductivity to include the north-west. We have to look beyond Derry being the end of the line, as the potential for growth is massive. We would love to see an extension of the network and the restoration of rail in Tyrone, using Derry as a springboard into Donegal and beyond, as Ms Anderson said.

We need to have the ambition to create an all-Ireland rail network, and that ambition must be matched with investment and effort. I have no doubt that we can work collectively across the Chamber and in the Executive to deliver these much-needed and much-demanded services.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I suspect that, with any other Deputy Speaker, the Jordan Pickford thing would have been a hit, but football is completely over my head.

Ms Mullan: I am only after asking my colleague who Jordan Pickford is. I will google him after this.

I welcome tonight's debate, which has been brought by my colleague, Martina Anderson, and I thank the Minister for attending. I know that she is aware of the Derry line's history and the lack of rail infrastructure. It is an issue that unites all the parties in Foyle. I was a recent attendee at an Into the West meeting and heard about its long journey and the commitment that those people have given to fighting for rail infrastructure that is fit for our city and region. I pay tribute to that group for the work that it does.

As has been mentioned, the Derry to Belfast line has enjoyed much success over the past few years, all the while fighting to be recognised as a key element of our public transport network. The impressive passenger number increases on the Derry line after my colleague, Chris Hazzard, introduced hourly services to Belfast have led to Derry becoming one of the fastest-growing stations on the island, and that is a testament to the powers of rail to increase connectivity and incentivise people to take up public transport. The increase in passenger numbers has exceeded expectations, and we need to build on that. By decreasing journey times and increasing the frequency of the services, we can make public transport the transport option of choice.

The inclusion of Derry in the feasibility study for a high-speed rail network is very welcome, Minister. That needs to be pursued by action and delivery on the ground. As Mark Durkan said, a feasibility study on phase 3 of the line has been commissioned by the Minister, but I ask the Minister to go further and commit to delivering on that. It is a common belief that the north-west has a substandard state service in comparison with east of the Bann, and it should be an objective of the Department to end that perception.

A century ago, Ireland had a much more comprehensive rail network. I am sure that most Members have seen the pictures, as it is a popular image on social media. It makes our current network look pale by comparison. It also highlights how the north-west's services were completely stripped away over the years, and who can deny regional inequality when they see the map? The north-west does not enjoy a rail network; it has a line connecting Belfast to Derry, a journey that takes two hours and 15 minutes. For many of us who travel to Belfast daily, taking the train is not a viable option. The line also possesses some of the most isolated stations on the island. The large appetite for rail in the north-west has been demonstrated, and we must build on that and provide a modern service for the people.

Over 30 years ago, my granda, a native of Belfast, used to take me on the train from Derry to Belfast and back home again. Over 30 years later, apart from the new transport hub building, little has changed. There has not been the expansion and investment that a region like the north-west would expect. Let us get phase 3 of the railway works delivered, let us improve the frequency of services, let us reduce journey times, let us look at increasing stations on the line and let us not confine the conversation to the current network.

We all look at the old rail network with astonishment, but no action is ever proposed to right that wrong. Let us begin exploring the expansion of the rail network in order to address the decades of neglect and underinvestment that the north-west has suffered.

Our rail network can play a huge role in tackling our carbon emissions. Emissions from transport amount to

around 23% of the total greenhouse gas emissions in the North. It is the second highest carbon emitter on the island. By improving our rail services, we can make public transport a much more attractive alternative to private car journeys. However, an issue for rail as a whole is that our rail network is largely dependent on fossil fuels. We need to start decarbonising our rail network to make it truly sustainable.

We need only observe the success of the rail line in recent years to recognise the benefits that a greater service could bring to the north-west. Although we are in a challenging period, we always need to plan for the future, and that should include improving a service that has proven its worth time and time again.

Ms McLaughlin: I, too, welcome the opportunity to take part in the Adjournment debate this evening to discuss the undeniable disparity in rail provision between the east and west of Northern Ireland. Within the infrastructure that exists, there is also an east-west disparity in the level of that service, with Derry and two other stations in the west suffering from a significantly poorer level and frequency of service than every station from Coleraine eastwards on the same line. My colleagues Martina, Mark and Karen have all clearly articulated the well-known operational and developmental issues that have plagued the railway service in the west for decades. We all agree that we need to improve the existing service and to improve and extend the existing network.

To date, Minister Nichola Mallon, you have done superb work for Derry, from road resurfacing to white-line painting, to new greenways and accelerating progress on Derry's road connections to Belfast and to Dublin. You have just got on with the job. That is even without mentioning the progress on Casement Park in Belfast and the grid interconnector. The latest example of progress on rail connectivity is the result of Minister Mallon's meeting with her counterpart in the Irish Government, Eamon Ryan, going further than the widely discussed fast rail connection between Belfast and Dublin and from there to Cork. Ministers Mallon and Ryan have instead taken the idea further to connect the undersupported cities of Derry and Limerick. This is what it looks like to have a Minister who takes Derry seriously. Minister Mallon has moved beyond the rather weak proposed phase 3 upgrade of the Derry to Belfast rail line, which, I am told, would deliver only a smoother train journey without providing a faster journey. We want to turbocharge that proposal, with the idea of having a truly fast and interconnected rail line taking us from Derry to Dublin and to Cork. That is something for everyone to get really excited about.

Sadly, this is not putting right all the mistakes of the past. Derry has suffered far more than its share of past mistakes, many of which were examples of deliberate discrimination against us and against Donegal. The destruction of the rail network across the western part of the province of Ulster is an example of that. I would love to see that vibrant infrastructure return, and, first of all, I would love to see a fully costed model for achieving that, along with a model to raise the capital to pay for it. I stress that I do not want Translink to be privatised. The mess of the public transport system in England is evidence of what happens when public railway and bus services are privatised. I stress too that a privatised rail service would not rebuild the rail infrastructure that the west

used to have, as the rate of return would be completely inadequate.

Let us acknowledge the work that Minister Mallon is doing for the west. She is investing in road and rail while giving the green light to increased investment in the electricity grid. That is all excellent for our connectivity and for our subregional economy, including job creation.

7.15 pm

I welcome the progress in bringing our train network into the 21st century. I hope that there will be an enlarged and truly all-island rail network. As I say, I look forward to fully costed proposals for the new rail lines. Let us come together to support and fund the Department for Infrastructure. That will require not only major ambition but major investment and an all-Executive approach to transform rail transport fully and truly on this island, north, south, east and west.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I will make a point of housekeeping: Members should be referred to either as “Mr” or “Mrs”, and all comments should be made through the Chair rather than directly addressed to a Minister. Obviously, no offence was intended, but, on another occasion, offence may well be intended, so it is important that we establish that.

Mr Durkan: No bother, Chris [*Laughter.*]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members have been thrown out for less than that.

Mr K Buchanan: I welcome the opportunity to speak in the Adjournment debate on rail connectivity in Foyle. Unfortunately, as you can appreciate, I am no substitute for Gary Middleton. I do not know whether that is a positive or a negative. Unfortunately, Gary is unable to be here, so I will speak as a DUP MLA from west of the Bann and as a member of the Infrastructure Committee.

Transport infrastructure in Northern Ireland plays a significant role in our economy. It is important for our students, our workers and our tourism sector. It has also proven to be effective in attracting investment into the north-west region. The DUP has been a champion of the new graduate-entry medical school in Londonderry for many years. The increase in students, alongside further plans at Ulster University, further makes the case for improved rail infrastructure in Northern Ireland. The train service has proven to be a sustainable option for many employees travelling to and from Londonderry. That is better for the environment, and, in many cases, it is better for productivity, given that we regularly hear feedback from train users who enjoy being able to work as they travel. The railway line along Northern Ireland’s scenic north coast was described by travel journalist Michael Palin as one of the most beautiful rail journeys in the world. Even Her Majesty The Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh are fans of that beautiful route, having enjoyed a train journey along the railway line in recent years. We must ensure that that tourism asset gets maximum usage and investment to ensure that it achieves its full potential. The railway line has also proven key during major events such as the Open golf championship and the Clipper festival in Londonderry.

It is important to recognise that progress has been made to date. After years of lobbying by many sections of our communities, it was great to see the old Waterside railway

station refurbished and the new north-west transport hub opened. That key project benefits connectivity in the north-west by integrating multimodal forms of transport and linking the station to the city centre and the wider greenway network. It is encouraging that passenger numbers on the trains have increased year-on-year. That proves that there is an appetite for that mode of travel. How much greater could that be if there were further investment in the lines?

The three years without a Government in Northern Ireland have, no doubt, had an impact on progress. The outgoing Infrastructure Minister, Chris Hazzard, left office with no direction for the Department. Delays in upgrades have caused a lot of frustration for railway users and campaigners. We need to see the delivery of phase 3 on the Londonderry to Coleraine line. The Minister has instructed that a further feasibility study be carried out on that, and it is vital that that be carried out as soon as possible. Additional halts along the line must be considered, particularly at Ballykelly, where the DAERA headquarters are located, and at City of Derry Airport. Those additional changes would be welcomed by commuters and users of those facilities.

As an MLA for Mid Ulster, I also recognise that there are wider issues with transport links in the west of the Province. I urge the Infrastructure Minister to ensure that she lives up to the commitments in ‘New Decade, New Approach’ to address regional imbalance and the infrastructure deficits in the west. Of course, that extends beyond rail: we need delivery on our road infrastructure as well. I note that the Minister has announced a feasibility study for a high-speed Londonderry to Cork rail link. Despite the Minister’s knee-jerk dismissal of the Northern Ireland to Scotland bridge link, I will await the findings of that feasibility study.

Improvements to our infrastructure in Northern Ireland must, however, be our priority. The Minister has the power to make significant improvements, but that will require a long-term vision and investment. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member from Foyle for bringing the debate to the Floor. It might sound strange that a Member for South Antrim is speaking on the issue of rail links to the north-west, but, as some of you will know, in my previous existence, I was the chief executive of the British Irish Chamber of Commerce, and we spent considerable time trying to promote the north-west. Indeed, one of the most surprising things that we came across was when, in trying to reduce our environmental footprint, we decided to go to Londonderry by train. We reached the unusual situation where, when we arrived in Belfast on the Enterprise train, the train to Londonderry had just left. The two trains did not even connect up with the timetables, which showed the degree of improvements that needed to be made.

I want to refer to another Minister, Danny Kennedy, who in May 2014 introduced a rail investment prioritisation strategy. That was about investing sums of money that today would probably equate to close to £1 billion into the rail infrastructure. As part of that, we wanted to see improvements in the lines to Londonderry and improvements to the trackbed. We also wanted to see improvements so that we could open up the rail network across Northern Ireland in areas where it would work fairly easily. We wanted to see the likes of Glenavy and Crumlin

being linked, and we wanted to see the existing rail network being used to its maximum potential, but the rail network needs a considerable amount of investment.

We need to look at it strategically, and, as Mr Matthew O'Toole has mentioned on several occasions, we can now look at interest rates somewhere close to zero-rate interest or even negative-rate interest for strategic investment. We should be looking at a wide-scale update to our rail network and at how we do that. We also need to look at how we future-proof it for the environment, and the key to that is the question of how we electrify the rail network. That needs to be part of a wider economic strategy in Northern Ireland, and, indeed, part and parcel of our party's proposals to get zero net carbon by 2035 should be a significant investment in rail and how we manage to do that.

There are other issues that need to be done. This might sound strange coming from the leader of the Ulster Unionist Party, but I believe very strongly in all-islands communication. I also believe that considerable investment needs to be put into the Belfast to Dublin rail link, but the most important part of that investment needs to be put into the area south of Drogheda that goes into Dublin around the Dublin Area Rapid Transit (DART) line. We need to lay a new trackbed, and that new trackbed will be extremely expensive. That has to come on an all-island basis to look at how we get a proper and effective rail system. Many people think that Irish Rail, CIÉ and the rest of it are some kind of paragons of virtue, but they have significant infrastructure problems themselves. Indeed, one of the things that we should be looking at is where we can get some kinds of synergy between the Northern Ireland rail network and the rest of the rail network on this island.

We should also be looking at our existing trackbed before it disappears completely, and we should look at the opportunities to open up to Armagh and, potentially, Dungannon. That would give us an increased link and improve commuter links in and out of Belfast. We need to be able to spread this about as much as we can. Indeed, that might be a better opportunity to open up to the west.

I am surprised that the Member from Foyle did not mention the opportunity of extending the rail link further out towards Letterkenny and the improvements that there might be if that were able to be done. That would cost a significant amount; however, bearing in mind that, according to the shared island unit, approximately €500 million is supposed to be available for North/South infrastructure, one of the things that we should be using some of that money for is a proper investment strategy to look at how we are able to develop our rail links and communication links along those lines.

I am about to finish my remarks; however, since we are talking about trains, somebody did say to me, rather unfairly, that I look a bit like the Fat Controller from 'Thomas the Tank Engine'. To Members from my party, I say that I have now won the bet. Thank you very much indeed. We do need the investment in rail.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No one had ever thought it, but thank you for putting that image into our mind.

Dr Archibald: I will speak briefly in this debate. I thought that maybe I was hijacking it a bit, but we have heard from Members for South Antrim and for Mid Ulster.

The unfortunate reality is that the only functioning rail infrastructure to Derry and the north-west is via Coleraine in my constituency, so I want to raise a couple of issues in relation to the Coleraine to Derry line.

Beyond Coleraine, to the west, the frequency and the timing of services are less favourable than they are to the south-east, as my party colleague Martina Anderson and also Sinead McLaughlin outlined. There is a need to address the level of service to ensure that workers can get to Belfast for work in the morning on time. Night-time services are also required so that people have the opportunity to use public transport for leisure.

A few weeks ago, I asked the Minister whether, as part of the Coleraine to Derry rail line feasibility study, she would consider additional halts, and specifically a halt at Ballykelly, where the DAERA headquarters is located and where, under normal circumstances, a couple of hundred civil servants would be working. As part of the urgent need to tackle the climate emergency by cutting emissions, increased public transport infrastructure is needed if we are to give people the opportunity and option to travel to work on public transport and encourage them to get out of their car. I was very pleased that she indicated that it will be included in the feasibility study. It is important that we take the opportunity to look at improving our communities' accessibility to rail infrastructure so that they have the opportunity to choose public transport for travel to work and to school and for leisure as part of their daily lives.

A number of potential stops between Bellarena and Derry would bring the opportunity to deliver public transport services to more local communities, with linkages into Limavady, Ballykelly, Greysteel and, of course, City of Derry Airport. Points have already been made about the level of service. Improving that will also be vital. It is important that those additional stops be considered in more than just an aspirational way. We all understand that there are funding constraints, but we need to have vision and thus seek to identify funding and work towards delivering the work. As my party colleague outlined, infrastructure is vital to economic development and, in particular, to addressing the regional inequalities and imbalances that we have unfortunately seen over many decades.

Finally, as I have the opportunity, I will pick up on an issue that is often highlighted to me by my constituents in Magilligan. Under the phase 2 upgrade, a new passing loop and halting station were built at Bellarena. Parking facilities at the station have remained unfinished, however. Despite a lot of contact with Translink, that issue is as yet unresolved. It remains a frustration for the local community. Perhaps the Minister will look into that situation to see whether it can be resolved.

I thank my party colleague Martina Anderson for bringing forward the Adjournment topic. I look forward to continuing to engage with the Minister on these issues and on other constituency infrastructure projects.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call Mr Gerry Carroll, I see Mr Muir in his place. Do you wish to speak in the debate?

Mr Muir: Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I declare an interest as a former employee of Translink and a self-confessed and perhaps lifelong bus and train nerd. I thank the Member for bringing the

matter to the Assembly. I speak as the Alliance Party's spokesperson on infrastructure.

It is clear from the debate that we are all in agreement about the lack of rail connectivity in Foyle. As Mr Buchanan — to give him his correct title, in line with Standing Orders — said, the Belfast to Derry railway journey was noted by Michael Palin as being one of the most beautiful in the world. That documentary is currently available on the BBC iPlayer, if anyone wants to watch it. Previous upgrades in phase 1 and 2, restoration of the old Waterside railway station and the introduction of new CAF trains have enabled many more people to enjoy the journey in better comfort and style. The service, however, remains too infrequent and excessively slow, with the journey by road, or even by bicycle, often being quicker than that by rail. It is incredible that, just a few years ago, John Madden was able to cycle from Derry's General Post Office to the Albert clock in Belfast quicker than the journey would have taken by train. As Ms Anderson stated, for commuters, only one train leaves Derry on a weekday that arrives in Belfast before 9.00 am. For concertgoers and anyone else attending an event in Belfast at the weekend, the last train leaves Belfast for Derry just after 9.00 pm. Those restrictions mean that, for many people in Derry, the train to Belfast is just not a viable option.

The problem extends beyond the Belfast to Derry railway line.

Derry's location offers fantastic access to the west of Ireland, but rail connectivity to Donegal, Sligo and elsewhere across the border is non-existent, with just three railway stations west of the Bann. It was not always that way, but, regrettably, it is now, and we have to focus on what can be done about it.

7.30 pm

The Alliance Party supports pushing ahead with phase 3 of the Coleraine to Derry railway upgrade at the earliest opportunity. That project is vital in improving the speed and reliability of services to and from Foyle at a fraction of the cost that we are investing in road projects. Politicians across the island have long spoken about the need for high-speed rail connecting the largest cities in Ireland. I welcome last week's announcement from Minister Mallon and Minister Ryan concerning the commission of a feasibility study into the planned high-speed rail network all the way from Cork to the north-west. However, if we are to see a sustained effort to improve rail connectivity to the north-west and beyond, we need an infrastructure commission for Northern Ireland that will produce a medium- to long-term infrastructure plan to be delivered by the Executive.

It is through a funded, sustained, medium- to long-term infrastructure plan that well-meaning aspirations for better rail connectivity in the north-west can be turned into a tangible reality. Any such infrastructure strategy must have building back better and responding to the climate emergency at its heart. I can think of no better project than improving rail connectivity in Foyle to support a regionally balanced green recovery.

In closing, better rail connectivity to the north-west must be at the heart of a funded Executive-sponsored medium- to long-term infrastructure strategy. If that can be achieved, we will, maybe, turn back the clock and look towards better

rail connectivity that links Belfast to Derry/Londonderry, Dublin and beyond.

Mr Carroll: I am a West Belfast MLA, but it is important that I speak on this issue as I am interested in and support the extension and rolling out of public services and infrastructure across the North more generally. I have frequently travelled on the slow but beautiful line from Belfast to Derry. That description is probably the only thing that I agree with Portillo on.

People Before Profit has been fighting for rail in Derry for many years — long before the big parties paid focus to the issue. To put it bluntly, the issue might not have been discussed as it is today had it not been for my former MLA colleague, Mr Eamonn McCann, and a handful of other activists in Into the West who raised the issue many years ago, when it was neither popular or profitable. Eamonn raised the issue when he was here, and people campaigned outside the Building and forced others to take the issue seriously. It is clear from my understanding of the issue, that pressure from below forced it on to the agenda and forced people to take it seriously as an issue at the forefront of local politics in Derry.

Trains are the most environmentally friendly means of mass transportation ever devised. Our rail service, as inadequate and underfunded as it is, is part of the public service. In the current decrepit state of capitalism, we must preserve all that we can of the public service. We live on a small and beautiful island, and we should put a necklace of rail around it for people to experience it in every way that they can. That is especially important in the era of COVID, when people need to travel locally to experience the beauty of the island, and for the many people who do not or cannot drive, or who do not have access to a car.

Expanding the Derry service would, obviously, be a start to the endeavour, and it could set a benchmark that could be followed for other areas across the island. I share Members' support for railway expansion across the north-west region beyond Derry and Donegal and other places, but, frankly, I do not hold out much hope in the Southern Government delivering that, but I am happy to be proved wrong. I will leave it there.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister for Infrastructure, Nichola Mallon, to respond to the debate. The Minister has 10 minutes.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I thank Ms Anderson for securing this Adjournment debate on railway connectivity in the north-west, which she and many others in Derry are passionate about. I listened with interest to the comments made and points raised by Members.

While we may have political differences and different viewpoints on many issues, it is clear that rail unites people across all political parties. I believe that people have a deep emotional connection to rail, and we should aspire to do more on it. I am committed to doing that during my tenure as Minister.

It is true that the people of Derry and the north-west have waited for far too long for investment in rail. Members are right when they talk about the starkness of the rail map and the stark imbalance between east and west. That has, understandably, led to a sincere feeling among people in the north-west that they have been left behind. That is why it is important that I assure Members that I will not be a

Minister who leaves the north-west behind. Since coming into office, I have been clear that my priority is addressing regional imbalance, better connecting communities and, importantly, ensuring that we shape our places around our people, for our people and with our people.

There are many benefits to investing in our rail network. Transport underpins our quality of life and chances of economic success. Our rail network plays a key role in making the North a more attractive place to visit, live, work and do business. That means giving people and businesses more and better choices about when, where and how to travel. For too long, though, we have not been ambitious or courageous enough. We have to think bigger, not least now because we need to tackle the climate crisis, grow our island economy and improve connectivity, not just across the North, but right across this island, as many Members who contributed to the debate rightly recognised.

Members have shown their enthusiasm, and I really do share that. However, we have to work together, as Ms Anderson and others said, if we are to achieve the change that we desire for our communities. Investing in infrastructure is critical if we are to move forward on our ambitions. We cannot just stand still and maintain our public network, which is a huge challenge in the face of COVID and a dramatic reduction in passenger numbers and income. We have to be ambitious enough not just to protect it; we have to grow it.

That needs to be our collective ambition in the Assembly and Executive.

In recent years, my Department has invested over £100 million in major rail projects in the north-west. That included phases 1 and 2 of the Coleraine to Derry track relay project, totalling over £70 million, and investment in the north-west multimodal transport hub, which Members referenced, amounting to over £27 million. My Department also invested £68 million in new trains that will help to increase capacity across the network, including on the Coleraine to Derry line. In addition, £474 million is being spent to upgrade the A6, and the projected cost of the A5 is £657 million.

However, more needs to be done to address historical underinvestment in the north-west. That is why I have committed to a new feasibility study to get phase 3 of the Derry to Coleraine rail line back on track, and I have ring-fenced funding for that work to be done at pace. That will ensure that all future spend is fully informed by a robust business case and that there is high-level assurance on costs and on risk and benefit realisation. That will include working with Translink, Into the West and councils to examine within the new feasibility study the options of new halts and associated park-and-ride facilities at Strathfoyle, Eglinton, City of Derry Airport and Ballykelly. It will also examine the possibility of introducing half-hourly services from Derry. Members will also know that I recently announced that Derry will be included in the high-speed rail feasibility study.

The New Decade, New Approach commitment did not extend to the north-west, and that was simply not acceptable to me or my counterparts in the Irish Government. I am absolutely delighted that Minister Ryan and I, at the recent North/South Ministerial Council meeting, confirmed that we would develop a feasibility study of a potential high-speed rail connection between

Derry, Belfast, Dublin, Limerick and Cork as we seek to create a spine of connectivity on the island and work collaboratively to tackle regional imbalance.

All-island connectivity should excite us all, not least because it better connects our communities in a more sustainable, cleaner and greener way, but also because it opens up huge potential for our economy. The new regional strategic transport network transport plan will also set out the priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks up to 2035. Consultation on this plan will provide the opportunity for Members to make proposals on extending the rail network even further. I look forward to further engagement with them on the plan in the weeks and months ahead.

In closing, I want to reaffirm that I have real ambition for rail on our island. It is an untapped resource and opportunity to boost economic growth and tourism and, as Members have said, tackle the climate emergency. We are in unprecedented and hugely challenging times. It is at this very moment when creativity and ambition are most needed. Delivering an ambitious rail programme requires vision, investment and determination. I can assure you all that I have that determination and commitment to work in partnership with you and with partners right across the island as we deliver the radical change that the rail network on our island needs.

I have addressed a number of Members' points but, in the remaining time, I will very briefly turn to specific points that Members have raised. Ms Anderson talked very passionately about how things were when it comes to rail, how it was abandoned and the dereliction that has ensued. She is absolutely right that rail is key to growing our all-island economy and that we will flourish when we have clean, sustainable infrastructure — and that that infrastructure is rail. She is right to show that passenger numbers have increased exponentially over the past number of years; a number of Members pointed that out. That is inevitable when you think of the most scenic route that is the line between Belfast and Derry. As Mark Durkan said, if you build it, they will come. We all need to have that ambition for our rail network.

Ms Anderson asked about the need to improve our existing services and expand them through phase 3. As she will know, I am pleased that, working with Into the West, which is an important partner in devising the terms of reference, we have been able to shave six months off the feasibility study. We are accelerating that feasibility study at pace. But of course a feasibility study is only good enough until you get the money to be able to deliver it, so while I have ring-fenced money for the feasibility study, I very much look forward to bilaterals with Minister Murphy and to continue to make the case for investment in rail with our Executive colleagues because I believe, as Ms Anderson does, that investment in rail is a necessity. I agree that infrastructure is central to our recovery from COVID and our challenges in the face of Brexit.

Mark Durkan also talked about the deliberate disinvestment in rail. I agree with him that Into the West has been, and continues to be, a driving force for change behind the rail campaign. He also referenced the multimodal transport hub and, yes, that is very much welcome investment. However, Members are right that we need to do so much more. He is right that, when you are discussing rail, particularly in the SDLP, you cannot help

but think very fondly of John Dallat. I would very much have liked to have had his company in the Chamber while we were discussing this tonight.

As all Members have said, partnership working is really important. We need to build on the commitments in New Decade, New Approach. That partnership working requires all of us, as elected representatives across all the political parties, to work in partnership with the local council and Into the West, but also right across these islands.

Steve Aiken was right in saying that we have to look at connectivity. We have a huge opportunity. The Irish Government have announced €500 million for infrastructure North and South. Boris Johnson is talking about a connectivity review and how we need to turbocharge infrastructure. There are huge opportunities for us to use rail to connect our island North and South, but also to be very mindful of how we can connect better to our airports and ports so that we maximise our connectivity across these islands.

Sinead McLaughlin spoke about job creation and the importance of rail in transforming economic opportunity, and I completely agree. Other Members spoke very eloquently about climate action and the role of rail in that, and I agree wholeheartedly.

I also agree wholeheartedly with Mr Muir. We need a long-term vision and a strategic approach. I also absolutely agree with him on the importance of having an infrastructure commission that takes that strategic, long-term approach and which recognises, as every Member who has spoken tonight has, the importance and transformative power of our rail network.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I thank all the Members who participated in the debate.

Adjourned at 7.45 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 2 November 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Allister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Since the Assembly last met, it has emerged that a lead party of government, Sinn Féin, retained COVID business money for more than six months, until it was flushed out by Stephen Nolan. When today, if at all, will the Assembly have an opportunity to ventilate and discuss that issue?

Mr Speaker: There are plenty of opportunities in today's Order Paper for Members to raise whatever questions that they want to raise about that matter.

Committee Membership

Mr Speaker: The first item of business in the Order Paper is a motion on Committee membership. As with similar motions, it will be treated as a business motion and there will be no debate.

Resolved:

That Mr Jonathan Buckley replace Mr Alex Easton as a member of the Committee for Health; and that Mr Alex Easton replace Mr Jonathan Buckley as a member of the Committee for Communities. — [Mr K Buchanan.]

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Transport Sectoral Meeting

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

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in the transport sector, which was held on Wednesday 7 October.

The meeting was conducted via videoconference owing to current COVID restrictions. Eamon Ryan TD, Minister for Transport, Gordon Lyons MLA, as accompanying Minister, and I attended the meeting. It was a very positive meeting, and a lot of progress was made. A number of issues were discussed, including the implications of Brexit, our response to COVID-19, the latest EU funding position, our shared New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitments and our future work programme for the transport sector. During the meeting, I also raised the issue of the withdrawal of the Bus Éireann service between Belfast and Dublin and how we need to work together on all-island transport services.

The Council noted the work being carried out to prepare for the end of the transition period and noted the implications, arising from a North/South perspective, of Brexit. Ministers agreed to continue to cooperate on transport issues in the coming months.

We noted the ongoing liaison and communication on transport services, operations and protocols in the responses to date to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We also agreed that, as Ministers and at official level, we will continue to cooperate and communicate on the impact of the pandemic on transport operations between Northern Ireland and Ireland and also between the island of Ireland and overseas. We also welcomed

the continued cooperation between the Department for Infrastructure and the Department of Transport on EU funding-related matters. The Council noted the potential loss of some funding opportunities as a result of Brexit and the implications of that for our shared New Decade, New Approach commitments and for communities here.

The Council also noted the joint position paper and project list prepared by both jurisdictions in the context of the development of the new PEACE PLUS programme 2021-27 and the position of ongoing Connecting Europe Facility (CEF) and INTERREG projects. The Council noted the various commitments outlined in New Decade, New Approach, particularly in the area of infrastructural investment. On the A5 western transport corridor, we noted that both Governments remain committed to the A5 scheme, and, as part of New Decade, New Approach, the Irish Government reaffirmed their £75 million commitment to the project. The Council noted that, following a public inquiry into the scheme in early 2020, the Department for Infrastructure received an interim report from the commissioner on 2 September 2020. My officials are considering the issues raised and recommendations made in the report and are taking legal advice. When I have been apprised of the outcome of the review, I will consider it carefully, taking legal advice into account, before deciding on the next steps for this regionally significant project and the timing of the publication of the report.

On high-speed rail connectivity, Ministers noted that the Department of Transport and the Department for Infrastructure will further develop draft terms of reference for a proposed study of rail speeds. Importantly, we agreed that the high-speed rail feasibility study would be extended to Derry and Limerick. Minister Ryan and I took that decision because we recognise the fact that the north-west has, for too long, suffered from underinvestment, including in rail. We are both committed to addressing regional imbalance across the island by better connecting our communities and enhancing economic growth. That work and the study itself will be overseen by a high-level steering group, comprising representatives from both Departments and transport authorities from both jurisdictions.

The Council noted the commitments in New Decade, New Approach to the Narrow Water bridge and agreed that both Departments will work together to consider the next steps for progressing the scheme.

Ministers noted that the review to explore potential government support for renewed air services between Belfast and Cork and the City of Derry Airport and Dublin will be progressed by the Department of Transport, working with the Department for the Economy and the UK Department for Transport. The Council also noted the ongoing work on cross-border greenways.

Lastly, we noted that the current transport work programme dates back to 1999. We agreed that it would be useful to review it to ensure that it takes account of many developments, global and local, and of work already done and the lessons learned from that work. An updated work programme is to be considered at our next meeting, which is scheduled to take place in early 2021.

In closing, I welcome the re-establishment of our formal NSMC meetings. For too long, those important structures have not been functioning, and it is vital that we work

collaboratively in the face of the all-island challenges of COVID-19, Brexit and climate change to find a way together that protects our citizens, enhances our economy, connects our communities and protects our environment. I look forward to working with my counterpart, Minister Ryan, as we continue to engage positively on how we can work collaboratively to deliver for citizens and communities across our island.

Miss McIlveen (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): The Minister has reiterated her commitment to the A5 scheme, and I note that she received the interim report from the public inquiry on 2 September. Will she outline the issues raised and the recommendations made in that report and detail the timescale for the next steps?

Similarly, will she provide a timeline for the development of draft terms of reference for the proposed high-speed rail connectivity study and give a commitment that the decarbonisation of the transport sector will play a major part in any revised work programme?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Chairperson for her question. The A5 report, which has been submitted to my Department, contains a number of issues that my officials are having to review and seek legal advice on. I have asked them to make recommendations in a detailed submission to me. As soon as they do that, I will give very careful consideration to the publication of the report and the next steps.

My officials, along with officials from the Department of Transport, are working to finalise the details of the high-speed rail feasibility study. We expect that it will take 12 months to complete. As I have said many times in, and outside, the House, I am committed to tackling the climate emergency. Transport is the second-highest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions here, so the decarbonisation of public transport has a very important role to play as we work to tackle the climate crisis.

Mr Boylan: Cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. I thank the Minister for her statement, and I welcome it. I would like her to expand a little on the conversations that she had with Minister Ryan on environmental and green issues.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. We spoke about the importance of greenways and the need to work collaboratively on them, and we talked about the need to ensure that we collaborate on the transport network. As I said, I raised the issue of the withdrawal of Bus Éireann services and the importance of ensuring that we have connectivity across our island and a public transport network to reduce people's reliance on cars. We also talked about the importance of collaboration in our response to COVID-19. While it was a transport sectoral meeting, inevitably the issue of the environment and the climate emergency ran through a number of the discussions.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her statement. I am sure that COVID-19 also played a part in the discussions. What agreements on collaborative North/South working has she been able to come to with her counterpart in the South to help to protect our communities and to defeat COVID-19?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The truth is that COVID-19 does not respect boundaries and that we are all at risk of spreading or contracting the virus. We

must all do all that we can to get through the pandemic safely. All aspects of our lives and our services have been affected, and transport is no different. Public transport in the North has been severely impacted by the pandemic: patronage is currently at about 46% of 2019 levels. Translink has been implementing a range of public health measures on its vehicles, including enhanced cleaning, limiting rear-facing seats, a no-change policy for cash and a requirement for passengers to wear face coverings. Recent surveys indicate that compliance with the use of face coverings is about 86%.

Minister Ryan and I agreed at the NSMC meeting that it is vital that we keep the lines of communication open as we both deal with the relevant COVID-19 restrictions. Our officials will continue to cooperate and communicate on the impact of the pandemic on transport operations across the island.

Mrs Barton: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, you talked about the Irish Government's reaffirmation of their £75 million commitment to the A5 western transport corridor project: surely, that was meant to be £400 million at one stage.

12.15 pm

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. The A5 is a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach', and the Irish Government have reaffirmed their commitment to provide £75 million of funding. I also noted and wholeheartedly welcomed the Taoiseach's announcement that the shared island unit will set up a fund of €500 million to build a shared future and the fact that it has been clearly set out that infrastructure, North and South, will be a key component of that going forward. I am very much committed to working with my ministerial counterpart and with Governments across these islands to ensure that we get the investment that we need in our infrastructure.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her statement. The Minister will be aware that the transition period will come to an end very soon. The clock is ticking. During the meeting, what assessment was made of the potential impact on transport North and South of not reaching a deal?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He has raised a critical issue. The British Government's decision to leave the European Union will have a profound effect on the way we live our lives and go about our business on the island of Ireland. I have serious concerns that movement away from the common standards, practices and regulations that our transport operators have become accustomed to will have a detrimental impact in areas such as international haulage access and cross-border public transport, particularly if Northern Ireland-based operators are in the position of trying to align with two separate sets of standards or regulations in order to conduct cross-border business.

My Department continues to work collaboratively across these islands to make the case to protect our interests, but we absolutely need to see an agreement between the British Government and the European Union on a future relationship that allows us to maintain regulatory alignment and the free flow of people and goods across the island. I and my officials will continue to engage with the transport sector here and to press urgently for the clarity and answers that it needs.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the statement from the Minister this morning. From the discussions on high-speed rail connectivity, it has been indicated that a high-level steering group will be established, comprised of departmental and maybe transport authority officials. I am concerned by the hames that is being made of a similar scheme across the water. Can the Minister guarantee that the steering group will have a very high level of expertise?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. It is ambitious to seek a spine of connectivity on our island for high-speed rail. It is visionary and ambitious, and it needs to be worked through at a high strategic level to make sure that we see it right through to delivery and operation. I assure the Member that we have the ambition and the vision and that it will be led at a very high strategic level at the feasibility study stage.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, you have already mentioned Brexit-related issues and your commitment to continuing to work with your counterpart in the South on transport issues, and the Member who spoke previously touched on that as well. Can you advise the House whether there has been any indication that drivers from the North will need a green card to travel South?

Ms Mallon: The Member has raised an important issue. I believe that there should be no disruption for drivers travelling across the island. We continue to engage with a range of stakeholders to make the case and ensure that we do what we can, given our limited role, to ensure that that disruption does not happen.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for her statement. She indicated that the Department would do a feasibility study on the North/South high-speed rail line, and the Narrow Water bridge was mentioned in her statement. Can the Minister give us a high-level budget figure for the rail link? Will she carry out a feasibility study on a bridge to link with our neighbours to the east in Scotland? Will she give that more consideration than she has in the past?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The purpose of the feasibility study will be to identify a range of factors to ensure the delivery of the project, one of which, obviously, is the funding required. I commit to continuing to update the House as that work progresses.

I have always said that I have absolutely no difficulty with connectivity; I see the merit in having connectivity at a physical level and in terms of relationships. I have said on a number of occasions that one of the positive things that I have experienced from the COVID situation is the engagement with my counterparts across these islands and the learning that we have shared. We are committed to continuing that engagement.

I think that the Member refers indirectly to the bridge between Northern Ireland and Scotland. Connectivity across this island is really important. My view is that the £20 billion for one bridge could be better spent on a range of connectivity projects that would deliver much more for our citizens, communities and businesses in Northern Ireland.

Ms Anderson: I thank the Minister for her statement. Minister, as you will be aware, there was a debate in the Chamber about north-west rail connectivity. You talked in the statement about high-speed rail and the loss

of European funding. Do you envisage having further conversations with Minister Ryan about the western arc to ensure that Derry, Letterkenny and Sligo are connected? You could hear from the debate in the Chamber that there was cross-party support for that.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. She will be aware of my commitment to and ambition for rail across our island. She will be aware that I have ring-fenced funding to ensure that we get phase 3 back on track with the feasibility study. I have made it clear that that work needs to be completed at pace. I am also working with Minister Ryan to ensure that Derry and the north-west will be included in the high-speed rail feasibility study. That is a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach', and it was absolutely right that we extended it. I have welcomed the €500 million fund that has been set up for infrastructure projects, and I am happy to have further engagement with Minister Ryan to see what more we can do to enhance our rail offering across the island.

Mr O'Toole: Thanks to the Minister for the statement. It is worth saying that the meeting and what has come from it represent the biggest shift forward in all-island infrastructure in several decades.

I will ask about Brexit. She has touched on it before, but one of the specific concerns is around the professional qualifications of train drivers, bus drivers and the like in relation to cross-border transport. If no deal looks likely in the weeks to come, will there be a reconvened NSMC or further discussions and engagement with her Southern counterpart to prepare for those unfortunate circumstances?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I am sensitive to the fact that discussions between the negotiating teams are ongoing and that the outcome will be determined by the British Government and the European Union. My Department continues to work closely with Department for Transport (DfT) counterparts in London to ensure that Northern Ireland issues regarding cross-border services are kept to the fore during UK-EU withdrawal negotiations. Any outcome that places a limit on the number of hauliers, for example, allowed to travel South to transport and receive goods, such as the need for a European Conference of Ministers of Transport (ECMT) permit, will have the potential for serious supply chain disruption and detrimental economic impacts on the North. In addition, should bus operators not be in a position to offer regular or special regular services to the South or to provide cabotage services, that will have a negative impact on consumer choice and free movement between North and South.

With regard to cross-border rail, I am hopeful that the arrangements that have been put in place will mean little or no disruption for passengers and that longer-term solutions to our mutual benefit can be put in place. I agree with the Member: the purposes of the NSMC structures are set out in the Good Friday Agreement, and that would be a useful and beneficial avenue through which to explore some of the issues to ensure that we are absolutely prepared or prepared as best we can be, while being mindful that we are not a member state involved in the negotiations.

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for her statement. One of the key transport commitments in 'New Decade, New

Approach' was the York Street interchange. There is no doubt that that will have a positive impact on commuters and freight not just in Northern Ireland but cross-border. Was there any discussion around that, such as assistance with that project or an indicative time frame for when we might see that project delivered?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware that the York Street interchange is a commitment. I took the decision to have a short, sharp external review to ensure that the project could progress in the right way in terms of being future-proofed. That work is ongoing, and the report is being carried out. I hope to be in receipt of the report on the review by the end of November. I am then keen to do what I can to move the project forward, subject, as always when it comes to infrastructure projects, to the funding being made available.

Mr T Buchanan: Minister, I note a number of important projects in your statement but none more so than the A5, which has been rumbling on for more years than I wish to remember. You will know of the importance of the A5 project for commuters in the west. Can you indicate when the project will commence on the ground? Have you any idea of what the cost will now be? Do you know whether the scheme will be delivered as a total project or in phases?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He is right to highlight the importance of the A5. It is a commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach', and it is a strategic project in tackling regional imbalance and connecting communities in the area that the Member represents. It is also a hugely important project for road safety.

As I said, my officials have been given a copy of the report. They are considering the issues that have been raised, and we are seeking legal advice. As soon as I receive that submission, I will make a decision on the next steps, including the timing of the publication of the report.

I assure the Member that I understand the frustration that the project has been a long time coming. It will be progressed as soon as we can complete all the required statutory processes. Obviously, it will be subject to funding, but I have given a commitment to it. It will be progressed as quickly as we can do it in line with the satisfactory completion of all the statutory processes.

Mr O'Dowd: I note that the Minister's statement refers to the fact that she raised the issue of the withdrawal of the Bus Éireann Dublin to Belfast route: can we expect a statement in the near future saying that that route will be restored? Does the Minister agree that that also puts greater emphasis on the need for the new high-speed link between Belfast and Dublin to be used to boost the economies not only of Belfast and Dublin but of the towns along that route, such as Lurgan, Portadown and Craigavon?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. I am committed to securing island-wide services between Belfast and Dublin and, indeed, across the island. I raised the matter with Minister Ryan at the NSMC transport meeting. My Department will continue to work to provide services for our communities, North and South, and will work with Translink to minimise the disruption to passengers along the route. You will know that the Bus Éireann route is a commercial one, and Bus Éireann took the decision that it did. I am committed to ensuring that we

do not reduce our services, so I am examining, subject to funding, what Translink can do there because we currently provide half of the services.

I agree with you: our cities are our economic driver, but we must realise that that should not be at the expense of our towns and cities along the way. I have given a commitment to tackling regional imbalance, and I am keen that we continue to do what we can to ensure that towns and villages across the North can benefit.

Mr Clarke: Minister, in response to my party colleague who asked you about the high-speed railway and the lessons from England, you said that it was at a very high level. Given previous difficulties in your Department, where, on the railway from Coleraine to Londonderry, they could not even get the platform size right, how confident are you that you have the expertise in your Department to move this project forward?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. We are working at cross-departmental level across the island. The engagement will be at a high level, as you would expect for a feasibility study of this nature. I can give you a commitment that I have no intention of presiding over a farce, and I am committed to doing what I can to ensure that we get the right feasibility study and terms of reference and that we can quickly move and progress it to delivery.

12.30 pm

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for her statement. Can she provide us with a more detailed update on her discussions regarding Narrow Water bridge? Will she give us any indication of when we can expect to see construction of that vital project?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. Consideration of options for a bridge at Narrow Water included engagement with key stakeholders. Most recently, in September I met representatives from the Narrow Water Bridge Community Network and local political representatives. Officials from my Department also recently updated an outline economic appraisal of options for the future development of Narrow Water bridge in collaboration with the Department of Transport. I am committed to progressing the project and will work with partners in the local community and across this island to deliver the progress that is now needed on that important transformative all-island project. That includes a meeting that I have scheduled with both local councils so that they are able to feed into the project and have their views taken on board.

I also welcome the shared vision and commitment of An Taoiseach and the Irish Government to build a new shared island that is better connected and served by all-island infrastructure through projects such as the Narrow Water bridge.

Ms Hunter: I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the positive progress that was made at the NSMC on transport. It is very much welcome that we can see the continued collaboration between the two Ministers North and South on all-island rail, which is a very important issue for my constituency of East Derry. With the extension of the 'NDNA' commitment to high-speed rail now extending to the north-west, will the Minister advise us on the next steps of this transformative project?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question. As she knows, I was keen to see the extension of our commitment in 'New Decade, New Approach' to include the north-west in the feasibility study for high-speed rail. In order to help to address regional imbalance and to better connect our communities, this is a very important project, particularly for opening up our travel corridor on this island.

I worked closely with Minister Ryan to see the study extended, and our officials are now working to finalise the terms of reference before proceeding to procurement. Minister Ryan and I have a shared desire to enhance rail connectivity across our island, and we recognise the benefits of this cleaner, greener, more sustainable mode of transport and are committed to working together to take this project forward in the shortest possible time frame.

Mr Beggs: In her statement, the Minister indicated that there was discussion about the implications for transport North/South and, indeed, east-west. There is considerable concern from hauliers, distributors and the Food and Drink Association in particular about the implications of Brexit and the arrangements in the protocol on the supply of products to our supermarket shelves. My question to the Minister is this: has there been recognition in the Republic of Ireland of the damaging implication that overly bureaucratic procedures will have for supplies to our supermarket shelves? The impact of that may be reciprocated on suppliers in the Republic of Ireland moving goods into GB. Will both parties seek pragmatic solutions that are light-touch and that enable goods to move easily east-west and west-east?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. It is apparent that Brexit and the way that it is being handled are completely damaging. I have been meeting people in the haulage sector to hear their concerns. They are hugely anxious and concerned about the absence of any clarity or detail from the British Government and the European Union on what they need to do to prepare for the end of the transition period. What absolutely needs to happen is full implementation of the protocol.

The Member is right to point out food security. We were very conscious of it, and we remain so in our response to COVID. I assure him that I will continue to work, pragmatically and in solution-finding mode, with anyone and everyone, because I recognise the huge concern and anxiety that is being caused to hauliers, people in retail and, increasingly, to consumers, as it starts to become apparent that the consequences of Brexit will be damaging for all of us.

Mr McNulty: The Minister may remember that, in simpler times, on a beautiful summer's evening, we travelled from Newry along the canal, past the Victoria Lock, towards Slieve Foy and Carlingford lough, to meet our partners in Fianna Fáil. Then, Brexit was our only major concern; now, things are different.

I welcome the inclusion of greenways in the Minister's statement. It is clear that the Minister is seeking to deliver a change in direction within her Department and, by extension, in the way we travel and connect across our islands. Can the Minister provide any further information on the work to deliver greenways North and South, specifically in relation to the Albert Basin to Victoria Lock greenway and the Middletown to Smithborough greenway?

She has already agreed to connect the end of that greenway to Middletown village.

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The Member is correct: I am trying to work to change the culture within my Department, and within our society, towards refocusing how we travel and connect communities. I want to see real change where we have cleaner and greener spaces and where active travel is an intrinsic part of society. I want to see that across the island of Ireland. That is a passion that Minister Ryan shares.

In September, I announced £2.8 million of funding for six greenway projects across Northern Ireland. I hope to be in a position to provide more support, and I encourage councils to progress the projects to the point where the Department can support their construction. Three cross-border greenway projects — north-west greenways, the Ulster canal greenway and the Carlingford lough greenway — are being funded under the INTERREG programme. I am committed to working closely with my counterparts in the South to make progress on those important projects.

Ms S Bradley: I thank the Minister for her elaboration on the work around the Narrow Water bridge, in particular, and for her renewed and ongoing commitment to that critical project. The Minister constantly references the importance of enhancing our economy. Does she share my view that we need to have projects that are ready to be built and ready to go as quickly as possible, particularly at this time? Does she agree that Narrow Water bridge is a significant project that will bring much-needed employment to the area? Will she commit to speaking to the Minister of Finance and his counterparts across this island to get that project ready for delivery?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for her question and agree that Narrow Water bridge is a transformative project. It will enhance the local economy, be a huge boost to tourism — locally, but also regionally — and bring important environmental benefits. In the face of Brexit, it is particularly poignant in terms of physically connecting communities. It is a project that I believe in, and I want to work hard to try to progress it. I am happy to have conversations with anyone to draw down funding. It is no secret in the House that the Department for Infrastructure often struggles to secure funding, but I am willing to talk to anybody so that we can bring a cocktail of funding to the table to ensure that we see the bridge being built and the multiple benefits that it will bring.

Mr Allister: The Minister is doing much work on North/South infrastructural projects. She has a great enthusiasm for that and has held many ministerial meetings in connection with that. How many times has she met her Scottish counterpart to discuss the much-needed improvements on the A75 and A77, which are such vital links for our economy?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. The focus is on North/South projects and North/South engagement because I am making a statement on the NSMC. I can assure the Member that I have regular engagement with my counterparts across these islands. I have met Robin Walker on a number of occasions, and I have met the Secretary of State. I have also had several engagements with Grant Shapps and, as the Member asked about, I have had several teleconferences with Michael Matheson. The Member is right to point out the A75. It is an important

project, and my officials have been engaging on it with their counterparts in Scotland. We understand that that is very much at the centre of Scotland's transport plan. Those conversations are ongoing.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for her statement. I want to follow on from Mr O'Dowd's point about the suspension of Bus Éireann's Belfast to Dublin service. I am concerned that COVID is being used as an excuse to suspend those services, especially as it is being called "indefinite", no time has been given for when the services will resume and, obviously, previous Southern Governments' concerning propensity for stopping and suspending bus routes is very concerning. I know that she said that she raised the issue in the meeting, but does the Minister have any concern that, for all the Taoiseach's talk of a shared island, shared transport services do not seem to be on the Government's agenda?

Ms Mallon: I thank the Member for his question. He will be aware that Bus Éireann is a commercial service, so it was a commercial decision that the company took. With Translink, however, we have a publicly owned public transport network, which is something that we should be very proud of. Although, given the restrictions, we temporarily stalled services at the height of the pandemic, I hope that the Member recognises that we have worked hard to ensure the protection of services on our public transport network. I will continue to work with Minister Ryan, Translink and anyone else to ensure that we continue not just to protect our services, routes and public-sector jobs but to recognise that, when it comes to public transport, ours should be not just a protectionist policy but one of enhancement and improvement, recognising that it is a critical public service that is essential to tackling the climate emergency.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease while we reconfigure the Chamber for the next item of business.

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

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 3) Bill: Consideration Stage

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, to move the Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No amendments have been tabled to the Bill. I propose therefore, by leave of the Assembly, to group the nine clauses of the Bill for the Question on stand part, followed by the five schedules and the long title. I trust that no Member objects.

Clauses 1 to 9 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 to 5 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes the Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill. The Bill stands referred to Mr Speaker.

12.45 pm

The next item in the Order Paper is the legislative consent motion for the Pension Schemes Bill. I ask Members to take their ease until the Minister arrives.

Pension Schemes Bill: Legislative Consent Motion

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister for Communities to move the legislative consent motion for the Pension Schemes Bill.

Ms Ni Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That this Assembly agrees, in line with section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Pension Schemes Bill dealing with collective money purchase benefits, the Pensions Regulator, pensions dashboards and further provision relating to pension schemes as contained in Part 2 and clauses 117, 120 and 129 of, and schedules 4 to 6, 8, 9 and 11 to, the Bill that was introduced in the House of Commons on 16 July 2020.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Clear as mud. The Business Committee has agreed that there should be no time limit on the debate. I ask the Minister to open the debate.

Ms Ni Chuilín: As Members will recall from the debate on the original legislative consent motion, the Westminster Pension Schemes Bill establishes collective money purchase schemes where contributions are pooled and invested to deliver an aspired benefit level. The Bill strengthens protection for scheme members, enhances the powers of the Pensions Regulator and introduces stronger sanctions for those who wilfully or recklessly harm their pension schemes, including a maximum seven-year prison sentence and a civil penalty of up to £1 million. It increases transparency about individuals' pension savings by introducing pensions dashboards and provisions to tackle pensions scams.

The original legislative consent motion for the Bill, as introduced in the House of Lords, was approved by the Assembly on 1 June 2020. This additional legislative consent motion is required to cover amendments made to the Bill since its introduction. The amendments introduced a new policy regarding climate-related financial disclosures, which is outside the scope of the original motion. The new policy seeks to secure effective governance and disclosure of the climate change risks that schemes face, with the long-term objective of protecting members' benefits against the risk of climate change and the risks and opportunities associated with the transition to a lower-carbon economy.

In practical terms, that will allow the Government to mandate the recommendations of the international task force on climate-related financial disclosures, the most widely used framework against which institutional investors report and assess exposure to the financial risk of climate change.

The climate-related financial disclosures amendments cover three areas: governance requirements, publication requirements, and the powers of the Pensions Regulator in the case of non-compliance. The amendments also require schemes to have regard to the official guidance on complying with effective governance and publication requirements. The amendments build on regulations that are already in place and which require occupational pension schemes to take account of climate change in

their investment practices. Occupational pension schemes with 100 or more members are already required to explain how they take account of climate change in their investment strategies. Under the regulations from last month, all schemes are required to report publicly how they do so, as transparency is key to informed decisions and informed change.

The Pensions Climate Risk Industry Group, which was convened to provide guidance for trustees of pension schemes on integrated climate-related risk assessment and management into decision-making and reporting, has highlighted that all pension schemes face climate-related risks, irrespective of the way they invest or the estimated duration of liabilities. Many schemes are also supported by employers or sponsors whose financial positions and prospects are dependent on current and future developments in relation to climate change.

The effect of these amendments on private pensions policy is to strengthen the requirements placed on trustees and managers of occupational pension schemes to include proper climate risk management in their governance processes and publish that information so that it is available to all. This builds on the expectation that occupational pension schemes and other large asset owners disclose in line with the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosure recommendations, as set out in the 2019 green finance strategy.

Climate change is expected to have significant impact on pension schemes assets and returns for savers, both through the risks of a warmer planet and the transition to a lower-carbon economy. Therefore, it is only right that long-term investors such as trustees are informed and empowered to take action to address those risks and protect the retirement savings of scheme members. These measures aim to ensure that pensions and schemes are in a good position to play a role in the change to a sustainable low-carbon economy.

On 2 October, the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) outlined a time frame to align its climate risk reporting requirements with those flowing from the Pension Schemes Bill. This move will ensure that asset managers and FCA-regulated pension schemes are required to report their assets' climate risks in line with recommendations from the Task Force on Climate-related Financial Disclosure.

These provisions are largely beneficial for scheme members. The new policy seeks to strengthen the requirements placed on trustees and managers of occupational pension schemes to include proper climate risk management in their governance processes and publish that information so that it is available to all.

Since the Bill was introduced, other amendments have been made to add further detail to the policies that are already in the Bill. In summary, the amendments are as follows. The first is a charge cap for collective defined contribution schemes, which are commonly called CDC schemes. This amendment ensures that the regulation-making powers in the Pensions Act (NI) 2015 regarding charge caps apply to CDC schemes so that a similar charge cap can be implemented in CDC schemes. The existing charge cap, set in the regulations at 0.75%, provides an important protection for members in the

default arrangements of money purchase schemes used for automatic enrolment.

There are transfer rights amendments that are designed to protect scheme members from targeting by criminals and fraudsters. For example, they will clarify, in prescribed circumstances, that the trustees or managers of a scheme are not required to carry out a person's request to transfer pension benefits to a different scheme unless they are satisfied that the person concerned has obtained prescribed guidance or information on pension transfers. This is with a view to limiting pension scams.

There is a pensions dashboard amendment that will make it clear that there will be a public service pensions dashboard as well as a commercial dashboard. The intention has always been to provide a public service pensions dashboard through the Money and Pensions Service. The amendment now makes that explicit in the Bill.

Amendments have also been made regarding the use of delegated powers in relation to collective money purchase benefits. The delegated powers for the authorisation criteria and subordinate legislation will now be confirmatory. The delegated power for the transfer rights will also be subject to the confirmatory procedure. This is in line with the corresponding powers relating to British legislation, which will be subject to the affirmative procedure.

An amendment has also been made to clarify an existing power allowing for the modification of statutory provisions to make it clear which provisions may be amended and for which purposes.

Overall, the Bill aims to help people plan for the future and to protect people's pensions by giving the Pensions Regulator greater powers to tackle irresponsible management of pension schemes, including actions taken by employers that could compromise the viability of the pension scheme. I very much support the principle that members' interests should be at the core of everything that we do.

The Assembly has already agreed the principle that the Bill should contain provision for here. In view of that, it is sensible that the amendment should also apply here, as many schemes operating here are based in Britain, and it is desirable that the same regulatory framework is in place here to facilitate compliance, planning and enforcement.

Importantly, under the Bill, the power to make subordinate legislation and to commence provisions relating to devolved matters will vest in the Department for Communities. Likewise, the powers of control and subordinate legislation will rest with us here.

The Bill ensures that the pension system is fit for purpose for the future by strengthening the systems and introducing important safeguards and deterrents against those who might seek to avoid their responsibilities.

The use of the legislative consent motion procedure in this case should not be seen as a precedent or an indication of how I intend to proceed in the future in this area. I am very much aware of the importance of the Assembly's role when considering legislation and, in particular, the value of the Committee's scrutiny role.

It is very important that the provisions in the Bill are enacted in Britain and here at the same time because

it provides us with legal certainty for schemes and employers to allow preparatory work, for example, for the introduction of climate-related financial disclosures to proceed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. Before I call the first Member to speak, I advise Members that I have quite a short list here, but there are quite a lot of Members in the Chamber, so if anyone wishes to speak in the debate, please rise in your place to let me know.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): The Committee thanks the Minister for bringing this second legislative consent motion on the Westminster Pension Schemes Bill. The Westminster Pension Schemes Bill started in the House of Lords on 7 January 2020. It is now at Committee Stage in the House of Commons, and the Bill Committee is expected to report on 5 November.

As a short aside, I will take this opportunity to remind the House that the Committee for Communities is currently considering the Pension Schemes Bill for Northern Ireland and will start its formal clause-by-clause scrutiny this very week. That Bill is to mirror the provisions of a different Westminster Bill — the Pension Schemes Act 2017 — which introduced, amongst other things, a new regulatory framework for master trusts workplace pension schemes that can be used by multiple unrelated employers.

Planning and preparation for retirement is very important for all of us and spent pension schemes are often not given the attention that they deserve by many of us. As I reminded the House on 1 June, when we debated the first LCM related to the Westminster Bill, although pensions are a devolved matter, to all intents and purposes, in the UK, there is essentially one system of pensions that includes numerous pension schemes in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the Pensions Regulator, the Pensions Ombudsman and the Pension Protection Fund all operate UK-wide.

The Westminster Bill establishes collective money purchase schemes. In such a scheme, both the employer and employee contribute to a collective fund from which the employee draws an income at retirement. The Bill also strengthens protections for scheme members by enhancing the powers of the Pensions Regulator and introducing stronger civil and criminal sanctions. It also increases transparency about pensions savings by introducing digital interfaces for individuals called pensions dashboards and introduces provisions to help to tackle pension scams.

The Committee is pleased to see that, central to the Bill, is the principle of consumer protection and enabling people to plan better for their pensions and that the Bill has been broadly welcomed by unions, the pensions industry and political parties.

This further LCM relating to the Westminster Pension Schemes Bill is now needed to ensure that Northern Ireland provisions remain in the Westminster Bill following amendments to it. Members will have read the Committee's report published on 22 October 2020 on the second legislative consent memorandum, but, just in case they have not, I will provide some background and update Members.

1.00 pm

The Committee published a report on the first legislative consent memorandum on 29 April 2020. At that time, members were reassured that the Department would brief the Committee on any significant policy changes to the Bill as a result of amendments at Westminster. Such amendments occurred, and the Committee was then briefed by departmental officials at its meeting on 15 October 2020 on such a policy change, other amendments and on the need for the further LCM. The Committee welcomed the main amendments, which are to do with climate-related financial disclosures, with the aim being to secure effective governance and disclosure of the risks facing pension schemes and of the risks and opportunities associated with the transition to a lower-carbon economy.

The Committee also welcomed the other amendments and was content that they added further detail on policies already in the Bill, including, as the Minister stated, setting a charge cap for collective defined contribution schemes, which is an important protection for members of such schemes. On transfer rights amendments, one aims to safeguard members of unfunded public-sector schemes from being targeted by criminals and fraudsters, and another aims to limit pension scams. There is an enhancement to the pensions dashboard that ensures that there will be public service pension dashboards as well as commercial dashboards

I remind the House that the Committee has previously noted its general uneasiness with the use of LCMs in principle rather than bespoke Assembly legislation. It is not the way that we would prefer to deal with legislation, but we recognise that it is necessary in this instance. We welcome the inquiry by the Committee on Procedures on the use of LCMs, and the Committee for Communities has already issued a response.

That said, the Committee recognises that the amendments are generally seen as a positive measure to help people to plan for the future and to protect people's pensions. The Committee welcomes the fact that further details on the provisions will be set out in subordinate legislation by the Department for Communities and made subject to Assembly control. The Committee accepts that it is advantageous that any changes to the regulation of pensions are made across all jurisdictions at the same time to ensure compliance and enforcement. We acknowledge that the Bill will strengthen the pension system by introducing certain safeguards and enhanced sanctions. For those reasons, the Committee is supportive of the second legislative consent motion related to the Westminster Pension Schemes Bill. Therefore, on behalf of the Committee, I support the motion.

Ms Ennis: The Committee has been scrutinising the Pension Schemes Bill for a number of months, and I thank the research team and all those who provided briefings to the Committee. I am broadly content that the amendments fit within the aims of the original Bill, which is to provide additional protections, safeguards and options for members of the schemes. The amendments, for the most part, provide further detail and clarity on what is already included. The climate change financial disclosures element is the new policy inclusion, and it is the element that has necessitated the additional LCM. The Minister and the Committee Chair have given a clear summary of what that will mean in practical terms. Therefore, it makes

sense, given the necessary focus on climate change on the impact that it is likely to have on many aspects of our lives, that any climate-related risks are properly assessed and disclosed in order to minimise the risk to people's pensions. I support the LCM and look forward to discussing the remaining aspects of the Pension Schemes Bill in Committee.

Mr Durkan: As I said in June, when we passed the first legislative consent motion related to the Pension Schemes Bill — I know that the Minister will concur — LCMs should be a last resort, particularly when we are dealing with the current Westminster Government. No matter how laudable the aims of a Bill, the Assembly should not surrender its powers or reduce scrutiny lightly. LCMs and accelerated passage are suboptimal routes for us to take. I take this opportunity, as I take every opportunity, to reiterate to the Minister that we have the time to ensure that we do not have to cut corners when it comes to scrutinising the upcoming welfare mitigation legislation.

We recognise the time pressures that there are with the Bill as a result of the three-year absence, and that puts pension scheme members here at a disadvantage to those in Britain. We supported the LCM in June on the basis of the Communities Minister's assurance that any changes to the Bill as it made its passage through the House of Lords to the Commons would be brought here for scrutiny and approval; hence the motion that is before us. That assurance was sought because of the Committee's nervousness about potential changes to the Bill that we would not wish to support.

The UK Government have already indicated their intention to secure support to remove the Lords amendment on delaying the introduction of commercial pension dashboards. In the light of the potential changes to the Bill in the Commons Committee tomorrow and on Thursday and when it returns to the Floor of the Commons, can the Minister reiterate that no changes will be extended to Northern Ireland without the Assembly's approval?

We support the changes that have been made thus far, which are before us. The Minister and the Committee Chair have already detailed them, but I highlight in particular those that relate to climate change, which help to ensure that pension schemes can adapt to a low- and — this will, hopefully, be in the not-too-distant future — net zero-carbon economy. The new provisions aimed at strengthening protection against pension fraud and scams are similarly welcome.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Minister for Communities for tabling the LCM. The Pension Schemes Bill extends to Northern Ireland the provisions of the GB Pension Schemes Act 2017. The extension could not proceed as intended in 2017 as this place was suspended. It is time that we ensured that people who have workplace pensions here are covered by the same protections as people elsewhere in the UK. Therefore, on behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the LCM.

Following the Pensions (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, it was compulsory for employers to automatically enrol eligible workers into a qualifying workplace pension. The pensions market responded, and master trusts developed. Master trusts are multi-employer pension schemes that employers pick for their staff rather than having to set up their own scheme. The reason why my

party supports the LCM is that part 1 of the Bill provides authorisation for master trusts to be introduced along with the criteria that they have to meet. That means that all master trusts will have to demonstrate to the Pensions Regulator that they can meet criteria and that their trustees are fit and proper persons who can meet the criteria and act within required parameters in the event of wind-up or closure of a trust. The Pensions Regulator will have greater powers to take action where key criteria are not met. It also means that master trusts operating outside the UK will be open to employers here as long as the master trust registers in the UK and complies with that criterion and the Pensions Regulator.

Part 2 of the Bill supports a cap on early exit charges. The power to override contract terms allows the Department to make regulations that restrict charges or impose requirements on certain pension schemes. For example, if a contract between those persons currently provides for a type or level of charge, such as member-borne commission or an exit charge, that is prohibited under regulations made under paragraph 1 of schedule 18. It allows regulations to provide that the provision of a scheme will be overridden in the event of any conflict in the legislation. The Bill caps early exit charges. It does not set out what those levels will be, but it is vital for customers to know that they will be able to access pension freedoms without overly expensive barriers.

As the Minister said, the Bill requires master trusts to provide information on how money is being invested by reporting climate-related sustainable investments. That will help us as a society, as we move towards a lower-carbon economy with the ultimate goal of zero emissions.

I welcome the pensions dashboards for both the public and private sectors. After all, they are our pensions. It is not fair to ask a normal person on the street to try to find out exactly what is happening with their pension, so the dashboard is welcome.

The LCM provides openness and transparency for customers. The dashboards, as I said, will be one way to do that. It protects people's pensions by giving the Pensions Regulator more powers. It works towards a low-carbon economy. The reports that will be brought forward from each pension scheme or master trust will be welcome. As the Chair said on behalf of the Committee, while the Committee welcomes it, we would have preferred that it were not an LCM, but we are where we are. I must ask the Minister to confirm that any future amendments will be brought back to the House so that nothing slips through that would be bad for customers or exclude us from opportunities for master trusts.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Member has indicated that they wish to speak in this debate, so I call the Minister to make a winding-up speech.

Ms Ni Chuilín: I am really shocked at that, actually [*Laughter.*] I thank all the Members who spoke. Like everyone, I am deeply uncomfortable at having to use the LCM route. I am not taking the scrutiny of the Committee lightly. That is its role and its job, and I want to ensure that that process is not thwarted. However, I think that there is an acceptance that, if the amendments were not discussed and voted through, we would put pension holders here at a disadvantage, which we did not want. Just to be clear, if there are further amendments, they will be brought to the

Committee and the Assembly. It is now abundantly clear that everyone has accepted that safeguards are provided for in the Bill, which was mentioned by those who spoke, and that people have access to what they are entitled to through dashboards in public, private and commercial pensions.

If I have missed any issue, I will write to the Committee; indeed, if the Committee wants further information, it can write to me. Without further ado, I commend the motion to the Assembly.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly agrees, in line with section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Pension Schemes Bill dealing with collective money purchase benefits, the Pensions Regulator, pensions dashboards and further provision relating to pension schemes as contained in Part 2 and clauses 117, 120 and 129 of, and schedules 4 to 6, 8, 9 and 11 to, the Bill that was introduced in the House of Commons on 16 July 2020.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The next item of business relates to the Department of Justice. We are running ahead of ourselves in terms of time, so we can take our ease for a few moments just to allow the Minister to arrive in the Chamber. Thank you.

Members, I do not know how this has happened, but the Minister for Justice is unable to be in her place. I have sought clarity and established that I have the discretion to allow us to move on and return to the item of business at a later point.

1.15 pm

Committee Business

Post-primary Transfer Testing

Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I beg to move

That this Assembly takes note of the feedback to the Committee for Education's online survey into post-primary transfer testing and calls on the Minister of Education to outline contingency plans for post-primary arrangements.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You certainly did move in order to get to your place on time.

The Business Committee has allowed two hours for the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and a further 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Lyttle: I begin in my capacity as Chairperson of the Education Committee, in which I moved the motion on behalf of the Education Committee. The motion calls on the Assembly to take note of the findings of the Education Committee's online survey into post-primary transfer testing and on the Education Minister to outline contingency plans for post-primary transfer tests this year.

The motivation for the Education Committee survey, which was agreed by all main parties and is the focus of today's motion, is the safety, well-being and opportunity for equal education of children in Northern Ireland during a public health pandemic: a pandemic that has taken life and livelihood across Northern Ireland and caused the Northern Ireland Executive to take extraordinary approaches to almost every aspect of society. The closure of schools and significant disruption to education across Northern Ireland from March to June 2020 led to the replacement of GCSE, AS and A-level examinations with centre-assessed grading and, crucially, prevented school-based preparation for post-primary transfer testing.

At that time, the post-primary transfer tests in question were scheduled to take place about now. The first Association for Quality Education (AQE) common entrance exam should have been taking place this Saturday, in the middle of a four-week COVID-19 circuit breaker. In these extraordinary circumstances, the Education Committee engaged with the AQE and the Post Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) — the providers of the private tests — wrote to every selective school in Northern Ireland and consistently questioned the Education Minister on what contingency plans were being put in place for post-primary transfer this year.

The response, or lack thereof, that the Education Committee received was concerning. We therefore sought to engage more widely with parents, guardians, teachers, children and young people via the online post-primary transfer survey. The survey was unanimously agreed by DUP, Sinn Féin, SDLP, UUP and Alliance Party members of the Education Committee, with the assistance of the Assembly Engagement team. The survey was completed by over 8,500 people. Approximately 6,500 respondents were parents and guardians, about half of whom are

responsible for children in P6 or P7. Around 1,800 respondents were teachers, with about half teaching P6 or P7 pupils. Disappointingly, the Education Minister refused the Committee's request for the survey to be sent to all teachers in Northern Ireland via the C2k network. About 750 respondents were children or young people, of whom three quarters indicated that they were entering P7.

I will say more about the findings of the survey when I speak in my capacity as an MLA. Some of its key feedback, however, was that a majority of the parents and teachers surveyed were very or extremely concerned about children sitting transfer tests further to a period of significant disruption.

Despite the efforts of the Education Minister to facilitate private transfer testing of P7 children this year, including drafting a ministerial direction to the Education Authority (EA) and fast-tracking enhanced application and appeals processes, the Education Committee remains concerned at the lack of any concerted scoping of alternative arrangements for the post-primary transfer of children during a pandemic that is causing significant disruption to their education and to preparation for those examinations. The Committee therefore unanimously calls on the Education Minister to outline substantive contingency plans for this academic year.

I would like to add a few comments in my capacity as an Alliance MLA. As I have already stated, the motivation for the survey, and the focus of the Assembly and the Minister of Education, must be the safety, well-being and equal educational opportunity of children. I ask the Education Minister to stop misrepresenting my integrity and advocacy on the matter as being an anti-grammar school campaign; it is not. It is unedifying and is not a serious response to a very serious matter.

There are non-selective grammar schools in Northern Ireland. My understanding is that a grammar education is an approach to education, not a system of admissions for education. It is possible to hold the opinion that academic selection is unfair and unnecessary as a system of post-primary admission and not be against academic or grammar approaches to education. Teachers can differentiate their teaching approach to different aptitudes in a school without an archaic admissions system to differentiate pupils by school. That, however, is a wider debate about academic selection that the Assembly needs to have in an open and inclusive manner. It is my profound regret that the collapse of the Executive in 2017 stopped an inquiry into post-primary transfer that was initiated by the previous Education Committee.

The motion is about how we transfer thousands of 11-year-old children this year in the midst of a global public health pandemic that has claimed tens of thousands of lives on these islands and which has disrupted almost every aspect of our way of life. We have closed schools for months and cancelled some of the most important exams possible. Yet, in that context, the Minister of Education remains adamant that it is safe, fair and appropriate for 10- and 11-year-old children to sit up to five examinations in January and February 2021. How, in that context, can it be safe or fair for the Education Minister to allow private transfer test providers to require 10- and 11-year-old children to sit up to five examinations in January and February for admission to a post-primary school during a public health pandemic when he can legislate otherwise and when

8,500 responses to an Education Committee survey include over 60% of parents, guardians and teachers saying that they are very or extremely concerned about children taking tests this year? Of the parents, guardians and teachers surveyed, the highest-scoring preferred approach for post-primary transfer this year is not to sit the tests and to use non-academic admissions criteria instead. Furthermore, 43% of parents, guardians and teachers are of the opinion that post-primary transfer tests should be abolished. Given that tens of thousands of pupils have been in self-isolation since August, it is time for the Education Minister to provide full, open and transparent information on the extent of self-isolation rather than obfuscating behind codes and percentage figures.

The Education Minister says that there are no alternative admissions criteria. Yet, his Department recommends alternative admissions criteria. DE circular 2016/15 advises all grant-aided schools on post-primary admissions and recommends categories such as free school meals, named primary schools, named areas, nearest suitable school and sibling at school as appropriate criteria. What has the Education Minister done to scope alternatives and with whom has he engaged on the matter?

Children deserve better and more from the Education Minister. The motion calls on the Minister of Education to outline an alternative contingency plan for post-primary transfer this year. I hope that he has one. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: As I said, every Member who is called will have five minutes to speak. The next Member on the list is Robin Newton.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. First, I thank Louise Close and her colleagues in the Assembly Engagement team for what was a very useful exercise. At this stage, I want to pay tribute to principals, boards of governors, teaching staff and all support staff for the way in which they have reacted during the pandemic. We owe them all a debt of gratitude.

Despite the Chair's remarks, which, if I am honest, I find nearly insulting, it was right to carry out the survey. It was right to carry out a survey in the middle of a pandemic. Given the circumstances in which we all found ourselves — unknown circumstances and a place where we had never been before — it was right to do that. I welcome that, today, all our schools are open, the teaching staff are there and the children are being educated. The fact that that is happening stands in stark contrast to the very negative approach of the Chair of the Committee.

I want to refer to the survey. Before I do, the Chair made some remarks about children, school principals and teaching staff always being safe. Nobody would dispute that in any way. It goes without saying that we want the very best protection for the teaching staff and pupils in every school, from the moment that they go in through the front gates of the school until they come back out again, in whatever circumstances the children find themselves.

I want to refer to some of the findings of the post-primary transfer survey, and I note that the Chair will refer to those when he speaks as an MLA. Before we had the COVID-19 crisis, 91% of respondents planned to sit the transfer test. When the COVID-19 situation occurred, responding on how they felt about children taking the post-primary test during the lockdown period, 61% of parents or guardians,

64% of teachers and 67% of others stated that they were concerned or extremely concerned. It would have been strange if they were not concerned in those circumstances, which were impacting on every sector of industry.

When asked the question about whether the test should be run as planned in the autumn, 45% of young people wanted the test to be run as planned rather than changing the date of the term; 25% felt that schools should use a different way of assessing academic ability, based on scores in primary schools; 14% felt that the tests should be delayed until January 2021; and 12% felt that the tests should not be run.

When young people were asked about whether the tests should be abolished, 35% felt that they should be retained, 14% felt that they should be changed and 13% were unsure. While 38% wanted the tests to be abolished, up to 62%, therefore, wanted the tests to be retained or changed or were unsure.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. I noted that he mentioned young people. We are talking about children and a pandemic. Does the Member believe that it is fair on those children to be put into that situation, given all the great challenges that our society and young people have faced this year?

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

1.30 pm

Mr Newton: It is fair to ask whether children should have been put into the situation, but the children were included in the survey. That is a fact.

If we look at the results on post-primary transfer, we see that, before the COVID-19 crisis, 74.5% of parents and guardians were planning for their child to take the transfer test, 21% were not and 4.5% specified "Other". It is right that the survey was done, but, underneath it all, there is a current running against selection and the grammar schools as we know them.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Newton: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Ms Mullan: Sinn Féin supports the motion tabled by the Education Committee, and, as the Deputy Chair of the Committee, I am impressed by the number of people who took part in the survey. Like the Member opposite, I thank Louise and the Assembly team for their work.

With over 8,500 respondents, the survey shows the intense level of interest in post-primary transfer and, in particular, the worries over this year. Parents, children and teachers responded to the survey, and that is why the work was so valuable. It reflects the reality on the ground of what transfer is like here.

Sinn Féin's position on the unregulated tests used by some schools and carried out by private companies is clear: they should be abolished. However, for today's debate, I will mainly focus on this year's situation, brought in by COVID. The use of this system discriminates against children from socially deprived backgrounds, those with a special educational need and those with social and emotional needs. Over the past week, I have been contacted by many parents, teachers and concerned groups.

Unfortunately, I do not have time to read out them all, but I thank them for getting in touch.

I will read out a piece that was sent to me by a primary 7 teacher. She said:

"The stress at present for children, parents and teachers alike is unimaginable. I teach in a socially and economically deprived area and only one pupil in my class is being tutored. I overheard a girl in my class ask a boy why he was not doing the transfer test, and he said, 'Sure, you can only do the transfer test if you are loaded'. That tells a very heartbreaking story that a child, at 10 years old, is so aware and relates a test to money. This is not academic selection; it is social selection."

She goes on to say:

"Children missed out on months of education. I have some children who are taking the test who did not log in or engage with me during the entire lockdown period. In terms of teaching and learning, I am trying to deal with the day-to-day issues in relation to COVID whilst trying to cover a vast amount of work that was missed."

There is now a culture of private tutoring for many children. I ask the Minister to agree for the funding given by the Executive for the Engage programme to be used by primary-school pupils to purchase an online tutoring app. What is his Department doing to ensure that the Engage funding is used to support all children who have fallen behind because of the disruption in their education?

As outlined by the Chair, when teachers were asked for their preferred method of transfer, the most popular position was not to run the test this year and for schools to use non-academic admissions criteria. Teachers were also asked how they felt about children taking the transfer test following COVID, and 92% were concerned in some way. What is striking and deeply unsettling about the survey is some of the common words arising from feedback from young children about the transfer test: "worried", "nervous", "scary", "unfair", "stress", "concerned" and "sad". These are 10-year-old children in the midst of a global pandemic: where is the compassion for them?

Many teaching unions have shown leadership on the issue and have called for an end to academic selection: I commend that leadership. I also commend the leadership of the schools that, so far, have decided not to use the transfer test this year, in particular St Columb's College and Thornhill College in Derry.

Finally, as is the case in the House, the survey does not find consensus on post-primary transfer, but it is clear that new arrangements must be considered if we are serious about putting children first in our education system.

Mr McCrossan: As SDLP education spokesperson, I welcome the opportunity to participate in this important debate. At the outset, I know and acknowledge that this is and has been for some time a controversial and divisive subject of debate. However, it is imperative that pupils, parents and schools have clarity for the future, especially given the impact that the current pandemic is having on education as a whole.

I put on record my appreciation for the many teachers and school staff who have gone back into classrooms in

schools across Northern Ireland today. They are working in intolerable conditions and are in uncharted waters. In that regard, I wish all our staff and pupils a safe return to our schools. I hope that the Minister will do everything in his power to provide the necessary support to our teachers in the school environment, who have found the opening of schools after the first wave to be a very stressful situation. I am sure that that has been notified to him.

The SDLP believes at its core that academic selection is grossly unfair and in major need of an overhaul. Given the inaction or unwillingness of the House to tackle the issue, we are left with unregulated transfer tests that are not in the best interests of all our children across Northern Ireland. The way in which the situation is being dealt with is almost a hokey-cokey approach. In addition to those issues, we believe that the concerns of parents and teachers about the current use of transfer tests needs to be addressed, especially in the context of the pandemic. In that regard, I welcome the survey conducted by the Education Committee, and I thank the Committee and Assembly staff who were involved. The Education Committee set out to gauge the opinions of parents, teachers and other stakeholders in an online survey that ran between 7 July and 7 September. As was mentioned by my Committee colleagues, 8,528 responses were received. That work was bolstered by a young persons' survey, which resulted in 754 completed surveys. The findings of the survey highlight the fact that there is significant concern among teachers and parents about transfer tests proceeding in January 2021. I wish to cover a number of those items in my contribution.

The biggest concern surrounds the interruption to education in primary 7 and children in primary 6 having their education significantly disrupted by the restrictions that were brought in to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic — for example, those children could not have properly completed the whole curriculum in English and maths during that period. What is more is that the blended learning that children were encouraged to engage in during lockdown has been recognised to be a much less effective way of learning when compared with face-to-face teaching — obviously. Postponing transfer results until January is a small consolation to many of those pupils and does not afford them enough time to deal with the huge deficit in learning opportunities that were lost during the pandemic.

To compound that, since schools reopened for the current academic year, there has been massive disruption to the current primary 7 cohort, with over half of our schools being affected by over 2,000 COVID-19 cases. That has had a significant impact on pupils' personal health or that of their families and on their mental health in having to deal with family illness or even death in some circumstances. Expecting pupils who have had to suffer in such ways to sit through a test that will, in most aspects, determine their very own futures is absolutely reprehensible.

It is the SDLP's view, now that schools have returned after the half-term break, that the disruption to education that the virus has posed will only worsen, given the onset of the winter weather conditions that are conducive to its spread. Things may get worse over the Christmas period, which could result in disruption to schools in January.

The lockdown has had the same impact across the student population. Reports show us, for example, that those from a disadvantaged background, as outlined by Ms Mullan,

will be disproportionately impacted as a result of the pandemic. It has also affected what is expected from them as children and young people.

We mentioned young people. We are talking about children, and we should remember their age. They have gone through a very difficult period this year with their learning, and we need to support them. If consideration is given to removing the test this year, Minister, please ensure that a fair process is put in place so that children from disadvantaged backgrounds have the same access to opportunities as those from more affluent areas, which is clearly the issue.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for being here to hear this really important debate. I thank the Chair and members of the Education Committee for inputting to the consultation. The Committee spent some time agreeing the questions that went into the consultation. I put on record my thanks to the people who put the consultation together, particularly Louise. I thank the teachers, pupils and parents who contributed to the consultation returns. If there is one thing that it has shown us, it is that the public, teachers and pupils are as divided on academic selection as we are. I am glad that we have not hankered too much in the debate to talk about the percentages and the returns, because that does not provide the answer. Today is not the day to address transfer testing holistically; debates on the transformation of education will be the grown-up time to discuss it.

From the very outset of his mandate, the Minister outlined that he will hold fast to —

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: Yes, of course.

Mr Newton: The Member referred to the selection test. Does the Member agree that it was irresponsible to do away with the 11-plus before an adequate discussion and negotiation took place to identify another system that could be put in place?

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

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for his intervention. That was before my time. However, from my background in the Fire and Rescue Service, I know that when you are in the midst of a crisis, you do not take draconian actions; you take measured steps as part of a thoughtful process. We need to do that in education. If we want to get rid of academic selection, we need tried-and-tested alternative arrangements, which I do not believe are there, and that will be borne out by what I am going to share from the results of the consultation.

I agree with the sentiment of the motion. I support the motion. The Minister needs to do something to provide contingency plans in the event that the test goes ahead: we need to know that our children are safe. Daniel McCrossan picked up on that point: our children need to be absolutely safe. There have been 8,700 responses to the consultation; there have also been 7,000 responses to the 'bring it back to primary' petition. There are measures that we can take, such as reducing the number of tests that pupils sit this year. There are things that we can do.

If COVID takes us to a place where the test is not taken, we need to ensure that the alternative arrangements are

fair. As the consultation shows, people do not agree that the arrangements are fairer than the transfer test. Whether the test goes ahead was split across parents, teachers and pupils. I, like many of you guys, have had multiple emails from teachers and others with vested interests about what we should do. I hope that the Minister outlines at the end of the debate some of the contingencies that he is considering.

I will pick out one or two issues; I will not labour too heavily on the statistics. The Chair pointed out that there is a strong voice asking for the abolition of the test, but, similarly, 48% to 50% either want to keep it or to reform it. It is in a balanced place, guys; it is not as straightforward as just abolishing the test. Going back to Mr Newton's point, if we are going to get rid of the test, we need to ensure that whatever replaces it is better and fairer. It must not be just a change for change's sake.

I am sorry to do this, guys, but for the right reasons, the Deputy Chair and Daniel McCrossan both picked up on socially disadvantaged people. I was deeply saddened to see in the consultation socially disadvantaged people, such as children who are on free school meals and SEN pupils. The disappointing thing is that when respondents were asked what alternative arrangements they would like to see, do you know what finished bottom of the pile? Those on free school meals and those with special educational needs. It was not politicians who came back with those answers. For me, it was the most disappointing thing in the survey. If we are trying to tackle educational underachievement and trying to pull people up and not push anybody down, how can we do that when we know that those who academically suffer the most are those in socially disadvantaged areas who may be on free school meals or have special educational needs? The consultation told us that those were the two areas of least importance for alternative arrangements, and that really surprised me.

1.45 pm

One of the good points of the consultation — I know that Daniel will probably bounce in on this one — was the responses of our children. Mental health is my soapbox; it is the thing that I want to drive and talk about, and I will talk to anybody about it. At times, we underplay the resilience of our children and young people. This year's P7 cohort said in quite strong numbers, "Do you know something? I think we need to do the test this year". An interesting part of the consultation picked out the children in those schools that have decided not to do the test; 82 of those children responded to the consultation and said that they feel that they have now been disadvantaged because they are not getting an opportunity to do the test. That is out of the mouths of the babes. We have to listen to our young people and take on board their wishes. They have been preparing for this, and not just for the past two or three months. It is a system that they have known and been aware of since they were in P1. It may not be the best, but we can improve it and do a whole lot better.

At its end, the survey asked the young people for three words. The Deputy Chair picked out a couple, and I will give a couple. Whether they do the test or not, I say this to each and every one of them: you are enough.

Mr M Bradley: As other Members have done, I thank Louise and the Assembly team for the hard work that they

undertook to bring the survey to the Education Committee. The survey is a good yardstick for debate. As has already been said, it provides food for thought. Although I have no objection to the motion, I agree that serious thought needs to be given to transfer tests this year. I support the transfer test, but I also support good, serious reform, not a knee-jerk reaction such as what happened with the 11-plus.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for taking an intervention. We talk about reform of the transfer test; what about reform of the education system so that children do not think that they are being disadvantaged if they cannot go to their nearest school?

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

Mr M Bradley: Thank you, Principal Deputy Speaker. I thank the Member for her intervention. Of course, she is right. It is incumbent on the House to have a proper debate around the reform of education. I agree with her in that regard. I support some sort of transfer test, but it has to be reformed in a great way. I make the point that it is parents, not the Education Minister, who put their children forward for the transfer test. In that light, it is unfair to criticise the Minister in that regard.

I have a question about the survey itself, because I do not know the answer: how many respondents could use the same email or IP address from the same household? Was it open to all in each household, or was it a single response per IP address or email address? That is something that I do not know.

On safety, I would like to see a greater roll-out of IT equipment and the lack of broadband availability being properly addressed. I know that the Minister will already be making plans for a fair and equal transfer test.

In closing, I am confident that the Minister will have a plan B to cover further disruption to the school year owing to COVID-19, should that be necessary.

Mr O'Dowd: This has been an interesting debate thus far. Fair play to the Education Committee for commissioning the survey and the work that it has been involved in around the transfer test, particularly this year's transfer test and the difficulties that that has brought.

COVID-19 has had a dramatic impact on education, as it has on all aspects of our lives. I welcome the fact that, today, our children and young people are back in their schools. It is important that the Executive do everything in their power to ensure that our schools remain open. There is a responsibility on parents and others in society to make sure that that happens; we have to mind our actions and be socially responsible, whether around the school gates or in any other aspect of our lives. When I hear the figures on the COVID infections in schools, the first question that I ask myself is whether the infection was caught in school or as the result of activities outside the school.

That is an important factor to consider. The safety of our pupils and our staff is vital, and we all have a part to play.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that the expectation that principals and school leaders should carry out track and trace in schools is unfair and adds to what is already a very difficult situation for them?

Mr O'Dowd: It is grossly unfair and has placed huge pressure on our schools, our principals and our teachers. Without them, in many cases, track and trace would not exist, because they are the ones who are doing it. That is something that the Executive will have to look at as we move towards having a proper tracking, tracing and supporting element.

As I said, I am an avid opponent of academic selection. It is not that I am opposed to grammar schools or to A, B and C. I am opposed to academic selection, because there is no evidence to support the claim that academic selection gives added value to the education system. There is, however, a weight of evidence to show that it damages the education system and that it damages young people. I can think of no other area of public policy that has so much evidence weighted against it. In any other circumstances, our media would lambast us daily for continuing to use academic selection. Apart from a few examples, for whatever reason — I know what I think are the reasons why they do it — our media supports academic selection on the basis that it has parental support. Smoking in bars used to have support. Driving without a seat belt used to have very popular support. There are people out there who will tell you that COVID-19 does not exist. In fact, I was stopped recently while on a walk by a guy who tried to shake my hand. He took offence because I would not shake his hand and then tried to tell me that there is no such thing as COVID-19. There are opinions about everything, but then there is evidence. The evidence tells us that academic selection is bad for our education system. Our responsibility as legislators is to ensure that something that is bad policy is removed.

Particularly this year, why are we having this debate? We are having it because two private companies are supplying our schools — our publicly funded schools — with tests. I do not know to which Committee of this House those two private companies are accountable. In fairness, they are not accountable to the Minister, because academic selection is outside his remit. They are not accountable to the Education Committee, because they are two private companies. The question then is this: why are two private companies interfering in our education system in the first place?

On the timing of the tests etc, schools also have a huge responsibility. There are schools that have led by example by stepping forward and saying that they will not be carrying out academic selection this year. I hope that that continues, but there is no reason that all schools should not step forward and say that they will not be carrying out academic selection this year. They do not have to wait on an instruction from the Minister. I would love to stand here and lambast the Minister, trust me. It would be an easy speech. He has certain responsibilities for all these things, but we have devolved significant powers to our post-primary sector. Whether it is a grammar school or not, our schools have significant powers. Boards of governors carry significant powers in their hands, so they have a responsibility to step forward and say that there will be no academic selection this year. That in itself would take huge pressure off our children and young people.

I object to the suggestion that the test should be returned to the primary schools, and I do so on this basis: what about the children who are not sitting the test? My colleague Karen gave the very good example of P7 teachers. Why should the education of those children be

disrupted and abused because some either want to or are being told that they have to sit a test? It is totally unfair and wrong. In fact, the entire debate — not today's debate in the Chamber, but the debate about the test — has been about a section of our education system and a section of our pupils. That is what is wrong with academic selection. The focus of the whole machine is on those who are doing the test, and that leaves people behind. If you want evidence of what is wrong with academic selection, listen to the debate over this last few weeks and months. It is about the few, not the many.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Dowd: Our education system has to be about all our children.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: It is just past five to two, and Question Time commences at 2.00 pm. The next Member to speak is Mr McNulty, but I do not think that it would be fair to curtail his speech in that way.

Some Members: Go ahead. Go for it, Chris. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Or maybe it would be; I do not know. I ask Members to take their ease while Ministers come into the Chamber for Question Time.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(*Mr Speaker in the Chair*)

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

StopCOVID NI: Uptake

1. **Mr Harvey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how many people have downloaded the StopCOVID NI contact tracing app since it launched. (AQO 964/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill (The deputy First Minister): The Department of Health has advised us that, as of this morning, the StopCOVID app has been downloaded 495,745 times.

Mr Harvey: Thank you, deputy First Minister. How can we increase the number of those downloading and engaging with the app?

Mrs O'Neill: It would be helpful if all of us were to use our good offices at every opportunity to promote the use of the app. It is testimony to the public's desire to do their part that so many people have downloaded the app. I also welcome the fact that an app has now been designed specifically — if I can say that word — for younger people. That will, I think, see an increase in the number of people who use the app. The version that has been developed for 11- to 17-year-olds will help reach more people, and we are asking our schools, FE colleges and others to promote it. Our repeating the message to download the app is one of the key ways in which we will increase the number of people using it.

Mr Sheehan: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. What supports have been provided for those who are required to self-isolate?

Mrs O'Neill: Self-isolation is a crucial part of the strategy to stop the transmission of COVID in our community, so it is important that people are financially supported to self-isolate when required. In March, the Communities Minister, Deirdre Hargey, introduced enhancements to the discretionary support scheme to further support people affected by the pandemic. That includes a non-repayable COVID-19 living expenses grant to assist with the short-term living expenses where a person or any member of their immediate family is diagnosed with COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate.

Regardless of circumstances, a discretionary support COVID-19 living expenses grant award will include a specific amount for any children in the household and can be made for periods of more than 14 days. That means that it is possible for individual awards to exceed £500, which makes it a more supportive intervention than there is anywhere else. It will also support the lowest-paid workers. I remain committed to working with all Ministers to support those required to self-isolate and the individuals and families who need support during these most challenging of times.

Mr McGrath: The deputy First Minister may be aware that the Health Committee was told recently that an update was

due to the app that might reduce the time that people have to self-isolate. The app works back 14 days, so there is an opportunity to reduce the window in which a person might have to self-isolate. Does the deputy First Minister know when that update might be made available?

Mrs O'Neill: I was not aware of that conversation at the Health Committee, but I can ask the Department of Health for that information. We are told that advances are being made all the time with regard to the app, and I know that there is work ongoing on the period of self-isolation. We have yet to see the evidence on that, but, no doubt, we will get that over time. I will pass on the comments to the Department of Health.

Mr Allister: Some might think that there is a need now for a track-and-trace system for COVID small business grants following the scandalous retention of such vital money by the deputy First Minister's party until they were flushed out by Stephen Nolan. Why should the public not conclude that, if Stephen Nolan had not caught Sinn Féin out, there would never have been an intention to pay back the money?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not think, a Cheann Comhairle, that that question is relevant to the original question. However, I am very happy to say again in the House today what I said publicly last week: what happened was wrong and totally unacceptable. As soon as the party leadership became aware of what had happened, we moved swiftly to deal with the issue.

HIA Victims: Apology and Memorial

2. **Mr Lunn** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on progress towards an apology and an appropriate memorial for victims of historical institutional abuse. (AQO 965/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: Victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse (HIA) have endured unimaginable pain and suffering at the hands of those who should have protected them. We are absolutely committed to making sure that they get the acknowledgement and redress that they deserve to help them to move forward and to rebuild their lives.

The interim advocate has been working with victims and survivors groups to advise on an official apology. He has also looked at the experiences of other jurisdictions to help to inform that advice. We received his report on 16 October and took the opportunity to discuss it with him on 20 October. He has highlighted the importance of a wholehearted apology that deals with acknowledgement, responsibility, recognition and repair. The Executive Office has engaged separately with Survivors and Victims of Institutional Abuse (SAVIA) on the apology, and we will receive a full report of its views.

It is really important that we get this right, as victims and survivors have waited nearly four years since the Hart report was published. We will come forward to victims and survivors groups with plans for the apology as soon as possible. On 6 October, we announced the appointment of Fiona Ryan as the Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse. Fiona will take up position from 14 December. As well as her critical interest in an apology, she will certainly take up the issue of a memorial.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. She mentioned the interim advocate's activities.

He has announced that the advice services will be in place from the start of December. Can the Minister advise us on the extent to which those services will be available? Will they be limited services or full services?

Mrs O'Neill: As you know, the Hart report recommended that specialist support services should be available to victims and survivors, offering counselling and practical help tailored to their needs. I am pleased to say that the Executive Office is taking steps to establish a wide range of additional services for HIA survivors. The Victims and Survivors Service (VSS) will deliver dedicated health and well-being social support and related services to victims and survivors of HIA. From today, Monday 2 November, support is available directly to meet pressing and immediate needs including persistent pain, disability aids and psychological support.

We intend that the HIA support service will be officially launched from 1 December. That will include dedicated health and well-being caseworkers, outreach, drop-in and social support that is local and easily accessible. Representatives of the victims and survivors groups have helped to develop the case for the support service and assisted VSS, TEO and the interim advocate's office in designing the arrangements. The service will build on what is already available for HIA victims and survivors and on the interim service for counselling and emotional support that was established in early summer. It is another important milestone in the fuller implementation of the Hart report.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to desist from using their mobile phones in the Chamber, please. We are getting a lot of interference in the system.

Mr Stalford: Will the deputy First Minister assure the House that co-design of every stage of delivery will be at the heart of this restorative scheme? It is so important that we carry people with us. Secondly, can she give the House an update on where we are with the financial scheme in respect of compensation, specifically the contributions required from institutions?

Mrs O'Neill: On your first point, co-design and co-production are essential. If we are to get this right and have the confidence of the victims and survivors, they have to be at the heart of designing things. I am happy to make that commitment in the House today.

The Member will be aware — I think that we have talked about it at different Question Times — that we are seeking meetings with a number of the relevant bodies. Everybody has to play their part.

There is a huge lift and a huge responsibility in getting financial redress payments to those who need them. We are working our way through that and hope to have meetings with the relevant institutions in the coming weeks.

Ms Armstrong: Will the deputy First Minister ensure that applicants to the redress board are made aware of what information is being sought about applicants, particularly if the board is seeking their criminal records, as this is very distressing for victims?

Mrs O'Neill: I am very happy to take that on board and will speak to the relevant officials.

Mr Speaker: I am disturbed by the interference on the equipment here.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for her answers, particularly in relation to the support services that have been put in place for victims. It is extremely important that they get the support that they need, particularly at this time when they have to go through the application process. Will the Minister update us on the work of the HIA redress board on administering the redress payments and whether any issues have arisen during that process?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. As we all know, historical institutional abuse should never have happened. It was so wrong, on so many levels, that trust was breached and children were violated. They were all failed by a system that should have protected them but that turned a blind eye and covered up systemic abuse. We owe it to them to make sure that we get this right and that they get the redress that they deserve. I know that redress has been a long time coming. As a matter of fact, it has been far too long in coming. However, we have started to make some progress in supporting victims and survivors. The redress board opened for applications on 31 March, and, within seven weeks, the first compensation payments were made. That was all within the timescales that were set out by the president of the board. That was a significant milestone for the victims and survivors, who are now starting to receive their long overdue compensation. As of 28 October, 647 applications have been received, of which 171 were from people who participated in the Hart inquiry. Panels have made determinations totalling £5.1 million and paid out a total of £3.7 million.

Mrs D Kelly: Will the deputy First Minister update us on the recruitment of the Victims' Commissioner, given that we are concerned about how many people in society are hurting both from institutional abuse and from the conflict?

Mrs O'Neill: I was happy to make a statement to that effect to the House only a short number of weeks ago. We are delighted that Fiona Ryan is coming on board. That will be a new beginning for the work with victims and survivors and will build on all the recommendations of the Hart report, such as the apology, the memorial and all that we have committed to. She is due to take up her post on 13 December, and we look forward to that.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next Member, I advise that oral questions 4 and 12 and topical questions 2 and 6 have been withdrawn.

Ministerial Code

3. **Mr Beattie** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will bring the new ministerial code before the Assembly. (AQO 966/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: We are considering draft amendments to the ministerial code to reflect the changes in the law introduced by the Executive Committee (Functions) Act 2020. Following Executive agreement, we will table a motion for their approval by the Assembly at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Beattie: Thank you, Minister. Given that the Executive Committee (Functions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020 is now law, does that mean that decisions are being made by Ministers that are now outside the scope of the present ministerial code?

Mrs O'Neill: No, that is not the case. We are aware that the Minister sought legal advice and is perfectly content that she has taken decisions in line with the code as it currently sits.

Mr O'Toole: Deputy First Minister, one of the reasons that this place was in abeyance for three years was lack of public confidence in financial transparency and in holding Ministers to account. Will she confirm that, when a new ministerial code is brought forward, it will be enforced by the standards commissioner, who will have the powers and the logistical firepower to hold Ministers to account properly?

Mrs O'Neill: I can confirm that that is the case. When the ministerial code is in place and is confirmed by the Assembly, the commissioner will work on that basis.

Miss Woods: When will a new panel for ministerial standards be appointed?

2.15 pm

Mrs O'Neill: I do not have that information with me, but I am very happy to provide it to the Member in writing.

Mr Speaker: I call Claire Sugden.

Ms Sugden: My supplementary question has been asked. Thank you.

Ebrington Clock Tower

5. **Ms Anderson** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to set out the time frame for enabling works on the Ebrington clock tower. (AQO 968/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: We are making good progress in regenerating the north-west and bringing about prosperity for the people of that area through recent and continued investment. The £200 million that was made available through the region's city deal will help us to stimulate growth and attract jobs. We are committed to the development of the graduate-entry medical school at the University of Ulster's Magee campus, and, through our Urban Villages programme, we are progressing the redevelopment of Meenan Square. We are also committed to the continued implementation of the Communities in Transition project, which seeks to support and empower those who live and work in the Brandywell and Creggan areas of the city. Those critical and very significant investments will complement the great progress that we have already seen in the redevelopment of the Ebrington site.

We are pleased to report that the procurement process to appoint a works contractor to complete enabling works on the clock tower building is now under way. An appointment is expected by 30 November. The works programme is expected to run for approximately 12 weeks from December 2020, and that is, obviously, dependent on the weather. We will continue to advance all remaining development works on-site and look forward to seeing those being completed for the benefit of all in the wider area.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, Minister, and thank you for that full and complete answer. Passers-by in Derry will have seen the new construction of grade-A office accommodation taking place in Ebrington. Will the Minister provide an update on the second building that is proposed for grade-A office accommodation in Ebrington, please?

Mrs O'Neill: Thanks to the Member for her question. The developer of that grade-A accommodation, Heron Property Limited, received planning approval in September 2019, and works to construct the building commenced in December 2019. Whilst they were temporarily delayed due to the lockdown, works recommenced in July 2020. Construction works are expected to be complete by March 2022, and, when complete, we anticipate that the project will bring significant benefits to the city and the region and will be a key catalyst for the site.

Mr Middleton: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answers so far. On the grade-A office accommodation at Ebrington, does the Minister have any information on whether investors are still keen to put jobs on the site, given the current COVID environment?

Mrs O'Neill: We have no information to the contrary, so we will continue to work with them to make sure that this is progressed. The construction of the grade-A office accommodation that has commenced will provide 50,000 square feet of office accommodation. That is huge, and it can accommodate between 400 and 450 people. We will continue to work with the contractors to make sure that the work continues, is delivered and brings the benefits that we know that it will bring.

Mr Durkan: It is great to see advancement on Ebrington. It has been long overdue. Has the Executive Office heard any concerns from the business community in Derry that, while it is great that there will be business and office accommodation at Ebrington, it will not create new jobs per se and it runs a risk of displacing jobs in the city and across the district?

Mrs O'Neill: No, we have not heard any concerns about that, but, obviously, the current COVID restrictions make it difficult for Ministers to get out and about and engage with people. I have certainly spoken to numerous business people in the city and have committed to making a visit at some stage in the near future so that we can talk out all those issues.

Mr Speaker: I remind Members to desist from using their mobile phones. There is a lot of disturbance on the computer system here. I appeal to Members to do that.

High Streets Task Force

6. **Mr Humphrey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the work of the high streets task force can encourage shoppers to visit the key shopping areas of our towns and cities during the Christmas shopping period in what has been a difficult year for retailers. (AQO 969/17-22)

14. **Ms P Bradley** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the high streets task force that was announced on the 6 August 2020. (AQO 977/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 14 together.

I share Mr Humphrey's desire for a Christmas period that will bring relief to the retail sector whilst remaining safe for shoppers and those who work in the sector. We can all play a part in encouraging that in the coming weeks.

The high street task force will look beyond that immediate challenge. It is clear that our town and city centres face a range of economic and social challenges. Whilst the

COVID-19 pandemic has, undoubtedly, exacerbated the situation, many of the challenges are long-standing, stemming from the financial crisis of 2009, prolonged underinvestment in infrastructure and changing patterns of consumer behaviour. This calls for a strategic, sustained response, with Departments and local government working in partnership to deliver a vision for sustainable town and city centres as thriving hubs for the retail, services, hospitality and residential sectors.

I recognise that stakeholders are frustrated that the task force is not in place already, and I share that frustration. However, the challenges call for a sustained transformation, not a quick fix, and that needs thorough preparation and planning. We have asked for that work to be accelerated, with detailed proposals to be brought to the Executive later this month and the task force established shortly afterwards.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for her answer. Recently, I met the Lord Mayor, the chief executive of Belfast City Council and Michael Stewart, the president of Belfast Chamber of Commerce. Over the last two to three years, Belfast retail has had a dreadful time in the marketplace, given the Bank Buildings fire and, of course, this year, COVID. City retailers are struggling. They need help and support. The joined-upness that the Minister referred to in her answer is absolutely urgent. Will the Minister ensure that that joined-upness will be put in place as soon as possible? Can consideration be given to supporting high street traders, particularly in the city that I represent in this place, in the run-up to Christmas, which is so vital to our city centre economy? I was in the city centre on Saturday morning, and, quite honestly, the footfall was very poor. Traders are very concerned: I met them and heard that from them at first hand.

Mrs O'Neill: What will be key to the work will be the joined-up nature of it. None of us can afford to work in silos. We need to work with the industry and local government to bring together all the stakeholders and then bring forward a plan. There should be short-term, medium-term and longer-term goals for us to reach to support the sector. We have said that there is no quick fix here. We believe that this is a complex picture. We are trying to fix something that has been a long time developing, so we are absolutely wedded to a joined-up approach. As I said, proposals will come forward to the Executive before the end of the month.

Ms Mullan: Does the Minister believe that the high street task force has a role in COVID-19 management and recovery?

Mrs O'Neill: That builds on the previous question. The challenges that our towns and cities face are not amenable to a quick fix. The decline of the high street is not new. It began long before COVID-19. We now need to see action and delivery to stem the decline, make things more sustainable and plan for recovery. We need to protect our high street, our small retailers and family-owned businesses, who are all at the heart of our communities. These are the most challenging of times for everybody. We need to be innovative and look at how we can bring life back into our towns and cities and how they can be a space in which to live, work and enjoy our leisure time. As I said, we need to work collaboratively with all sectors. Our officials are currently engaged with all the stakeholders in

putting together preparations for the high street task force and bringing that forward to the Executive very soon.

Mr Nesbitt: If the deputy First Minister agrees with the Chief Medical Officer that the R number cannot be controlled with schools and hospitality open at the same time, what more does she think her colleagues in Finance and the Economy can do to help the 65,000 people who work in the hospitality sector?

Mrs O'Neill: There is no doubt that these are the most challenging of times for everybody, not least for the sectors that have been really badly hit. We are now just over two weeks into a four-week period of intervention. Our objective throughout this period is to get the R rate down. The work that we are doing now as an Executive collectively — all Ministers have a role to play in this — is “What does the exit strategy look like?” and “How can we move forward? How can we keep the virus down to a level that allows us to move around a bit more freely?”. We intend to publish work around an exit strategy over the coming days, and we will communicate that to the public.

These are really trying times. That is why, when we moved to intervene and bring forward these measures, we knew that we could not do it without financial support. We knew that we could not do it without shoring up the businesses that have been impacted. That will always be our barometer. No matter what we have to do, we need to be able to support the people who are struggling. That will be at the heart of our decision-making.

Mr Speaker: Steve Aiken is not in his seat to ask question 7, so we will move on to the next question.

COVID-19: Communications Strategy

8. **Mr Lyttle** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what communications strategy has been put in place to encourage and ensure compliance with the guidelines and behavioural change necessary to reduce COVID-19 transmission. (AQO 971/17-22)

10. **Mr Gildernew** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Executive's communication strategy, which is critical in achieving buy-in for and compliance with recent Executive decisions aimed at reducing COVID-19 virus transmission rates. (AQO 973/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will ask junior Minister Kearney to answer questions 8 and 10 together.

Mr Kearney (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Our ability to reduce the levels of COVID-19 in our community is absolutely dependent on the public getting behind the effort to protect people and to save lives. Our communications strategy focuses on the steps that we should all be taking to stop COVID-19 from spreading and on the very serious consequences of non-compliance. That is a message that can be conveyed no more effectively than by the families who have felt the devastating effects of the virus: those who have lost a loved one to COVID-19. The Executive's public information campaign is being updated for the winter months and includes a testimonial from a bereaved family member that will be broadcast from this Friday, 6 November. That personal testimony will be very impactful in communicating the very real human cost of COVID-19 and the importance

of everyone doing their bit by following the restrictions; limiting your contact with others; maintaining social distancing; washing your hands well and often; wearing a face covering; maintaining good respiratory hygiene; downloading the StopCOVID NI app; and isolating and immediately booking a test if you display the symptoms. The compliance communications group, which includes representation from Departments, local government and the PSNI, is working together to ensure that a joined-up approach is taken that will maximise the effectiveness of that messaging through all channels.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the junior Minister for his response. Clear and imaginative communications are vital to encourage behavioural change and to protect life and livelihood from COVID-19. Have the Northern Ireland Executive employed behavioural change experts and/or considered employing local artists and high-profile people in Northern Ireland to help us with that important messaging?

Mr Kearney: An integral part of the work that is being carried out in the Department of Health and by the Chief Scientific Adviser and his staff is on taking account of behavioural attitudes and behavioural change in order to assess the effect of the restrictions that we have introduced and how they can obtain greater buy-in from the public, as well as what may be off-putting or neutral and not impact positively on human behaviour. We should work on the basis that that informs our approach and our analysis.

The need for more innovative and animated ways of communicating, particularly with our young people, has been a recurring theme of discussion on the Executive. The point is well made, particularly when we look at how the demographics have changed, with the increasing chains of transmission in the younger demographic. It is important that our messaging be targeted and impactful. The need to be more innovative is a point that has been taken on board and that has been emphasised to the Executive's information service in the work that it is taking forward.

On your last point, yes, when we speak to our younger people, it is critical that we engage those from the younger demographic, particularly sports stars from all our codes, to assist us in articulating the important message of the measures that need to be taken by young people in particular in what is a challenging period to ensure that we save lives and that they stay safe.

Mr Gildernew: Can the Minister update us on the work that is being undertaken by the Executive to strengthen the messaging on enforcement and compliance in order to combat COVID-19?

Mr Kearney: As the Member will know, the Executive have introduced emergency measures to halt the alarming levels of COVID-19 in our communities. We are in the midst of the current intervention. It is severe and restrictive, but, nevertheless, it is designed to try to have the desired effect. None of the decisions that were taken was easy, but our focus is on emphasising the need to protect people and save lives. Key to that, as the Member will know, is breaking person-to-person contact: in other words, breaking the chains of transmission. We are trying to get a balance between introducing restrictions when they are needed to flatten the curve of the infection, mitigating

those as much as we can and, as has been discussed during Question Time, protecting our businesses.

2.30 pm

The steps that we have taken are informed by the most up-to-date analysis and advice that we had received. Our preference is to work with every member of the community so that we protect ourselves and one another. However, where compliance falls short of what is required, those regulations will, of course, need to be enforced. The strategic compliance group, which is chaired by the other junior Minister and me, works closely with all our partners on a range of compliance, enforcement and communication issues. I want to thank specifically our colleagues in local government and the PSNI for the central role that they have played, along with the Executive Office, over recent weeks. It is a very solid foundation for how we move beyond this period and into the recovery period.

I also want to highlight the important work that has been carried out in my own constituency, particularly by Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council, which has led the way in setting a template for how other local government organisations can follow suit in their work in the community. We are also working to ensure that public messages on the issue are heard and understood. To that end, we have engaged with a wide range of other sectoral interests, including faith groups. Our most important partner in all that is the community. We must understand that the human cost of not adhering to the public health restrictions is severe. We all need to be responsible and take responsibility for our actions and behaviour.

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

HOCS: Failure to Appoint

T1. **Mrs Barton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the reasons behind the failure to appoint a new head of the Civil Service (HOCS). (AQT 581/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. We had a competition. We were not successful in appointing someone. However, as we outlined in our statement to the House on 26 September, we are working to put in place arrangements to fill the HOCS position on an interim basis, and we hope to be able to say something positive about that in the next number of days. However, until that is finalised, we will say no more other than that we will come back to the House to give Members that information first.

Mrs Barton: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. Has anybody declined an approach to be temporary head of the Civil Service?

Mrs O'Neill: I will not get into HR issues. We worked through our HR department. Everything was done according to the rules and regulations as they are laid out. We are very glad to have had the work of a number of senior civil servants to help us through this period. For example, Derek Baker has stepped up to assist us in the Executive. On the key issues of the day, whether it is COVID-19 in the Health Department or Brexit, senior civil servants have helped us out, and we are grateful for that work. We hope to make a positive announcement about an interim head of the Civil Service in the days ahead.

COVID Recovery Plan

T3. **Mr McHugh** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they agree that the COVID recovery plan should promote equality, fairness and inclusion. (AQT 583/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. As joint head of Government, I can certainly say that I am committed to leading a power-sharing Government who are defined by equality, fairness and inclusion. Therefore, in planning for recovery and going forward, we want to ensure that this is a good place to live for each and every person who calls it home. We want to work with all groups to deliver a society with social justice, workers' rights and equality at its core.

I am also aware, however, of the disproportionate impact of the virus on black and minority ethnic communities and women; the impact on children and young people's education; the mental health impact of the restrictions that we have had to put in place; and the impact of the loss of employment, particularly on those who are already experiencing poverty. The recovery must provide for those in greatest need and those who have suffered the greatest impact.

Mr McHugh: Does the deputy First Minister agree that addressing holiday hunger must be at the core of any future COVID recovery plan?

Mrs O'Neill: Without a doubt, it is a stressful and difficult time for many people across the community, especially where they have found themselves in a sudden change of circumstances, whether that has been through losing their job or a reduction in income because their hours have been reduced.

COVID-19 has exacerbated that issue for many people and families without access to financial resources, so support for those families is vital. We need to be able to support all who are struggling. Holiday hunger is an issue that I and the whole Executive take seriously, and we are determined that the Executive will work to address that while ensuring that children are afforded the best possible opportunities to succeed.

Victims' Pension Scheme

T4. **Ms Ennis** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in the light of the fact that Ministers are committed to delivering a victims' pension scheme, to confirm that the Executive Office will bid for financial resources for the scheme as part of the Budget 2021-24 information-gathering exercise. (AQT 584/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for her question. I can confirm that we are determined to deliver a victims' payment scheme based on need. As part of the Budget 2021-24 information-gathering exercise, the Executive Office has made a bid for finances in the 2021-22 year for £28.72 million; in the 2022-23 year for £64.29 million; and in the 2023-24 year for £72.8 million. The provision of those finances and financial certainty for the scheme are now key to progress.

Ms Ennis: I thank the Minister for her answer. Can she provide an update on the status and timeline of Executive discussions with the British Government in respect of

providing adequate resources for the scheme, given that it is British Government legislation?

Mrs O'Neill: The First Minister, the Finance Minister, the Justice Minister and I met on 22 September in relation to funding for the scheme, and we agreed to make an urgent request for a meeting with the British Secretary of State, Brandon Lewis, to discuss the issue.

In a letter to the First Minister and myself, dated 26 October, Brandon Lewis set out the British Government's position that the cost of the scheme should be met from within the block grant. To date, he has not scheduled a meeting. That is not a tenable or sustainable position. We will continue to raise the issues of finances and financial certainty, as I did with the British Prime Minister, until this matter is satisfactorily addressed.

NDNA: Irish Government Discussions

T5. **Ms Dillon** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on discussions with the Irish Government about the NDNA commitment. (AQT 585/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: I welcomed warmly the Irish Government's announcement of the creation of a €500 million fund for the advancement of North/South projects as part of its Budget exercise on 13 October. While still at a very early stage of development, it is anticipated that the fund will support the delivery of key cross-border infrastructure projects; investment in new all-island initiatives in areas such as research, health, education and the environment; address the challenges of the north-west and border communities; achieve greater connectivity on the island; and enhance the all-island economy and all aspects of North/South cooperation. The fund is a much-needed and welcome investment that will, hopefully, deliver practical benefits for all our people, providing the basis for all-island cooperation.

Mr Speaker: I call Linda Dillon to ask a supplementary question.

Ms Dillon: My supplementary has been answered in the fulsome answer that the Minister gave, thank you.

Mr Speaker: Emma Rogan is not in her seat.

R Number: CMO Advice

T8. **Mr McCrossan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide clarity on the Executive's approach to the restrictions in the light of the Chief Medical Officer's (CMO) claims that it will not be possible to keep the R number below one if schools and the hospitality sector are open. (AQT 588/17-22)

Mrs O'Neill: You are correct, that is the Chief Medical Officer's view, and he has relayed that to the Executive in all our conversations.

We have to be guided by the public health advice. We have to take balanced and reasonable approaches. That is far from easy, and very difficult decisions have to be made. As I said in answer to an earlier question, the Executive are working their way through the exit strategy and what that looks like. We need to be able to communicate that well in advance of 13 November because we need people to have the information so that they can plan. The Executive's work continues on that basis.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the deputy First Minister for her answer. Can she clarify whether she agrees with the position of the First Minister that businesses should reopen, if safe to do so, in two weeks' time, after the restrictions lift?

Mrs O'Neill: Obviously, the ideal is that we allow the maximum number of businesses to be open and the maximum amount of freedom to individuals, but we are in a challenging situation. We brought forward the four-week intervention because we had to. We had no option other than to do something to try to arrest the situation.

Our determination is to make this work, but we are consistent across the board in saying that we want to find a way to move away from continual lockdown. The Executive policy cannot be to have a lockdown strategy. However, I have also been honest enough to say that we have to keep all options on the table. When it comes to what comes next, we need to minimise the disruption to people's lives as much as we can. We need to be guided by the public health advice. We need to invest in the test, trace and find strategy. We need to see more advances in the testing regime. We need better communication with the public, and I welcome the work that is being done on that. We have another few weeks left of the interventions, and, if we all stick at it, we can make a real difference and get the virus down to a level that will allow us to lift some of the restrictions. All the while, we have to be guided by the public health advice.

Culture and Language Legislation

T9. **Mr McGlone** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the legislation relating to languages and culture. (AQT 589/17-22)

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle agus gabhaim buíochas leis an LeasChéad-Aire. Tá mé ag iarraidh a fháil amach an féidir leis an LeasChéad-Aire an dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir leis an reachtaíocht i dtaobh cultúir agus teangacha a chur in iúl dúinn?

Mrs O'Neill: I thank the Member for his question. We are committed to the development and the implementation of the rights, language and identity proposals that are included in New Decade, New Approach. The delivery of those priorities will be important in building our shared future, based on mutual respect and parity of esteem. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly delayed [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order, Members.

Mrs O'Neill: It is very difficult to hear, a Cheann Comhairle, when people are speaking.

Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly delayed the speed at which we would have liked to see these issues progress, I can assure you that it has not deterred us from delivering them as quickly as possible. Officials are undertaking the necessary preparatory work to legislate for the core elements of the Bill, and we intend to progress the legislation during the 2020-21 year to create the relevant bodies as quickly as possible.

Mr McGlone: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasChéad-Aire. Thank you very much indeed, deputy First Minister. You mentioned that there is a time frame for it. Can you tell me

what that time frame is and what articles and elements of the Bill have already been prepared?

Mrs O'Neill: The Member is aware that there were three separate pieces of legislation to come forward. The drafting of the Bills was done in advance of NDNA. COVID has been the biggest interruption in bringing this forward, but I can assure you that there will not be a moment wasted. As soon as we receive the advice from officials, I hope to be able to come back to the Chamber to talk about its progression.

Mr Speaker: Pam Cameron is not in her place, so that brings topical questions to a conclusion. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two, please.

2.45 pm

Justice

Brexit: DOJ Preparations

1. **Ms McLaughlin** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her Department's preparations for the UK leaving the EU. (AQO 978/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Work has been progressing across the Department of Justice and the wider justice system to prepare, as far as possible, for the end of the transition period. The key risks of EU exit for my Department are the loss of EU tools that facilitate cooperation among law enforcement partners and the impact that it will have on crime, organised crime and public disorder. Plans to mitigate those risks continue to be impacted by uncertainty about the shape of any future security partnership and the nature of the wider relationship between the UK and the EU at the end of the transition period.

Ms McLaughlin: I thank the Minister for her answer. Does she agree that the removal of access to the European arrest warrant would be a backward step for policing and justice in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Long: We have a number of tools in the European suite of law enforcement tools for sharing and cooperation, among which the European arrest warrant is key. There are other fail-safe mechanisms in place at this point when it comes to issues such as extradition, but none of them is as effective or as efficient in its operation as the European arrest warrant has proven to be.

Ms Rogan: I apologise for not being in my place earlier during the previous Question Time.

Does the Minister agree that a no-deal Brexit will leave our criminal justice agencies at a disadvantage in tackling crime, particularly along the border corridor?

Mrs Long: We are working very hard to ensure that we are able to maintain safety, security and good order in the justice system. However, there will, of course, be issues with some of the protocols that we have been able to rely on to date. There is, for example, a particular issue with the data adequacy agreement that ensures that we can, in live time, share information across borders. That data adequacy agreement is not yet in place, and it is a key issue for justice. Should we exit the transition period without that agreement being in place, it would have a

day-to-day impact on the ability of operational partners to share personal data for the detection and prosecution of pan-EU crime and particularly cross-border crime. There is clearly a challenge that has to be addressed within the next eight weeks. There is a real pressure on all those involved in the negotiations to get down to the detail, to get that over the line and to get an agreement that will allow us to continue to provide a safe, secure and good cooperative relationship across the border.

Mr Beattie: Does the Minister not agree that, in light of contact between domestic terrorist groups in Northern Ireland and international terrorist groups in the Middle East, it would be folly for Northern Ireland, following the end of the transition period, not to align itself with the rest of the UK on the Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Bill?

Mrs Long: The Member has strayed somewhat from the issue of the adequacy of EU exit preparations. On the Counter-Terrorism Bill, terrorism in general is not a devolved matter; it is a matter for the Home Office to take forward. However, there are areas where it impacts on the operation of local justice. As the Member will be aware, I took the matter to the Executive and liaised with party leaders, but, unfortunately, there was no agreement among the parties in the House on how to get an agreed legislative consent motion, be it a limited or a full one, through the Chamber. Unfortunately, on this occasion, it will be a matter for Westminster to continue to address, as has been the case.

Mr Speaker: I should have said that oral questions 8, 11 and 14 have been withdrawn.

‘Child Sexual Exploitation in Northern Ireland’: Recommendations

2. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the next steps in implementing the recommendations of the June 2020 Criminal Justice Inspection report, ‘Child Sexual Exploitation in Northern Ireland’. (AQO 979/17-22)

Mrs Long: As I have advised the House previously, I remain committed to working with criminal justice and health partners to further improve how cases of child sexual exploitation are handled. A multi-agency task and finish group is considering the Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI) 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. In taking that forward, my officials are having ongoing discussions with partners in the Department of Health, the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, the Health and Social Care Board and the PSNI, and are developing an action plan that we will share with CJINI once ready.

On an issue such as this, I am always open about how we can improve outcomes for victims by working together better and more strategically, and that is what we will consider as we finalise our action plan in response to the CJINI report and seek to implement the recommendations.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her answer. Strategic recommendation 1 states:

“Within six months ... the Department of Justice take forward a cross-Departmental strategic response to tackle child sexual abuse and exploitation”.

Four months on, can the Minister assure us that work is under way in conjunction with the PSNI and the Public Prosecution Service to deliver that recommendation in a timely fashion?

Mrs Long: The majority of the recommendations in the CJINI report are operational and will fall to statutory partners to deliver, but the report recognises the importance of ensuring a coordinated, strategic and multi-agency approach to the issue. A multi-agency task and finish group is considering the report in line with the work that is being progressed by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland and other partners that are responsible for the operational response to child sexual exploitation and existing child protection mechanisms and protocols.

The group is also considering the CJINI recommendations alongside those in the recent Leonard Consultancy report on child sexual exploitation that was commissioned by the Safeguarding Board, given that there is a crossover in the recommendations. That should ensure that there is a considered and joined-up approach to the strategic and operational recommendations in both reports. It will include how my Department and our criminal justice partners best support those elements that have a Health lead and vice versa. Through that, a more coordinated and effective response should be able to be secured.

Mr Givan: The inspectorate’s report was very critical of the lack of strategic leadership in addressing the outworkings of the Marshall report, which was completed in 2014. It called for a step change and made the strategic recommendation that the Department of Justice needs to lead the multi-department response. Can the Minister assure the House that she will take on that responsibility and drive forward the kind of response that we need to see?

Mrs Long: Yes, Mr Speaker.

Ms S Bradley: I note the Minister’s work to date on the issue. Will she define or give a timeline for when we can expect to see some results from that work?

Mrs Long: The Department is, obviously, working collaboratively to take it forward. My Department does not have a strategic lead for child protection issues. However, I recognise that more can be done to enhance our strategic response and to ensure that, by working closely with partners, we get the best outcomes for victims.

There are some challenges with the timeline. For example, the Marshall inquiry’s findings included a suite of recommendations across a number of Departments and bodies. Progress reports have been published by the Department of Health, while a child protection senior officials group is also led by that Department. Over the coming months, we hope to be able to provide more updates to the Committee and the Assembly about progress on that serious issue.

COVID-19: Impact on the Justice System

3. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the impact of COVID-19 across all agencies in the justice system. (AQO 980/17-22)

Mrs Long: Across the justice system, the impact of COVID-19 has been felt in how services are delivered by the police, how courts operate, how people are kept safe in

custody and by those under supervision in the community. Huge efforts have gone into managing the impacts of COVID-19, with organisations quickly adapting their practices to comply with public health guidance and to put in place contingency arrangements. That has included conducting risk assessments of premises to ensure that the safety of essential workers and those in our care can be maintained, increasing the use of various digital platforms to engage with members of the public and those in contact with the justice system and, where possible, enabling staff to work from home through the provision of IT equipment. Examples of the use of innovative practices include virtual visits and virtual learning in custody, the increased use of live links by courts to enable remote access for defendants, victims and witnesses and digital recording of statements provided remotely by victims and witnesses.

From the end of September, the full range of courts and tribunals services have resumed, albeit at a reduced capacity due to the necessary social-distancing controls. Each justice organisation has a recovery plan in place, with progress carefully monitored and adjusted in light of the trajectory of the virus in the community and overseen by the Criminal Justice Board.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for her answer. I would like further clarity on working from home and the social-distancing measures in policing. Will the Minister also assure me that all efforts will be made to ensure that the most heinous crimes against the most vulnerable will continue to be met with the full rigours of policing and the law despite any COVID-19 limitations?

Mrs Long: It is very clear that, for most policing operations, working from home is not an option. Whilst there may be some scope for people to operate remotely for paperwork and other things, most policing requires them to be present and active on the scene. I can certainly assure you that there will be impacts on the PSNI as a result of COVID-19. I cannot assure people that there will not; that would be foolhardy. However, the PSNI has responded excellently to those challenges, including the additional burden, which it did not previously have, of having to manage COVID regulations and the enforcement procedures around those.

With regard to the PSNI's response, it has taken a toll on officers, and there are issues around people having to self-isolate. We keep that under review, and, where we are asked for more resource or more assistance, we are open to that discussion with the PSNI.

Ms Dillon: The Minister said that the courts have resumed. However, there is obviously quite a backlog. Can the Minister give us assurance that mitigations are in place, should there be any further COVID restrictions, to ensure that the backlog is reduced and dealt with, particularly around family court cases and those that involve very vulnerable victims.

Mrs Long: The Member will be aware that significant work was undertaken in the courts to ensure that, hopefully, they could continue to operate in as normal a fashion as possible once they restarted. Physical distancing measures were put in place, along with reorganisation of courts, and two court systems have been introduced so that deliberations are held in a separate court to the main trial. A number of different and innovative systems have

been put in place. Members will also be aware that we are looking at additional capacity with regard to circulation space and, potentially, the opportunity to hold some of our family courts and tribunals at other locations. The Department is working very closely with the Strategic Investment Board and, indeed, some arts organisations, whose premises will not be particularly busy over the next period, to utilise those to the best possible outcome for Justice.

With regard to the speed of processing, it is correct to say that there will be a backlog. At the moment, the backlog suggests that we now have real-time reporting and, from that, we can tell that there are around 51% more cases in the court system than there was on 1 March. That is a significant increase in the business that the courts have to do. However, last month was the first month where the number of cases being progressed actually exceeded the number of cases incoming; that suggests that some inroads are now being made into tackling that backlog. The Member will understand that, given the complexity of the justice system, there will be different impacts across the different stages of the system.

Mr Beggs: The National Police Chiefs' Council recommends engage, explain, encourage and, ultimately, enforce. Does the Minister accept that, in failing to chair the COVID enforcement working group, she has failed to demonstrate leadership?

Mrs Long: I accept neither the premise of the question that I failed to chair the group nor the inference taken from it.

Ms Sugden: Will the Minister give her assessment of inappropriate referrals from various statutory agencies to Women's Aid shelters? Inappropriate in that there has not been an incident, or not a recent one anyway, and it seems to be getting referrals because it has spaces. For example, the Housing Executive and police seem to be referring to Women's Aid to house people.

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for raising it. It is not an issue that has been raised directly with me by Women's Aid. There certainly has been an increase in the amount of reporting to Women's Aid and other helplines, largely, I think, as a result of people's awareness being raised about domestic abuse over the last eight months, but also due to the campaigns on social media and television encouraging people to report. Many people phoned up where there was not an immediate issue but concern about family or friends who may be at risk of domestic abuse and, perhaps, cut off from their normal network of support. I am not aware of people being referred back to Women's Aid with regard to seeking accommodation and support. If that is the case, I will be happy to hear more from the Member about that.

3.00 pm

Interface Violence: North Belfast

4. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Justice to outline the measures that her Department is taking to address violence at interfaces in North Belfast. (AQO 981/17-22)

Mrs Long: Over recent months, it has been extremely disappointing and, indeed, distressing to hear of sporadic interface violence at a number of locations across the north of the city. Any such trouble, where it has a sectarian

motivation, is a hate crime, and I condemn it unreservedly. The Department, in partnership with the Northern Ireland Policing Board, funds the North Belfast District Policing and Community Safety Partnership. A core part of that body's remit is to improve community safety and tackle antisocial behaviour.

The Department's interfaces team also works to broker inter-agency cooperation among DOJ, Belfast City Council, the PSNI, the Education Authority, the Youth Justice Agency and the Housing Executive in order to tackle the underlying causes of interface tensions. If we are to address those tensions and the violence successfully, we also need local political and community support and leadership to do so.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answer. I accept that the multi-agency approach is very necessary and that this is not just down to the police. What should the Justice Department's specific way forward be, and what actions can be taken? I should have declared that I am a member of the Policing Board. There are issues around what can be physically done in some of those areas. There are small moves that can make a big difference, and they are happening on a daily basis.

Mrs Long: First, I thank all the representatives for North Belfast, because, although this particular issue has been around in recent weeks and months, there has been good progress made on other elements of trying to build safer and stronger communities in that neighbourhood. My Department continually works to get that inter-agency cooperation to which I referred in order to look at options to design out crime. It is also considering what support might be available for diversionary activities and other such interventions.

With community consent, good progress is being made. Indeed, in recent months, interface structures have been re-imaged and removed at Duncairn Gardens and Hazelbrook Drive in North Belfast. Although I understand that there is a growing frustration that perhaps more could be done to tackle the issue, it is difficult, unless we are able to capture not just the actions that the police are involved in but the wider actions that are being taken in the area.

I am committed to working on a cross-departmental basis to address the underlying causes of violence, and the Together: Building a United Community strategy has also sought to break down those barriers between different parts of our community. Those who are determined to disrupt the peace and quiet that many residents had been enjoying along interface dividing lines in North Belfast simply must not be allowed to succeed.

Mr Speaker: I call Kellie Armstrong.

Ms Armstrong: My supplementary question has been answered, Mr Speaker.

Mr Butler: My question may already have been answered, but will the Minister outline any further cooperation that there has been between her Department and the Department for Communities on the issue?

Mrs Long: My departmental officials have been on the ground with PSNI colleagues at Spamount Street and North Queen Street to ascertain what measures can be taken to increase community safety in the area,

improve conditions for local people and create deterrents to antisocial behaviour. We also work in partnership with Belfast City Council, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and other agencies that have their staff on the ground in those neighbourhoods.

We also recognise that, on occasion, we will look to convene those with other roles to play in addressing the problems. In other places, we will make our contribution via established community and statutory partnerships. It is important to note that it is not just for the Department of Justice to lead on this. It has to be something on which we collaborate and work constructively with others, including agencies of the Department for Communities such as the Housing Executive and others.

Antisocial Behaviour

5. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Justice how she plans to address antisocial behaviour in communities. (AQO 982/17-22)

Mrs Long: I recognise that antisocial behaviour is an ongoing issue in local communities and that it causes anxiety and suffering for the residents of those communities. That is no doubt magnified by the restrictions that have been in place over recent months, with more people at home and some looking for alternative social places to meet. Partnership working among the relevant agencies that have the levers to address the issue is vital in order to deliver a swift and coordinated response to problematic behaviours and the underlying causes of that behaviour.

Fundamentally, my plans to address antisocial behaviour are based on supporting a collaborative approach at a local and strategic level to prevent, where possible, antisocial behaviour occurring in the first place; to resolve issues at the earliest possible stage through interventions; and to support those communities and individuals most impacted on by that behaviour.

The newly established multi-agency Community Safety Board will give effect to better linking the strategic and operational response to community safety issues such as antisocial behaviour. Through existing operational mechanisms such as policing, community safety partnerships and support hubs, processes are being developed to pool collective knowledge and resources to ensure an effective and joined-up response.

While the prevention of, and targeted interventions for, negative and risk-taking behaviours is the preferred approach to protecting people and communities, it is important to ensure that relevant agencies have the effective and proportionate enforcement powers in place to ensure that action is taken where necessary. My Department is working with partners in relevant Departments to review antisocial behaviour legislation.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive answer. It has been two years since the DOJ consultation on the criminal legislative framework to tackle antisocial behaviour. Does the Minister intend to make legislative changes to tackle antisocial behaviour and, if so, will they form part of the Miscellaneous Provisions Bill?

Mrs Long: I am happy to meet the Member to set out the actions that the Department has taken and what has been delivered thus far. Not all the antisocial behaviour

review will require legislation; some of it will simply require a different delivery option. My officials are aiming to progress the outworkings of the review consultation as quickly as possible. However, a challenge is that some of the powers under consideration sit outside the Department of Justice. Officials are, therefore, liaising with counterparts in other Departments to agree which Department is best placed to take forward the powers under consideration. It is not as straightforward as simply bringing those matters to the House. However, we will discuss it with other interested Departments and try to seek a way forward.

As you know, a key issue for the review is the ongoing challenges with Part 5 of the Criminal Justice (Northern Ireland) Order 2008. The order allows only for the voluntary surrender of alcohol; it does not allow for the policy intention to seize and dispose of alcohol. The Department of Justice has taken steps to improve PSNI powers. It is also talking with the Department for Communities, which has the primary responsibility for the regulation of alcohol, to ensure that a better solution can be found.

Mr Dunne: Does the Minister recognise the need for additional resources for community policing? I think that we all fully recognise the good work being done in my constituency of North Down by community policing. Does the Minister continue to urge the Chief Constable to provide additional resources for community policing in our constituencies?

Mrs Long: How the Chief Constable deploys his resources is an operational matter for the Chief Constable. However, he is on record as saying that he believes that community policing is a priority. Therefore, I hope that the Member, and his colleagues on the Policing Board, will hold the Chief Constable to account on how he delivers on that priority.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Minister and her Department for all their hard work throughout the pandemic. The Minister mentioned the new Community Safety Board. As we all know, some communities are tortured by antisocial behaviour. Can the Minister tell me who sits on the newly established Community Safety Board? What work is being done to prevent antisocial behaviour in communities?

Mrs Long: It is very rare for community safety issues to be resolved by one agency or one board alone, and antisocial behaviour is no different. The multi-agency Community Safety Board is a structure that aims to link the different strategic and operational responses to community safety issues together. The structure allows us to operationalise joined-up responses where necessary by stepping up and standing down a response group on any issue where evidence shows that it is needed.

For example, a community safety response group was set up in May to consider the risk of antisocial behaviour in the absence of normal youth diversion and summer scheme interventions due to social-distancing requirements. Without the support of formally approved and structured summer interventions, there was a risk of the issue being exacerbated and of a possible rise in the numbers of young people entering the criminal justice system. Discussions resulted in the Education Authority and PSNI working together to identify the most acute needs and agreeing on the appropriate mechanisms for engaging

with young people. A community safety response group was also set up in August to address PSNI and Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) concerns about unacceptable bonfires in some areas. Again, agencies met on a number of occasions to address the associated ASB and related community safety issues from those. The learning from all of those different step-ups will allow us to inform potential issues in the future.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. Partnership and collaboration is pivotal to so much that we do in the Assembly, and it is certainly important if we are to address and prevent antisocial behaviour. In my constituency, the Housing Executive is always very proactive and happy to engage with other agencies to address issues as they arise, but it is my experience that there are some inconsistencies across the housing associations; some are very proactive, while others display an unwillingness or inability to engage with other agencies to address problems. Is that something that the Minister will consider raising with the Minister for Communities, if not the Federation of Housing Associations?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his input. We are more than happy to raise that through the antisocial behaviour board. There is an opportunity, through the cross-departmental working that we have through that board, to find mechanisms to raise it, whether that is through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive or directly with the Minister. I am more than happy to take that forward.

Improving Health Within Criminal Justice

6. **Mr McHugh** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the progress of her Department's commitments in the Improving Health Within Criminal Justice strategy. (AQO 983/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Improving Health Within Criminal Justice strategy and supporting action plan was jointly developed by my Department and the Department of Health prior to its publication in June 2019. Seven thematic areas were identified in the strategy, which translated into a total of 45 actions to be taken forward on a joint basis between Health and Justice, including our respective partners.

The action plan, which is currently subject to a further update, reports 69% of the actions as being on track for completion, complete, or embedded in business-as-usual activities. Thirty one per cent of the actions in the joint action plan were assigned to my Department as lead, of which 71% are on track for completion, complete, or embedded in business-as-usual activities.

Mr McHugh: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Minister, I am sure that you will agree that many of those who enter the criminal justice system already suffer from complex health needs, including mental ill health and addiction. The Department of Justice has a key role to play in improving the situation for those people. Therefore, is the Minister satisfied that positive changes in that area are progressing quickly enough in order to make provision for the most needy?

Mrs Long: The Member raises a very valid point in terms of the degree to which many of those in our care in the justice system have already fallen through the cracks of health, particularly mental health, services, addiction services and others. People often have a complex range of

needs when they enter the justice system. What we have in the justice system is a microcosm of wider society. The responses that we use in the justice system to offer people mental and physical well-being support have to reflect best practice outside of the justice system. Therefore, we work very closely with our partners, particularly those in the PSNI, PCSPs, the Probation Board, the Youth Justice Agency, the Prison Service and, of course — most importantly — our partners in the Health Department, who help us to ensure that, regardless of the way in which people come in to contact with the justice system, whether it be a short intervention in the street or a longer-term intervention in the prison system, we put health and well-being at the forefront of what we do.

Mr Speaker: I call John O'Dowd for the next question. I advise you that you have one minute.

Prisons 2020

7. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the Prisons 2020 strategy. (AQO 984/17-22)

Mrs Long: Since the publication of 'Prisons 2020 The Way Forward' in July 2018, the Northern Ireland Prison Service has driven a programme of continuous improvement across the organisation, with the aim of delivering better rehabilitation for people in our care. Years 1 and 2 saw significant progress made towards the strategic commitments across each of the four strands of the programme. Plans for the first two years of the programme detailed over 180 deliverables, of which only 5% were not achieved. I am delighted that those achievements resulted in significant improvements for staff and people in our care, including delivering state-of-the-art accommodation and technology across the estate, developing innovative interventions to assist the most vulnerable in our care, and supporting our staff to carry out their unique and challenging role. The impact of the programme has been further evidenced by the excellent inspection reports received over the past two years for Maghaberry and Hydebank.

The programme has now entered its third and final year. Aligned with our ambition is a recognition that we are working in a complex and challenging environment that has been heavily impacted by the pandemic. While the organisation has maintained its drive for improvement, consideration is now being given to revisiting the programme timescales to reflect the additional pressures presented by it.

3.15 pm

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

COVID-19 Regulations: Penalties and Enforcement

T1. **Mr Middleton** asked the Minister of Justice for an assessment of the penalties and enforcement of the COVID-19 regulations. (AQT 591/17-22)

Mrs Long: As Members will be aware, the Department of Justice recently led a review of the penalties relating to the enforcement of COVID regulations, and we passed, at the Executive, increases in those penalties that are now being

taken forward in cooperation with the PSNI and other partners. Those regulations should be laid shortly.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for her answer to that question. I appreciate that she said that the regulations should be laid shortly, but can she give us a time frame? Does she agree that penalties and enforcement are of the utmost importance at this time, given that we want to ensure that we drive down the number of cases and that we get our economy open again? Enforcement and penalties are very important.

Mrs Long: Yes, I completely agree with the Member, and it is important that we do so as quickly as possible. However, the timing will, unfortunately, be led largely by the time that it will take for the PSNI to be able to produce the new enforcement notices. There have been some issues with delays in that because of the pressure on the bespoke printing that is required for those enforcement notices. However, as soon as those enforcement notices are ready to be rolled out across the Police Service, we have the regulations ready to be laid in the Chamber.

Prison Officer Health and Well-being

T2. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her Department's work to enhance prison officer health and well-being. (AQT 592/17-22)

Mrs Long: As the Member is aware, I have launched focused reviews on the support mechanisms and procedures that the Prison Service has in place to ascertain whether more could be done to help front-line staff. The review of the support services for serving staff was due to report by 31 October this year. The review team asked for more time to consider this important issue and will now report to me in early December. A separate review of support services for former staff is also being progressed, and I expect that report within the next month.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister of Justice for the attention that she has given to prison officer health and well-being. Does she agree that, whilst mental health must be addressed by all Executive Departments, the Department of Justice has a particular need to ensure support for staff who are performing some of the most challenging public roles in our community?

Mrs Long: I thank the Member for his comments. He and some other Members have taken a consistent interest in the welfare and the well-being of and support for current and former prison officers alike, and I thank them for that. Prison officers carry out a challenging and unique role in Northern Ireland and are to be commended for doing so. Well-being is embedded across the Northern Ireland Civil Service Departments, and help is available from the welfare support service and from Inspire. I want to support Prison Service staff in every possible way, which is why I launched the reviews. I will consider the findings of those with NIPS and senior management as a priority, once they are received.

Office of the Police Ombudsman: Funding

T3. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Justice to outline what plans, if any, she has to allocate additional funding to the Office of the Police Ombudsman to deal with the backlog of historical investigations. (AQT 593/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Police Ombudsman has contacted my office, and we are due to meet to discuss the matter shortly. It would be inappropriate for me to discuss in advance of that meeting what my intentions may or may not be until I have heard her case, but, as with any application for funding, it will be accompanied by a business case that we will have to look at carefully. However, I am committed to ensuring that the legacy piece that was supposed to be agreed by us at Stormont House and was supposed to be taken forward in short measure is able to proceed, because I believe that, by not doing so, we burden the PSNI, the ombudsman's office and, indeed, other parts of the justice system with policing the past when they should be mainly focused on policing the future.

Mr Gildernew: Gabhaim buíochas leat, a Aire, as an fhreagra sin. Obviously, we would much prefer to see the Stormont House Agreement mechanisms implemented in full, owing to the pressures that legacy puts, as you said, on the resources of the PSNI and the Police Ombudsman. However, I am sure that the Minister understands that many of the families have been waiting for many decades for the investigations to be completed, including the family of Roseanne Mallon in my constituency. Will the Minister confirm whether any funds are ring-fenced to deal with legacy and whether any of that will fund the Police Ombudsman?

Mrs Long: Funding was ring-fenced for legacy by the Northern Ireland Office. However, my Department has been advised that that funding is available to draw down only for issues related to the Stormont House Agreement and its structures but not for wider legacy issues. I have written to the Secretary of State seeking clarity on the matter, given the inherent delay that his change of process has led to in delivering on those legacy structures, such as the Historical Investigations Unit (HIU) and others.

At the moment, the funding for all legacy issues is complex and uncertain. I would like to see certainty brought to the entire process. I absolutely agree with the Member on the need for people who have been seeking truth and justice, where possible, to be able to continue to seek it and get it in a timely manner, and it is important that we have the resources to do that. It is not only for the Assembly and the Executive to find those resources: the UK Government have a significant role to play in that regard.

Parental Alienation

T4. **Mr M Bradley** asked the Minister of Justice to detail how the justice system intends to deal with parental alienation. (AQT 594/17-22)

Mrs Long: As Members are aware, in the next few weeks, we will have the Consideration Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill. While it contains no specific reference to parental alienation, the elements that deal with the aggravating factor of the use and abuse of a child in such relationships can be captured by the legislation. With respect to wider policy and practice on parental alienation, the issue of families and the law around that rests with the Department of Health. However, we have had a long engagement with Health over parental alienation and how we can capture it as part of the domestic abuse offence.

Mr M Bradley: I thank the Minister for her answer. I have been contacted by several constituents who have not seen

their children for several months and even up to a year. Many primary carers seem, in some cases, to use or take advantage of the pandemic to inflict isolation on the other parent so that they cannot engage with their children. How can the Department prevent that happening?

Mrs Long: There are a number of elements to this. First and foremost, when it comes to the justice system, particularly the family court system, the needs and, when ascertainable, desires of the child have to be paramount. There is, therefore, a reliance on the judgement of the courts, but that is informed by social work and by those who have contact with the family to ascertain their needs.

The best outcome for children is to have full investigation and full access to both parents. Ideally, we would like a situation in which such family disputes do not reach the courts in the first place but can be mediated, and, as a result, there is an emphasis on mediation in how we want the family court and justice system to move forward. When it ends up in court, it is important that the desires, wishes and needs of the children are paramount. There is no excuse for preventing a child from seeing their estranged parent unless there is a risk to the well-being and health of that child.

PPS: Religious Imbalance

T5. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Justice what action she is taking to address the imbalance in the religious breakdown of those employed in the Public Prosecution Service (PPS). (AQT 595/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Public Prosecution Service does not fall within my remit in the Department of Justice. It is an independent body funded by the Department of Finance.

Mrs Barton: While it is an independent body funded by the Department of Finance, will the Minister make a statement to the House every year on the community background statistics of employees in that service?

Mrs Long: It would not be appropriate for me to make statements on the breakdown of people in that service, because it is not a part of the Department of Justice.

DOJ Legislative Programme: Update

T6. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Justice for an update on her legislative programme. (AQT 596/17-22)

Mrs Long: My plans for the remainder of this term include the introduction of the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill in the Assembly today; the introduction to the Assembly of the protection from stalking Bill, hopefully, at the beginning of December; bringing forward a Bill to change the personal injury discount rate in mid to late January; and a justice (miscellaneous provisions) Bill to be introduced to the Assembly, hopefully, in March of next year.

I appreciate that that is an ambitious and demanding programme, but I believe that we can deliver it if we work together. A good model is the Committee Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, where we have worked in partnership to improve and, I believe, enhance and sharpen the Bill. I am grateful to members of the Committee for their constructive and timely consideration of the issues during scrutiny of the Bill. Hopefully, if we can get through the Consideration Stage,

Further Consideration Stage and Final Stage, it will receive Royal Assent in the new year. As the Chair noted with some pride, we will finish ahead of Westminster, despite people's concerns that, because we did this locally, we would lag behind it.

Mr Dickson: I appreciate the extent of the Minister's programme, but does she agree that reform of the committal process is a critical part of speeding up justice in Northern Ireland and that that has been reflected upon by Criminal Justice Inspection, the Northern Ireland Audit Office and Mr John Gillen in his report on serious sexual offences?

Mrs Long: Yes, the changes in the Bill are crucial to improving the speed of the justice system and delivering on the Executive's priorities in 'New Decade, New Approach'. They also deliver on a commitment arising from a Northern Ireland Audit Office report, as the Member rightly says, on avoidable delay in the criminal justice system that was published in 2018. Whilst it is important in tackling the speed of justice, it is also important for the other benefits that it brings for victims and witnesses. For example, the Fresh Start panel recognised that it brought protection to victims and witnesses in paramilitary and organised crime-related cases where there may be coercion or intimidation, and the Gillen review recognised the impact that it would have on vulnerable victims and witnesses of serious sexual offences in an effort to reduce trauma and attrition rates. Finally, the Chief Inspector of Criminal Justice has made similar recommendations about reforming committal proceedings because she was concerned about the impact on serious sexual and child abuse offences and wanted those added to the schedule. That will happen as a result of the committal reform that is being brought forward. It is also my intention progressively to add offences to the list of specified offences until traditional committal proceedings are eradicated entirely. If the Assembly has the First Reading of the Bill today, that will be a significant first step in that process.

Victims' Payment Scheme

T7. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Justice whether a judge has been appointed by the Lord Chief Justice to oversee the victims' payment scheme. (AQT 597/17-22)

Mrs Long: I have spoken with the Lord Chief Justice, and he has assured me that such a nomination is imminent. We are hopeful that an announcement will be made in the coming days.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for that. Will that be an interim appointment or a permanent appointment? If it is an interim appointment, why?

Mrs Long: My understanding, if it is correct, is that it has to be an interim appointment in the same way as all the members of the panel will be interim appointments until they are formalised in legislation. It is also my understanding that, when we get the appointment, it will not necessarily be the case that there will be huge churn, given that, we hope, most of those who have the specialisms and skills will reapply when those become formalised posts.

Community Support Hubs

T8. **Mr McGrath** asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the work of the community support hubs in identifying and protecting vulnerable people in our community. (AQT 598/17-22)

Mrs Long: The community support hubs have been an incredibly useful tool and have the opportunity to enhance the cooperation and collaboration that happens in the organisations that are responsible for identifying vulnerability and responding to it. They have also managed to bring partners together in collaborative ways of working that are more streamlined than perhaps was the case before.

So I think that the hubs have been a success, and we certainly hope that people will continue with those projects and to work on the basis that has been set up under the hub system.

3.30 pm

Mr Speaker: Unfortunately, time is up. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two while we prepare the Chamber.

Questions for Urgent Oral Answer

Economy

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

Small Business Support Grant Scheme

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy how ineligible payments occurred under the coronavirus £10,000 small business support grant scheme, including progress in recovering payments.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I wish to start my response with a reference to the Comptroller and Auditor General. In his report, he highlighted the fact that 20 Department for the Economy initiatives were activated to support local businesses and that, as a result of that action, tens of thousands of businesses have been assisted and jobs saved. This would not have happened had the Department failed to act quickly. My Department launched three grant schemes: the £10,000 small business grant scheme, the £25,000 small business grant scheme, and the microbusiness hardship scheme. A total of £343 million was processed to approximately 32,000 businesses. The £10,000 small business grant support scheme was open to businesses registered as in receipt of small business rate relief. It was later extended to include those in receipt of industrial derating. The scheme mirrored those being implemented in other parts of the United Kingdom.

Every party in the Executive agreed that there was a need to get payments to businesses as quickly as possible. For that reason, it was agreed that approximately 7,000 automatic payments would be made to those businesses for whom Land and Property Services (LPS) holds bank details for rating purposes. The Executive took that decision fully cognisant of the risk. To save businesses and jobs, it was simply not possible to put in place the checks and balances that would normally be associated with schemes of this nature. The scheme was announced on 18 March and launched eight days later on 26 March.

The data that was used to process the payments is held by LPS. An online portal was also launched for those businesses for which LPS did not hold bank details.

In my letter to Executive colleagues on 25 March, I set out that a subsequent audit of the scheme would provide an opportunity to identify payments made in error and to consider options for recovery. I remain committed to that today.

The eligibility criteria for the scheme included a list of exclusions, including vacant properties, MPs' and MLAs' offices, and businesses that were insolvent or dormant. Every effort was undertaken in the time available to ensure that automatic payments were made only to eligible businesses. I am aware, however, that a number

of ineligible payments were issued, representing less than 2% of the 24,700 grants issued.

The scheme closed on 20 October to appeals. My Department is committed to undertaking a post-scheme evaluation and will put in place a full process to recover ineligible payments. To date, 74 payments have been recovered in full. I am content that my Department took the necessary, swift action to support tens of thousands of businesses and jobs under threat because of the COVID-19 crisis.

Mr Muir: I thank the Minister for her response. The revelations exposed last week by the media concerning the grant scheme have caused great anger and concern as people and businesses across Northern Ireland continue to suffer real hardship. Will the Minister commit to commissioning a swift, independent investigation into the matter so that we all quickly know what happened, who knew, how the money will be recovered, and why we found out about this scandal only last week?

Mrs Dodds: First, I inform the Member that the process only closed on 20 October. The reason that it was allowed to continue was to allow for appeals concerning the £10,000 small business grant scheme. It is very important to remember that.

I have said, as I said to my Executive colleagues in my letter of 25 March, which asked for approval for the scheme, that we will have a full evaluation of the scheme, followed by a process of recovery of any payments that are deemed ineligible. We will allow the process to continue to ensure that those payments made in error are recovered and to ensure that businesses that got the money were able to continue in business.

We saved many businesses in Northern Ireland through the £10,000 small business grant scheme. Many businesses are here today that would not be here had they not had that type of relief, alongside the other national programmes that our Government put in place. Many businesses comment to me about that on many occasions.

Mr Middleton: The Minister will be aware that there was incredible pressure from across the Chamber to get the scheme set up in March to get money out quickly to businesses. In this Chamber, one Member told us to rip up the rule book while another told us to bury bureaucracy. Does the Minister agree that a balance needed to be struck between getting the money out quickly to those who urgently needed it and ensuring that it went to those who were eligible?

Mrs Dodds: Yes. I thank the Member for his question and comments and for reminding the House that many Members, from every single party in the Chamber, urged us at the time to rip up the rule book in order to get money out quickly. "Bury bureaucracy" was a phrase that was used. The honest answer is that we were in an incredibly difficult situation: a pandemic that we had never before been in as a nation. We had been told that businesses had to cease trading, and there was a huge concern that many of those businesses would subsequently fail were they not to receive the support that they did.

The Executive took a decision, supported by every party in the Executive, that there would be a number of automatic payments because that would get money out more quickly to those businesses. That is where we have seen most of

the difficulties. The subsequent application process, whilst slower, was open to less risk, and we should remember that for subsequent processes in the future.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Minister, for your response so far. Does the Minister have absolute confidence in her Department and its leadership to deliver a healthy economy after the COVID-19 crisis? I am really questioning that at the moment.

Mrs Dodds: That does not really relate to the question, Mr Speaker, but, of course, I will answer it because it is very relevant.

In terms of COVID-19, the only other Department that had a response rate similar to that of the Department for the Economy was the Department of Health, which you would absolutely expect in a health pandemic. My Department moved very quickly, as the Comptroller and Auditor General indicated in his preliminary report into the Executive's response to the pandemic so far. Again, as the Comptroller and Auditor General says, by moving quickly and getting money out quickly, my Department saved many thousands of jobs and thousands of businesses that would otherwise have failed.

As well as that, my Department has been working on skills, on higher education, on further education, on improving our green, clean energy strategy for the future and, of course, on developing our overall economic strategy for the future. These are incredibly difficult times, and I thank the officials in my Department for their response and work so far. I also want to place on record in the House — it is very important — the work of Land and Property Services. Many people across the Chamber will have cause to be very grateful to Ian Snowden, who personally rang them time and time again to answer queries for businesses. It is worthwhile putting that on the record today.

Dr Archibald: Oversight of the spending of public money is something that we must all take very seriously, and my party is very aware of that since learning of erroneous payments to our offices last week. There is a need to ensure that money is returned to the public purse. *[Interruption.]* I have previously asked the Minister and permanent secretary — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Will the Member resume her seat, please? I remind Members that every Member who is on their feet is entitled to be heard respectfully. Everybody will have an opportunity to make their point in due course.

Dr Archibald: I have previously asked the Minister and permanent secretary at Committee about the scale of ineligible payments, and, in response to my written question, the Minister indicated that officials were putting in place a process to deal with ineligible payments. Can the Minister outline whether, as part of that process, individuals or businesses that received erroneous payments have now been notified and asked to repay the money?

Mrs Dodds: As I have noted in the Chamber already today, the scheme closed on 20 October. We will write to everyone whom we identify as being ineligible for payment and ask them to return the money. It is important that we have proper accountability for taxpayers' money. Indeed, it is particularly important at a time like this when so many businesses are suffering and so many individuals are hurting because of the health crisis in our communities.

Yes, that process will be undertaken, but be aware, colleagues in the Chamber, that, in response to the four-week restrictions, we are also putting together another set of grant schemes. There are very limited numbers of officials to work on all those grant schemes at the same time, and I refer you to Her Majesty's Treasury, which has indicated that the full scale of fraud and error in the job retention scheme may not be known until 2021.

3.45 pm

Mr Stewart: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. One of the most frustrating things for businesses hearing this story coming out in the last week or so is that many waited for months and months, and some were still waiting, as you alluded to, on their appeals being heard as recently as last week. Businesses contacted me to say that they are still waiting on the outcomes of those appeals, so there will be a great deal of frustration. Can the Minister assure us that any ongoing appeals will be heard as quickly as possible so that people who are entitled to that money can get it? What legal powers does the Minister have to try to claw back any moneys that have been paid incorrectly?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. I assure him that appeals will, and should, be heard as quickly as possible. Those who are still waiting tend to be the most difficult and intricate cases, and they are probably waiting for further information etc. We will ensure that that happens. That is important, and I thank the Member for highlighting that. It is very significant.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for coming to the House today and answering the question. She will appreciate that many people are very angry about the scale of the payments that were made erroneously, and there will be others who will thank her for ripping up the rule book. However, when she ripped up the rule book, did she include a very clear statement in those rules that said that money would be recouped from anybody who attempts to defraud the scheme or is paid erroneously and that she would have the power to do that recoupment?

Mrs Dodds: I want to thank the Member for his question and to correct him. I never indicated at any stage that we should rip up the rule book. In actual fact, I cautioned, in a letter to my Executive colleagues — and I brought it with me — on 25 March, before the scheme launched, that there would be risk to the scheme. So, I am not in favour of ripping up the rule book. The rule book is there for a very good reason. I included certain exemptions to the scheme. Those exemptions included MPs' and MLAs' constituency offices. That was clear from the start, alongside businesses that were insolvent or dormant etc. Therefore, I had a very clear set of guidelines for those who were operating the scheme, and we will write to those people and seek to claw back money that was paid in contravention of the guidelines for the scheme.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answers so far. When did she first become aware that some payments were made to ineligible businesses and people, and by whom was she informed?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. We are now only starting the evaluation of the scheme. We had done some preliminary work on areas where we thought there may be difficulties with the scheme. For those who are concerned about the issue of payment to wind turbine

owners, the small business rate relief scheme is an all-encompassing scheme, and Members of this Assembly and members of the Finance Committee may wish to examine it in further detail. We discovered that many businesses that are eligible for small business rate relief are strange, to say the least. For example, we discovered that payments had been made through the automatic process to wind turbine owners. We later moved to make those ineligible for the scheme.

Be aware, folks, that we will come back at businesses that have not claimed properly or businesses that, through no fault of their own — and that was the case with some of the businesses, and we do not want to make people out to be in the wrong where they are not in the wrong — received one of the 7,000 automatic payments, and we will attempt to recover all the moneys that are owed.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give us some indication of the estimation of the number who wrongly received? I received an answer today that says that 72 have repaid. How many are still outstanding? When it comes to repayment, Mr McHugh told public radio that he had great difficulty in contacting Land and Property Services and in getting a process to recover the money. Is the Minister aware of any difficulty in LPS receiving back payments that should never have been made?

Mrs Dodds: I will take the last part of your question first. My Department has advised people of a telephone number that they can call to make arrangements with LPS. If there are very specific difficulties, I will, of course, pass it on to LPS. However, the Member will be aware that LPS is under the control of the Finance Minister, so this may be a matter that he would wish to take up with him.

At present, as we know it and before we have done a full evaluation of the scheme, most of the difficulties lie within the 7,000 automatic payments, because the other payments were actually processed, and many of them were processed and checked manually by people from my Department. It was a huge undertaking to try to get those grants out in a very short space of time. It is worth reminding Members that 24,700 grants went out in an extremely short space of time under very difficult circumstances. Currently, including the 52 wind turbines, the number stands at just over 400.

Mr Carroll: Given that people in my constituency are hounded and humiliated to pay back benefits if they are overpaid, can the Minister explain why there is one rule for those constituents and another for those who are in and connected to Stormont and do not even need, or apply, for grants but get them regardless?

Mrs Dodds: I remind the Member that we should try to eliminate fraud and error in all aspects of life, and that includes in the benefits payment system. I looked this up the other day: in 2018, the fraud and error in the benefits system amounted to £60 million in Northern Ireland. I encourage people who are in that situation to make that right. I do not approve of it in any form of life. I also say that, if payments were made in error, people should return those payments. The eligibility criteria are very clear on the website, and people can examine the eligibility criteria. People should look at it very carefully, and, if they have received a payment in error, they should return it.

Ms Sugden: The Minister has confirmed today that she understood the risk at the time of payments, and she has

also confirmed that her Executive colleagues, who made the decision along with the Minister, understood the risk. Therefore, what measures did the Minister put in place while knowing of that risk? Did she, for example, issue remittance advice with all the automatic payments, which included a disclaimer to claw back that money should it be paid in error?

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for your question. You are absolutely right: I wrote to Executive colleagues before the scheme launched on 25 March. I received a response from every party in the Executive, which indicated that, even though I had outlined the risk, that risk, when balanced against the need to get money out very quickly in a very difficult situation in order to save jobs and businesses that would have failed, was appropriate in the circumstances. We are now in a situation, as the scheme has closed, where we will evaluate and take the scheme forward. If you got money and you know that you are not entitled to that money, that money should be paid back. We will be writing to everyone whom we are aware of in those circumstances, and we will try to seek the recovery of that money for the public purse.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for her answers. I think that we should all genuinely recognise how significant the small business grant was. It was paid out from March onwards, during the real shock that came with the lockdown period. Will the Minister advise on how she would stop this ever happening again? I understand that the system used the LPS database. Does she see a better system in which there would, perhaps, be a formal application rather than automatic payments, which would reassure the public that it would not reoccur in the future?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question, which really centres on automatic payments. As I said in my answer to the previous question, it was a balance between getting money out quickly and the risk of fraud and error. The Executive decided that we should use the LPS data system because it was a rates-based scheme. That mirrored all the schemes that were put in place across the United Kingdom. We did not invent something that was new or different. Obviously, as we are now fully cognisant of, in the haste to get money out, we used the database, but it included some businesses that we would not necessarily think of as being impacted by the COVID pandemic. As soon as we realised that with regard to wind turbines, we moved to exclude them. Again, it was a method by which to get money out. That was not so much the case with either the £25,000 scheme or the microbusiness hardship scheme. I have stood in the Chamber and heard people complain about how slow those schemes were because of the application process. Of course, that process takes away considerable risk from the scheme. Therefore, we must all make choices in what we do and how we conduct business.

Going forward, those application processes are important, as would be — as I have explained to a number of Members on a number of occasions — HMRC cooperation in the verification of data, which still eludes me to this day.

Mr McCrossan: I welcome John Stewart back to the House after his period of illness. I put on record my appreciation for the funding that has been given to businesses at this critical time, which is important to keep them above water.

I am concerned, however. The Minister mentioned that the Department will try to get that money back. If businesses should not have received money, the Department will ask them to return the money. Does the Department have any enforcement powers to ensure that that money is returned? What are those powers?

Mrs Dodds: We set out the parameters and eligibility for the scheme. If a business applied and was not eligible, it is clearly in the wrong. What it has done is wrong, and, therefore, we will come after it for payment.

Mrs Barton: Will the Minister give the House a guarantee that the method of automatic payments that was used previously will not be used again when giving out grants?

Mrs Dodds: I certainly am not using it. I am not using it for the COVID restrictions support scheme, which is currently under way. Perhaps Members would like an update. That scheme launched late on Wednesday afternoon. We worked very hard to get that out. Part A of the scheme has launched. To date, we have around 1,200 applications, with many more draft applications in the pipeline.

Again, I say to the House, because we need to be clear: this is about the balance that we strike on all that. Checking data and being able to check eligibility criteria are very important in de-risking a scheme, but it makes it slower to administer. Therefore, we have to choose.

Mr Frew: What part will the Minister of Finance play in any evaluation? He has just walked in; his timing is impeccable. Will the evaluation cover the scandalous actions and, indeed, inaction of Sinn Féin in the Minister's constituency of Upper Bann and in West Tyrone? Does the Minister believe that that is what Sinn Féin meant when it said, "Let us rip up the rule book"?

4.00 pm

Mrs Dodds: I indicated that most of the problems related to the automatic payments. However, it is clear, it was clear at the very outset of the scheme and the eligibility for the scheme was clear that it was not applicable to MP and MLA constituency offices. Anyone who received that money into their bank account — paid automatically, in error and unasked for — should have returned it and should not have been tardy in doing so.

In the further schemes, we need to strike a balance between getting money out to people who are in awful circumstances because of the restrictions that have been placed upon their daily lives and the risk to the public purse and the timescale that we have to get money to people in order to help them in very difficult circumstances.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, and that concludes this item of business. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two, please.

Finance

Mr Speaker: Mr Robbie Butler has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister of Finance. 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.

Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the announcement of the extension of the coronavirus job retention scheme and its impact on businesses in Northern Ireland.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): For months, I have pressed the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to extend the furlough scheme so that jobs can be protected. This announcement is welcome, albeit that the extension is for only one month at this point.

I welcome that the scheme will be open to employees who were on the payroll on or before 30 October, including employees who were not previously furloughed, as that has been a gap in support to date.

Many businesses, however, have been faced with tough decisions about redundancies, which have not been helped by the lateness of this decision by the Treasury. It remains unclear whether the furlough scheme will be extended beyond the end of November. I will be pressing for that because the weeks and months ahead will continue to be challenging for businesses and workers who need certainty that the support that is offered by the furlough scheme will remain in place.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for his answer. As he will be well aware and as he reflected in his answer, many businesses are on their knees because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the UK Government's furlough scheme, what financial measures and supports is he actively considering in order to support businesses in the event that restrictions may return after 13 November or may be applied in the future, given that it is the uncertainty that is crippling people?

Mr Murphy: The Member knows — I was listening to the Economy Minister earlier — that the Executive are rolling out schemes, particularly for businesses that have been affected by the restrictions over this four-week period, and are looking at a range of measures, including those brought forward by the Infrastructure Minister for taxi and coach businesses, and measures for those who did not previously receive support. In allocating money for that, we have held back a sum of money, which the Executive agreed to last Thursday, to ensure that, should there be a necessity to repeat the current restrictions — none of us wants to get into that situation — there is money to assist businesses through that phase as well.

We will continuously get advice from the Chief Medical Officer and the Health Department on how COVID is behaving and what the projections and the trajectory are for it. Clearly, we want to make sure that people heed the advice and that we, as a society, become more proactive in suppressing the spread of COVID across the board. That in turn will hopefully not lead to a situation where we have to bring in restrictive measures, but we have held back some additional money to make sure that, should that situation arise again, we do have some support to give out to businesses at that time.

Mr Frew: Given the much-needed help that this will add to businesses in the next month — it is something that we have all been pushing for — what signal does it send when the Minister's party has support money resting in its accounts? Will the Finance Minister make a statement

to the House on that issue to bring much-needed transparency to the population of Northern Ireland?

Mr Murphy: Clearly, it was not right to have any money that was wrongly received sitting in anyone's account. Once the leadership of our party became aware of that, the money was returned immediately to the centre, and action was taken on the back of it. I have to comment on lectures on propriety in government, coming from a DUP Member for North Antrim. At the very least, in transparency, the Sinn Féin process for dealing with this money, which was not applied for or sought but should have been paid back much more quickly, and dealing with transgressions within our party is much more transparent than that that applies in the North Antrim DUP.

Dr Archibald: The Minister has outlined that, as I have been saying for many weeks, the ending of furlough would result in thousands of jobs lost and that the job support scheme would not be adequate. It is welcome that furlough is being extended, but does the Minister agree that it should be extended until at least the end of the financial year to give businesses and workers certainty to plan and, for some businesses, retain a skilled workforce when demand returns?

Mr Murphy: It is welcome. Bear in mind that, for many months over the summer period, we argued for that extension. We ended up with the job support scheme, which was quite restrictive. There was then a move about a week ago to expand that scheme, which was welcome, but it was still not as good as the furlough scheme. Then, suddenly, overnight, we are back to the furlough scheme. The uncertainty of the pandemic and how we are dealing with it has been greatly exacerbated by the approach of the Treasury in getting support for workers and employees. We have been on the very point — on the eve — of people coming to terms with the job support scheme. Only a week ago, it was changed, and then, suddenly, it was brought abruptly to a halt.

The fact is that we, the Scottish Finance Minister, the Welsh Finance Minister and, in latter times, the mayors of cities in northern England were all calling for a furlough extension, but those calls fell on deaf ears in the Treasury. When it became an issue in southern England, that extension was abruptly granted. Welcome as it is, it has been handled in a way that has caused huge uncertainty to business. Of course we want to see it extended, but one month is not going to be sufficient. I hope that the British Government will recognise that sooner rather than later and that they will give notice to employers and employees about protection of jobs in the time ahead.

Mr O'Toole: I welcome the fact that, notwithstanding that the job retention scheme has been extended by the UK Treasury, Sinn Féin has taken at least some action to recognise the strength of feeling in relation to the money that was erroneously held, or should not have been held, in accounts, and that people in Sinn Féin have not retained their jobs as a result of that.

My question is about the extension of the furlough scheme. I agree that it is unacceptable that across the north of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland people have been crying out for the furlough scheme to be extended. The refusal to do so highlights the constraints on this institution in financial support for public health policy. Can the Minister explain what further conversations he has had

with the Treasury around in-year flexibilities that he has requested so that we have the flexibility and are not simply relying on last-minute action from the Treasury based around the public health situation in the south of England?

Mr Murphy: As the Member will know, we updated the Finance Committee on some of these discussions a week or so ago. We continued to press for the continuation of the furlough scheme because we recognised that the end of October was a cliff edge for many employers and employees.

The job support scheme, although very substandard when compared with the furlough scheme, was nonetheless better than a cliff edge, but we are now back to the previous decision. As the Member knows, we have continued to press for flexibility with our finances and, if there are to be any, to get the earliest possible notice of Barnett consequentials. Although the support from the Treasury has been welcome and has no doubt assisted us to assist businesses, to respond to the pandemic by supporting the health service itself and to protect the vulnerable, the lateness and abruptness of the decisions has not helped us in our planning. We will therefore continue to press for that flexibility. As he knows, the comprehensive spending review is under way in Whitehall. We want early information on the outcome of it. We are disappointed that we are not in a multi-annual Budget cycle, but we, like Scotland and Wales, will continue to press for flexibility with our finances until the end of the financial year.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for coming to the House today. Have you had any communication with the Economy Minister to work out what might happen to those who were made redundant at the end of the furlough period but who, because of the extension, might now take advantage of the further furlough period? I understand that your counterpart in London refused to answer that question today, but it is a very serious question. People need to know whether they can extend their furlough period and rescind their redundancy notice at this time, because that has the potential to knock people into a further year of redundancy rights.

Mr Murphy: The Member asks a very pertinent question. We are told that an employee must have been on an employer's PAYE payroll by midnight on 30 October to qualify for the scheme. That is very late information for people, and they have been coming to terms with that over the weekend and today. We are continuing to press for further details, and we want to make those as public as we possibly can and to make them available as early as we can so that employers in particular and employees who can now avail themselves of the scheme understand that they can do so. There was a gap from the end of June through to October during which newly employed people could not avail themselves of the scheme. They can do so now. As I say, those people, if they were on the payroll right up to a minute before midnight on 30 October, now qualify for the scheme.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. He will be aware of how hard the hospitality industry has been hit by the COVID-19 restrictions and how the job retention scheme literally was and is a lifeline for workers. Without it, we would see more redundancies in an already precarious industry. I agree with Ms Archibald that furlough should, at a minimum, continue until the end

of this financial year. Given those issues, will the Minister support Unite the Union's hospitality and tourism rescue plan, meet union reps and bring the plan to the Executive's attention for action?

Mr Murphy: I concur with the Member's view on the extension of furlough. We have been arguing for that for some time. As I say, we will continue to argue for it now that the scheme is back on the table, albeit belatedly. I have not seen Unite the Union's plan, but I have always had an open-door policy of meeting the unions when they have an issue that they wish to present, and I am more than happy to meet Unite the Union to see the detail of its plan.

Mr Carroll: What is the Minister's plan to address any shortfall in wages in the scheme to ensure that people are not having their wages reduced at a time when the cost of fuel and other things is going up? Moreover, what is the Minister's financial plan if the Tories extend the scheme for only a month, as they have currently said?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that we do not have either the financial wherewithal or the data to do wage schemes. We had previously asked HMRC, which holds all that data, to assist with the possibility of creating a bespoke scheme in the North like the wage scheme, but we got a point-blank refusal. It is therefore not possible for us to intervene in that way, because we do not know who pays taxes and how much they pay. HMRC holds all that data. Furthermore, the Executive's finances would not stretch to meeting wage support. That has to come from Treasury.

We continue to press the Treasury on that. We do not want to see anybody in greater hardship. The experience of the pandemic has put a huge number of people into hardship, and it has already created a significant number of redundancies. Our arguments with Treasury have been over trying to get it to recognise that workers, and low-paid and part-time workers in particular, have been at the front end of that. It has particularly affected those in the hospitality sector, which tends to employ a lot of people in low-paid, part-time work, and there are a lot of women working in that sector as well.

We continuously press that case with the Treasury, because only it can do those schemes.

4.15 pm

Ms Sugden: Just so that I get it right, has the Minister confirmed that those employees who were employed after the end of the cut-off date for the original furlough scheme — I think that it was the end of March — can now, up until the end of October, apply for the new furlough scheme? To labour Mr Dickson's point about those who have been made redundant, I understand that the British Government reversed that process and, if the paperwork had been submitted, they brought forward the date so that they were included. Is that something that the Minister is asking for on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland who have been made redundant in the anticipation that the furlough scheme would have come to an end in October?

Mr Murphy: As I said, I think that the date at which people were previously cut off was the end of June. Those employed in the hospitality sector over the summer season, in particular, fell through that gap. We are told that people who are on a PAYE payroll by 29 October are

eligible. That came to us very late in the day on Friday. There is much more detail to be worked through, and officials continue to engage with the Treasury. As soon as we get more accurate information for employers and employees, we will make it public. Clearly, this is a time of great distress for people, and they should understand the schemes. Welcome as the schemes are, they have come in a very haphazard way to us, and that does not give certainty to people who face redundancy or who are trying to run businesses.

Mr Givan: The decision, welcome though it is, nevertheless will be too late for some people, for the reasons that the Minister outlined with the changes in the scheme from June and now going back to the "premium scheme", for want of a better phrase. Given that businesses will be asking for support packages in future, have any Barnett consequential flows from the decisions taken by the Treasury and the most recent announcements by the Prime Minister? Does the Minister agree that the best support that we can give to our businesses is to allow them to get back to business?

Mr Murphy: We are continuing to bottom out with the Treasury whether there will be further Barnett consequential flows as a result of the most recent announcements, and I hope that we will find out more information about that this week. We are not certain whether that is the case, but we continue to explore that with the Treasury.

Of course we want to see businesses back working, but, as the Member knows, we have to strike a balance between ensuring the suppression of the virus and allowing people to go about their normal activities. While we have had restrictions here, they are not at the same level as those in England: all our retail is open and not just essential retail as is the case there. Schools — it is timely for the Education Minister to come into the Chamber — were closed for two weeks, but they open again today.

From my experience, the Executive do not want to have any level of restrictions for one minute longer than is absolutely necessary. Of course, it is much better for businesses if they can trade, but in the absence of their being able to do that, we need to get as many support packages to them as we can.

Mrs Barton: Minister, you spoke earlier about money that you had held back in case it was needed. Do you, along with the Minister for the Economy, have any plans to support those businesses that are still being excluded?

Mr Murphy: The Member will probably know from previous statements that I have made in the House that, as well as the money that we allocated last week, we had always held back a sum of £55 million for groups that were excluded. I am very pleased that, at long last, the needs of some of those groups, such as taxi drivers and coach operators, are beginning to be addressed. I know that there are some issues with those schemes, but there is, nonetheless, some move to address those needs. Other sectors, and those who are self-employed, have been left out. Schemes have opened, and I sincerely hope that those schemes will be able to address the needs of those people.

We held aside a sum of money for those who were previously excluded. I made the point — I made it at the Executive — that while we are in the second round of support for some businesses, it is grossly unfair to

people who have not yet received any support. Every effort should be made, and I have encouraged Executive colleagues from all the Departments with a responsibility to make every effort to ensure that they put together some measures to provide support to those who have continuously lost out since the start of the pandemic.

Mr Muir: On hearing the announcement on Saturday evening, it struck me that, once again, the south of England comes first in the UK Government's response to the pandemic, while they have pushed many in Northern Ireland into poverty as a result of the less-favourable job support scheme. I would not call furlough a "premium scheme" at all. Will the Minister outline what impact the extension of furlough and the additional grant moneys will have on any decision to extend the restrictions beyond 13 November?

Mr Murphy: The restrictions were brought in before there was a job support scheme. There was the continuation of furlough for the first half of our four-week restriction period and then the job support scheme beyond that. Clearly, you have to take cognisance of the economic impact on workers and businesses that restrictions are going to have and try to mitigate those as best you can, because the restrictions are absolutely necessary to suppress the virus, protect the health service and save lives. That is the reason we do this. The extension of the furlough scheme will not have any real bearing on that, albeit it continues to protect workers in a better way than the job support scheme, so it is a better level of protection.

Regardless of us coming out of our restriction period in two weeks' time, we will continue to argue for the furlough scheme to continue to operate. The economy is not back to full operating level, and it will not be possible to get back to full operating level. Social restrictions will still apply, and that will make it more difficult for hospitality and retail, in particular, to do business. There will be a continuing need, in the economic uncertainty, for the furlough scheme to remain. It is not necessarily linked to any extension of our restrictions, but there is a need for the extension of that scheme because of the damage that the economy has seen over the last number of months. That is why we have continuously argued for that, and I will continue to press Treasury for an extension in the time ahead.

Mr Dunne: I thank the Minister for his answers today. We all welcome the furlough scheme, and the confirmation from the Minister that new applicants can now apply is reassuring. I am sure that he recognises the great value in being part of the United Kingdom that has brought forward such a scheme.

Further to earlier discussion, what is the Minister's opinion about getting the balance right? Following the First Minister's statement last week, we have been encouraging people to get the balance right with regard to living, working and doing business with COVID. What is the Minister's opinion on that as we move forward in trying to get a good Christmas, not just for business but for everyone?

Mr Murphy: There is a range of challenges and, arguably, damage to society as a consequence of the pandemic, and a lot of that is economic. That is why a lot of these schemes have been put in place and why we are discussing the furlough scheme today. It has been an essential component in mitigating the damage caused by

the economic downturn and the restrictions that had to be put in place over various times.

There is also societal damage; we recognise that. All of the interaction with our families and communities is very much part of our everyday life and what makes us human beings. The ability to interact with others is a key component of what we are. That has all been damaged and affected. Of course, we want to see society being able to move forward as much as possible. However, that has to be balanced against the fact that people are dying as a consequence of this pandemic.

We have a responsibility to protect public health, to protect people who are more vulnerable to the pandemic than others and to make sure that transmission is kept down within the community. That is a balancing exercise between taking the necessary steps to do that and ensuring that society, businesses and the economy can continue to function as best as they possibly can. That is a constant challenge. It is a real challenge in the Executive. There are no easy decisions to be taken. My colleague across the Chamber will verify that we have grappled with this on many, many occasions, debated it out and, eventually, have come to decisions that we have all attempted to stand over. We do that in the best interests of all of the people who we represent, collectively.

Mr Allister: Will the Minister give some clarity for those employed in the hospitality sector, which has been closed down for the last two weeks. Will they now qualify for backdated furlough payments?

Mr Murphy: Those within that sector who qualified for furlough from before the end of June qualified up until 31 October. The furlough scheme continued up to that date. Then they moved onto job support. From last week, there was an improved job support scheme, but that has now been overtaken by a continuation of furlough. We are still trying to get more detail in relation to that. The Member will accept that that is not ideal when it comes to planning or in ensuring that there is clarity for workers and employers. We are now told that people who were on the PAYE roll up to midnight on 30 October can qualify for the scheme. That may, as we understand it, fill the gap for people who were employed over the summer so that they can be furloughed.

There is more detail to be hammered out. We were given late notice, and, characteristically, it did not give the full detail that is required. We will have to hammer that out with the Treasury over the next couple of days. We are already engaging with it on that, because it is important, as I am sure that the Member will agree, to have clarity for employers and employees alike.

Mr Speaker: That concludes this item of business. I ask Members to take their ease for a couple of moments.

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

Committee Business

Post-primary Transfer Testing

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly takes note of the feedback to the Committee for Education's online survey into post-primary transfer testing and calls on the Minister of Education to outline contingency plans for post-primary arrangements. — [Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We now return to the Committee for Education's motion on post-primary transfer testing.

Mr McNulty: On this All Souls' Day, we should all take a moment to remember the souls of people close to us and our loved ones and the souls of those who have passed away as a consequence of the pandemic.

Today, many parents and young people are breathing a huge sigh of relief because schools have reopened. Many parents, teachers, principals and school staff are still worried and have concerns and unanswered questions. They deserve huge credit for stepping up and putting the education of children and young people first.

I welcome the opportunity to take part in this debate, and, like others, I commend the work of the team that oversaw this insightful survey and recognise the invaluable contributions of the respondents who number over 8,000. I must also reiterate my party's opposition to academic selection for kids at age 11. That has been the view of the party since its formation and it still holds true today.

However, this debate is not about the academic selection policy. This debate is about addressing an issue facing young people in the midst of a pandemic.

4.30 pm

Children have already experienced enough disruption to their education this year. There are obvious impacts on their academic education, but there are also unintended and unquantified impacts on their emotional, physical and mental health and general well-being. There can be no doubt that the pandemic has most adversely affected children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational needs. We should not do anything that adds to the pressures on those children, inhibits their educational opportunities or increases their mental and emotional strain. We have a duty to do everything in our power to protect our citizens, especially our young people and most especially our young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special educational or complex needs.

Like others, I commend the schools that have recognised the very difficult situation facing 10- and 11-year-old children. Some grammar schools in my constituency, such as my old school, the Abbey Christian Brothers, Our Lady's Grammar School, the Sacred Heart Grammar School and St Colman's College, have postponed the use of academic selection for this year. The head teachers in those schools, as well as the head teacher of St Louis

Grammar School, Kilkeel, came together and made the brave decision to postpone the transfer test this year. Their collective decision, supported by their boards of governors, was focused on what was best and fairest for children and families in the midst of a pandemic. In the midst of this crisis, the head teachers and boards of governors of those schools all stood up and showed strong leadership. I applaud them all.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for giving way. He rightly refers to the section of our community who are most hit by this situation: schoolchildren. I know that he feels much the same as I do about the shocking fact that 2,000 children were at risk in their own home during the school closure. Does the Member agree that much more needs to be done between the Education Department and the Health Department on the issues pertinent to those 2,000 children?

Mr McNulty: I wholeheartedly agree with the Member.

In the event that the Minister continues to hold firm, and given the uncertain trajectory of the coronavirus pandemic, will it be reasonable to ask school leadership teams to think about our children and follow the example of those grammar schools and suspend testing this year? The debate on academic selection has been going on for years, and we can fight that battle another day. However, today, I appeal for leadership.

As I said, children and young people are returning to school today. They have been asked to wear masks on school buses. They have been asked to sanitise their hands. They have been asked to keep their distance. They know that we are in the middle of a pandemic. They know that we are in extraordinary times. I agree with other Members: most children are resilient and can adapt to whatever arrives, which is a brilliant trait of youth. However, some children and young people, through no fault of their own, do not have that capacity. We should be thinking about those children when we are making decisions about the fairest and best way to proceed.

We must act now and postpone these tests. We need a unified and consistent approach. We owe it to our most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people.

Mrs Barton: I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate. As a former teacher in a non-selective school, I watched, year after year, as year 8 pupils arrived in their pristine new uniforms on their first day at the big school. There were those who had not sat the post-primary transfer test who considered examinations to be a real inconvenience in their lives. At the opposite end of the scale, there were those who had sat the post-primary transfer test and were so disappointed at not succeeding. Finally, there were those, perhaps encouraged by parents and teachers to have a try, who were really not concerned about the final outcome. It was obvious that some of that year 8 group were suffering disappointment following their encounter with the transfer procedure. However, after half-term, many would say that that disappointment had disappeared. They enjoyed life at their new school, and they began to view the experience in a positive light by turning it into a building block to increasing their resilience.

The keenness that many young people have for sitting examinations is borne out and reinforced by the young people's questionnaire, which indicated that a similar percentage of pupils — 91% — wanted to sit the transfer

procedure prior to COVID, while only 3% fewer wanted to sit the transfer after it. Those stats prove that it is really important, in the event of unforeseen circumstances in January, that you, Minister, take all reasonable steps to ensure that the transfer procedure is not cancelled and that emergency contingency planning is in place to allow those young people to sit their post-primary transfer test. That contingency planning must give consideration to the location of the examination in combination with ensuring that the pupils have a COVID-reduced safe experience while sitting the exam. Consideration of the safety and welfare of children must be the number-one priority.

The experience in the past of hundreds of children gathering in a school gym, dining hall or corridor of classrooms next to each other to sit an examination is neither a good example to set nor a very satisfactory arrangement for the protection of those pupils. Will the pupils be distanced 2 metres apart? Who will sanitise the desks, chairs etc before and after the exam? Will the pupils attending remain in their primary-school bubbles, or will they mix with others from areas that could be 50 miles apart? I call on you, Minister, to work with the two private transfer examination providers and permit pupils to take the transfer examination in their own school, where they will be familiar with the tried-and-tested COVID-proof regulations.

Both examination providers financially charge pupils or an education body for supervising the young people who are sitting the exam. Perhaps that finance could go towards the extra supervision that will be necessary for the smaller sittings of the examinations in the pupils' primary school surroundings, ensuring that there is safety.

The UUP supports the motion.

Ms Bradshaw: I thank my colleague Chris Lyttle, the Chair of the Education Committee, for bringing forward this important motion today, and thank you, Minister, for being in the Chamber to hear the debate.

I will say a few words about the more general situation that pertains to post-primary transfer testing in my constituency. It is not solely an education issue; it ties in with planning, transport, social support and many other matters. First, let us again be clear that transfer is a statutory function of the Department. It is not adequate for the Department to say, "Well, schools decide". The Department has functions that include, but are not limited to, ensuring that, for example, section 75 is adhered to. We are already seeing disadvantage in education being exacerbated by time having to be taken off school. It is unacceptable for that simply to be ignored and handed over solely to schools to make the best that they can of the situation.

Secondly, let us be clear about the situation. We already have clear warnings, notably from Wales, but, implicitly, from our own health advisers, that January will likely see coronavirus cases rise again. It is inconceivable that any sort of sensible testing could take place in such an environment. Just to pick up on a point that was made by the Member who spoke previously, parents are extremely concerned that, if the tests are carried out in secondary schools rather than in their children's primary school, their children will come in contact with other children and adults, meaning that community transmission could be huge. That is all entirely predictable, so we need to know now what

the response from the Minister will be to that predictable situation.

Thirdly, it is already the case that some schools are affected worse than others. Some have had to isolate for long periods; others not at all. There is absolutely no way that a crude test taken with many pupils inevitably absent, giving a clear advantage to those who have been least affected by the need to isolate, is in any way a sensible means of deciding which schools pupils go to.

We have buried our head in the sand for too long. The fact is that it is already the case that parents try to make decisions on educational routes right from nursery age. In parts of South Belfast, primary schools are well oversubscribed, particularly the maintained and integrated ones. In fact, six primary schools serving just one DEA in my constituency are at or over capacity, with demand continuing to exceed approved enrolments. One reason for this is that it is perceived to be the best route to the post-primary schools that parents want to send their children to. Therefore, we already have reports of parents finding entry criteria confusing and of bottlenecks even at pre-primary level as parents seek the most appropriate pathway.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Ms Bradshaw: Yes.

Mr Gildernew: Does the Member agree that we have heard several times of parents choosing to opt for transfer? However, in many instances, it is not really a choice in that if your classmates, your friends, your cousins and everybody from round your neighbourhood are going to a particular school, it is really the only choice. Therefore, it should not really be considered a choice at all.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member will have an extra minute.

Ms Bradshaw: I think that my colleague Chris Lyttle touched on some of those issues at the start, and I certainly agree with that.

We have the reports about the confusing entry requirements and the bottlenecks, but this is not exclusively about potential educational achievement. Issues such as proximity, which you have just mentioned, after-school capacity and needed ethos play into such decisions. Needless to say, we find the integrated sector oversubscribed, and, in fact, there is evidence that it would be even more oversubscribed were it not still on what is now a rather old-fashioned requirement to carry out a headcount.

In conclusion, we must grab this opportunity to do away with an outdated selection system that is barely fit for the second half of the 20th century and develop an education system that meets the demands of the second half of the 21st century, focused on exporting products and services rather than people.

Mr O'Toole: Thanks to the Committee for Education for bringing this motion, which my party colleagues and I will support, to the Floor of the House. I want to make some general points about selection, as others have done, but I think that it is important to first state, given what the motion is about and given that we are talking narrowly about one year today, that this year is like no other that any of us have lived through. It is certainly unlike any that the very young children whom we are talking about today have

lived through. As has been said repeatedly in this debate, particularly by my colleague Daniel McCrossan, we are not talking about young people, as in young adults. We are talking about children here. We are talking about children who have faced enormous amounts of disruption this year — not just this academic year, but since March — and who will, it is entirely possible, face further disruption in the months ahead. We are, as we know, a long way from having anything like a normal set-up, albeit that I am glad that schools returned today.

Uncertainty and disruption in preparing for these exams has been, and continues to be, unacceptably stressful for children. I am sure that it is the same for all constituencies represented here today, and, in recent months, my office has been, frankly, inundated with parents who are deeply worried about their children and their well-being. Yes, they are worried about COVID-related closures and the kind of learning opportunities that they have had through the pandemic, but they are also worried about the transfer test. The two issues are, I am afraid, completely and inextricably linked. As the Minister has said before, the disruption to learning for our children has been extraordinary this year. That makes not proceeding with transfer testing as normal all the more urgent.

Indeed, it makes it all the more indefensible that we would simply leave the process unchanged.

4.45 pm

Several of the parents who contacted me continued working throughout the pandemic. Many of them are essential workers, and many felt that they had been abandoned and left to their own devices during the school shutdown period. Disruptions increased because of self-isolation, and that will continue. Even with schools back today, we know that there will be continued issues around self-isolation and continued disruption for children who are at primary school and who will be asked to go through the transfer process in the months to come.

The pandemic has added a layer of anxiety that is unique for this cohort of 10- and 11-year-olds. In the Committee's survey, only 5% said that their child was prepared, with the majority stating that their child was unprepared or disadvantaged. Going ahead with testing as normal this year will only exacerbate existing education inequalities. Those equalities have been well rehearsed by several Members, including Chris Lyttle, John O'Dowd, Karen Mullan and my colleagues Daniel McCrossan and Justin McNulty. This pandemic has exacerbated the existing education inequalities in our system. Simply proceeding with the transfer test for those children as if those inequalities have not been exacerbated is deeply irresponsible.

I will make a broader point about the testing system, which is that —

Mr Allister: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: I am happy to.

Mr Allister: Is it not utterly fatuous to pretend that this attack on the transfer test is really rooted in COVID? COVID is obviously a fig leaf for those who always have been, and always will be, opposed to affording the ladder of elevation that transfer affords many children. Should Members not dispense with the shamelessness of

pretending that this attack on the transfer test has anything to do with COVID?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr O'Toole: I am glad to have taken that intervention, because it enables me to say clearly that this debate is about COVID. It is completely unacceptable that we proceed with transfer testing in this year of all years. Let me address the point that the Member raised about this system. He said that it offers the ladder of opportunity. There is literally no evidence that transfer testing leads to better outcomes for poorer kids. That has no basis in fact whatsoever, and that it continues to be asserted by Members without evidence is deeply problematic. I will give way to any Member who wants to stand up and offer me some rigorous, data-based, academically proven evidence that it offers good outcomes.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: Minister, please stand up. Go ahead. Give it to me.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that the Member's time is limited. First, does he not accept that, in our two universities in Northern Ireland, we have a greater level of social mobility than pretty much anywhere else in the United Kingdom for working-class children getting in? Secondly, our academic results have consistently led all of the United Kingdom in both selective and non-selective education. Indeed, if we compare our non-selective schools in Northern Ireland with the schools in Wales, which are largely comprehensive, we find that our schools outscore them. A level of attainment is clearly achieved via our system. That stands in contrast to the situation in England, where selection happens —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Minister to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Weir: — for the 7% who can afford to pay for public schools. That is the real selection by money.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Time is up.

Mr O'Toole: I am afraid that I must close by saying, Minister —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I am sorry, but the Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — that what you have given me is not data.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member please resume his seat?

Mr O'Toole: It does not prove your point. We should not be proceeding with these tests this year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member will resume his seat. Time is up.

Ms Bailey: The Assembly has had 12 years since the last regulated 11-plus test was carried out. Failure to take action on the issue in normal times is nothing short of a disgrace. For 12 years, we have had extensive feedback from wider civic opinion and expert recommendations for change, and here we have it again.

The issue is the failure of successive Executives to sort this out. The Green Party is a long-standing supporter,

and proudly so, of the abolition of the academic selection process. To allow children of 10 and 11 years of age to be subjected to that level of stress and worry should not sit well with any of us. Moreover, it is a system that overwhelmingly favours those with the means to be coached and tutored.

We allow children to be instilled with a feeling of failure and low self-worth at 10 and 11 years of age, all the while knowing that some will never regain their confidence.

I clearly remember sitting my transfer test, back in 1980. As far back as that, my results did not matter, not because I was not impacted on, or because of my results, but because I went to an all-ability school that streamed pupils according to their ability. Some people might still say that that is not a possible or a viable system, but that school is now one of the most oversubscribed in Northern Ireland. It was also our first planned integrated school. Many said that that would never work either, and, to this day, say that it is not possible to extend that transformation throughout our system. Let us stop pretending that alternatives are not possible, because they are, and they are working.

The Committee for Education's online survey into post-primary transfer testing was clear. Parents and teachers are deeply concerned about the prospect of children undertaking unregulated tests this year. The current cohort of 10- and 11-year-olds has endured much upheaval in the past eight months, with the disrupted school year and every other pressure that COVID-19 has brought. We already know that the test creates a two-tier system that wrongfully disadvantages too many children from low-income families. To allow unregulated tests to go ahead for another year risks making the divide even wider. Who wants, willingly, to stand over that? Not every child has the same access to computers and home-based support. Even with the return of schools, children have had varying degrees of face-to-face teaching due to the coronavirus outbreaks and lockdowns among teachers and pupils. The Green Party finds it unconscionable that a child is required to sit these unregulated tests, unprepared and ill-equipped, under any circumstances, and, now, during a pandemic and lockdown.

Every year, without fail, parents come to me, distraught that their child has not been accepted into any school, never mind their preferred school. We have a ludicrous system in which some schools accept one test, some accept another, some accept both, some look at what primary school you went to, some look at your siblings or your parents, and some look at where you live. Schools are left to their own devices, and parents are left to navigate a complex system of post-primary admissions that makes little sense. Our Education Minister holds up his hands and claims that it has nothing to do with him. It has. Minister, you are in the privileged position of being able to stand up and sort this out and to do right by every 10- and 11-year-old child across Northern Ireland.

We are failing children. We are not upholding the right of many to an effective education when we cling to an inequitable system that is on its last legs, and when we refuse to step in, step up and create an integrated education system that is fit for the 21st century. Our system is a mess. Let us take action now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close, please.

Ms Bailey: Build a framework to look beyond this year, and meet the opportunity to build back better.

Ms Armstrong: I begin by clarifying that I am not on the Education Committee. "Thank goodness", say some Members. However, I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of two schools — one primary and one post-primary. I do not have a child facing the transfer test this year; I have never had. My family chose not to go through the system as we did not need to. The school that my daughter attends is the closest integrated school to my home. It accepts children on an all-ability basis. She is sitting her A levels, so not taking the transfer test did not hold her education back in any way, shape or form.

As a parent, I thank the Committee for Education for asking parents, teachers and children what should happen with the transfer test this year. I am a huge supporter of co-production and co-design, and it is right that parents and children should be part of the debate. We all agree that their voices are of paramount importance in the debate.

As others have said, this is not a debate about whether we should have a post-primary transfer test. It is a debate about what should happen this year, in the midst of a pandemic. Before Mr Allister asks to intervene, I do not support transfer tests, but this is not about what I think. This is about what we should be doing to make a change in the difficult circumstances that children face.

This is an important discussion about how child-centred our education system is. In this survey, children used words like "stress", "worry", "nervous", "excited", "hard", "scared" and "unfair". Those are words coming from 10- and 11-year-olds. We have to do all that we can to put children at the centre of considerations. As adults, taking appropriate consideration —

Mr Newton: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: I will.

Mr Newton: The Member makes an important point about the word cloud that was used. She quoted some words.

A Member: The negative ones.

Mr Newton: Yes. Other words that also appear are "happy", "important", "excited", "ready", "good" and "useful".

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much to the Member but, if he knows how word clouds work, he will know that, the larger the word appears, the more it has been said by children. The words that he used are tiny, whereas *[Interruption.]* As adults, we should be doing all that we can to put children at the centre of this. We need to think about how the pandemic has already impacted on those children. We need to do everything in our power to reduce the mental health impact on those children. The post-primary transfer test is one area that is creating stress for children — they said it in their own words — at a time when society is under such stress from a killer virus.

There are some shocking findings in this report. I am disgusted that the majority of parents, teachers and other interested parties in this survey feel that free school meals entitlement is a poor or very poor criterion to use. What is going on in our schools or with parents? To

me, that suggests that adults do not want children who receive free school meals to be in a class with their child. That is horrendous. As someone who grew up with free school meals, I find that answer shocking. I look back at Education and ask, "What type of system are you making?"

There are other answers that do not come as a shock. Some 43% of respondents want the post-primary transfer test abolished and 29% say to reform it. Minister, you have already reformed GCSEs, AS levels and A2s. Why not step in and change the post-primary transfer?

This is where we get to the nub of the matter. It is not within the Minister's gift to control the post-primary transfer tests, because the Minister allows two private companies to use school premises to make money out of tests that stress children. They have gone out of their way to protect their tests during a pandemic. Minister, when I say that you allow those companies to do the test, you allow post-primary schools to issue criteria in the book and allow grant-aided schools to have this test performed in their buildings.

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Ms Armstrong: Yes.

Mr Weir: The right of academic selection is there in law. It is not some whim. Look, I am supportive of academic selection, but it is not some whim of mine or of any other Minister. It is there in the law. The Member should be careful not to misrepresent the situation.

Ms Armstrong: I am not misrepresenting. You do allow post-primary tests that are run by two private companies to be held in schools that you fund.

This year, we are in a pandemic and 10- and 11-year-olds already have huge mental health concerns. On their behalf and on parents' behalf, I ask you this very clearly: what specific advice has the Department of Education received from the PHA and the Health and Safety Executive regarding test-day arrangements for upcoming post-primary transfer tests that will be hosted in many grant-aided schools across Northern Ireland on a Saturday? Who is paying for that?

The Department Education has decided to use a variety of existing different codes, namely "8", "I", "P" and "1", to record non-attendance attributed to a number of circumstances related to COVID-19. What was the rationale for using existing codes that retain their original purpose rather than creating specific and additional codes — as has been done across England and Scotland — that are much more clear-cut and honest? Where the aforementioned codes are used, non-attendance is only meant to be recorded if pupils are partaking in home-based learning. Can we have an update on progress on blended learning? What additional methods are used by the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI) to ensure consistency of standards and access to remote learning for children who are not physically attending schools because of circumstances related to COVID-19?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close, please.

Ms Armstrong: Finally, how much money is being paid into the system by the private companies that are getting our schools and our teachers to prepare children for their tests?

5.00 pm

Mr Carroll: It is important at any time but especially in the middle of a global pandemic that we listen to the voices of teachers, parents and young people. The report obviously does that. It is important that we are talking about it today, and the Minister should listen hard to what people have said in it. A concern of mine, shared by many others, is that, all along, the Minister has not listened to these voices and has operated on the basis that he knows best whilst some of his party colleagues simultaneously engage on a round of teacher bashing, disgracefully, during the pandemic.

It is worth saying that unions in the North, in the South and in England have already raised concerns about the reopening of schools. That needs to be put on the record too.

It is important that the concerns of all those who took part in the survey and of the community more generally are heard. Of all the groups surveyed in relation to post-primary transfer tests following COVID-19 and the lockdown period, 61% of parents and guardians, 64% of teachers and 67% of other interested parties stated that they were very or extremely concerned. Earlier in the debate, there was an attempt to dismiss that, but it is very important. When parents, guardians and teachers were asked for their preferred approach to post-primary transfer for the coming academic year, the highest scoring answer was to not run the tests and instead to permit post-primary schools to use non-academic admissions criteria. That is what they said, and the Minister needs to take that firmly on board.

Although we are told that we are in unprecedented times and that everything needs to be on the agenda, it seems that the Minister is firm in maintaining a system that is unfair. As other Members have said, it labels people as failures from such a young age and puts them under enormous pressure. Those views are not solely those of this socialist MLA but are those of teachers in the survey, the largest proportion of whom called for the abolition of the test. Teachers and young people surveyed believe that it should be abolished.

The survey also shows a massive concern amongst parents, pupils and teachers about post-primary testing in general, with many calling for the system to be abolished. The concerns refer to the pressure placed on children and the fact that academic selection is unfair and elitist. Those are sentiments that I certainly agree with.

Mr Butler: Thank you for giving way. He raises good points about the consultation. The consultation was excellent. Does the Member agree that it was incredibly disappointing to see the level of responses on free school meals and special educational needs children with regard to the attitude to education at the next level?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for his point. I agree, especially on free school meals, and I will come to that in a second.

What is the Minister's rationale for keeping this antiquated system in place? How can he justify testing young people at this age and putting them through a tremendous amount of stress and pressure in the middle of a global health

pandemic that has thrown all certainties up in the air and has been a particularly tough period for our young people? The safety and well-being of children, as the Chair said, was the reasoning behind the commissioning of the report. I am concerned that the Minister appears to be more concerned about battening down the hatches and defining what always was because it always was and wants to maintain a transfer test at all costs and ignore the concerns of parents, staff and pupils in the survey.

The Minister needs to look at how education works in places like Finland to learn what is the best practice and approach. Finland regularly tops the table for being the happiest place in the world and is widely regarded as having one of the best education systems in the world, not to mention having extended maternity leave for parents. We would do well and the Minister would do well to take our lead from what is done in Finland, especially here — I refer to Mr Butler's points — in what is an overstretched and under-resourced education system that sees many pupils, including those with special educational needs, not getting the support and assistance that they need. Finland has equal access to education for every pupil, and we should ensure that that is rightfully and accurately in place here.

Another major concern highlighted in the survey was the lack of support for free school meals. The House should send a collective "Thank you" to Marcus Rashford, who has done more to highlight food poverty than any government Minister in the UK. The Executive and the Minister especially must now begin to make plans to ensure that no child goes hungry, whether in school or during holiday periods, regardless of whether we are in a health pandemic. In one of the wealthiest countries in human history, it is morally repugnant — it is sickening, in fact — that children and families are forced to go without meals and, far too often, families are forced to choose between heating their home or eating.

I want to hear the Minister's plans in response to my points and the issues that are highlighted firmly in the survey.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Committee for Education, particularly the Chair, for commissioning the survey. There were over 8,500 responses from various important stakeholders, including teachers, parents and schoolchildren. Two thirds of people responded that they were concerned about the transfer process this year. That in itself should convince the Minister to reassure parents about what happens next, because the survey indicates that they are not reassured. He needs to do more in that respect, if nothing else.

I did not prepare for a debate on academic selection. I am cognisant of the fact that, given the time left in the mandate, we will not change the way in which the process works. There is no political will. The Minister says that he supports academic selection. I will be generous to Mr Allister, who said that the COVID situation tends to highlight the cracks that already exist in the system, not just with this issue but across government policy. This issue highlights the fact that, for over 10 years, the transfer process in Northern Ireland has been a mess. We need to look at it, and we need to be sensible and mature about doing what is best for our children. In an ideal world and in an ideal education system, every school would be the best school in Northern Ireland and every school would provide the best facilities and the best education. Parents

choose academic selection because they see that some schools are better than others, and that in itself is an issue. We need to look at that in any debate on transfer, because transfer is a symptom of the problems that exist in education.

This is an extraordinary year, and I want to address the comments about potentially setting a precedent for any future debate on academic selection. It does not have to. Any decision that the Minister makes can be made with the caveat that this was an extraordinary year. It does not have to set an example. As I said, there is not enough time left in this mandate and there is certainly no political will there, but a significant number of parents, teachers and children are saying that what is happening now causes them great anxiety.

I was not in the Chamber to hear earlier contributions, but I was really shocked to hear from a schoolteacher recently that the lockdown period from Easter onwards has had an impact on some children's educational development. I cannot say that that applies to all children across Northern Ireland, but teachers are the people who know best. I do not know anything about this — I am not a parent or a teacher — but I listen to my constituents, and they tell me that the first period of lockdown has had an impact on those children. Where are we now? We are in the midst of a second wave and potentially anticipating a third wave in January, so there will be impact. That impact is not only on their educational development but on their mental health and on their ability to socialise with other children, which seems to be one of the biggest impacts of stopping kids going to school.

I also want to talk about timing. We are now in November, and it is anticipated that the test will take place in January. The initial decision to postpone it was odd, and I appreciate that it was in response to a court hearing or a judicial review. However, what did that delay actually do? We delayed it until after the Christmas period, when children should really be with their families and not be stressed about a test that will happen immediately after the Christmas break. While the delay was somewhat welcome, in some respects it made the issue worse.

The other issue is that the transfer process, whether it involves academic selection or children just moving to a post-primary school, is ongoing. It needs to happen. There are time frames that the Department of Education and the Education Authority are working towards, and they need to have decisions now. Minister, if you put a process in place in response to a further wave, teachers and parents will have to prepare for that change of policy, as happened with AS and A levels. The ask from this debate is that we have some sort of contingency arrangement so that people can prepare and expect what is coming, rather than creating the stress that seems to have existed with the previous qualifications process.

My last point is on your opportunities, Minister, to be able to do anything. I have spoken with teachers, and they have told me that, despite the autonomy that they have through the boards of governors, they still have to work through Department of Education directives. If you, as Minister, were to issue a ministerial directive, again, caveated by the fact that this is an —

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

Ms Sugden: — extraordinary year, would that stand? Does he have the power to do something about this?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): As no other Member has indicated that they wish to speak, I call the Minister to respond. He has up to 20 minutes in which to do so.

A Member: [*Inaudible.*]

Mr Weir: I did not catch what was said from a sedentary position.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the debate. I thank all those who contributed to it. It is not surprising that the debate has been on a mixture of the specific arrangements of this year with COVID, and while I appreciate that it was not the intention of the Committee to look beyond that, quite a lot of Members went into academic selection. It is inevitable, as Mr Allister said, as the two are inextricably linked. Indeed, there will be a suspicion amongst many of us who are supportive of academic selection that, for many, this is seen as something of an opportunity.

While there will be a divergence of opinion on the issue, and I do not intend to divide the House on the motion, with the permission of the Deputy Speaker, I want to make one comment at the very start. It breaches protocol to mention any particular civil servant, but I suspect that the House will unite around the fact — this may be the only thing that they unite around in what I have to say — that it is important that I, as Minister, place on record that today marks the last day in Rathgael House of the permanent secretary, Derek Baker. He has contributed greatly throughout his public life to the Civil Service. He has contributed greatly to education, offered wise counsel and has been a steady hand and a steady mind throughout various crises, particularly in the years of the absence of a fully functioning Executive when he gave that leadership. It is important to place on record my thanks and the thanks of the House. Derek is universally respected across the political divide and the full education sector.

Mr O'Dowd: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: I will give way briefly.

Mr O'Dowd: The Minister will appreciate that Derek Baker worked with me when he was deputy permanent secretary, and I concur with the Minister's remarks about him. He was an excellent public servant.

Mr Weir: I thank the Member. It is good to see that working alongside you, John, did not spoil him at any stage. [*Laughter.*] I suspect that that is where the harmony on some of these issues may slightly diverge.

The motion talks about "contingency plans" arising out of the survey. I welcome the survey. It is only fair to point out that there are limitations in any survey, not least this survey. We have to recognise that, by its nature, it is self-selecting. It invited people to log on. There is no doubt that some people will have logged on more than once. Therefore, there will be limitations to what we can draw out of the survey.

It is also the case that those who have concerns over the current situation are a lot more likely, broadly speaking, to engage with a survey than those who are, generally speaking, content with arrangements. However, it belies the range of genuine concerns that are out there. I would be extremely surprised if, in current circumstances, there

were no concerns throughout society on a whole range of issues. It is interesting to note that, of those who took part in the survey, 85% of parents said they still intend to enter their children for the test and 88% of young people who responded said they still intend to take the test. However, as I indicated, concerns were raised.

Before I move on to the broader transfer process, including criteria, I will say that parents raised a number of issues in the report that I want to highlight. Those include concerns about pupils not having enough time to prepare for tests and the possibility of further disruption to schools due to COVID. I understand that both providers have made changes to their test arrangements by allowing extra time for young people to sit the tests. The dates are chosen by the providers. The only direct role for the Department on the dates is ensuring that the tests can be completed, results can be issued and transfer can take place on time.

5.15 pm

It is also that the tests are not an overall standard that must be met. The tests assess literacy and numeracy skills, which are core to the Key Stage 2 curriculum. Concern has also been expressed that some children may not have access to computers or home-based support if they miss school. Where this happens, schools will have contingency plans for remote learning that reflect the needs of pupils, so a number of measures have already been taken. There is the provision of IT devices to pupils in three phases: the identification of existing devices that are owned by schools, the purchase of the 3,600 additional laptops, and the purchase of 8,000 additional Chromebooks for distribution to pupils who are assessed, by the EA and schools, as those who are most in need. That includes P7 pupils, who have also —

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much, Minister, for giving way. I had not realised that school equipment, such as laptops, was being used for this purpose in particular. Does the Minister agree that Engage funding is allowed to be used by primary schools for this purpose?

Mr Weir: First of all, the Member is conflating two particular issues. This is not in relation to the Engage programme; this is regarding IT equipment. I have said that pupils across the board have, according to prioritised years, been able to access direct equipment, and that has been something that is irrespective of whether the child is doing the test or whether they are in a different year. However, it is one of the mitigations that has been put in place.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister briefly give way?

Mr Weir: Very briefly, because I have a number of things that I want to get through.

Mr Lyttle: Straightforward question, Minister: how many of those devices have been provided to P7 pupils?

Mr Weir: I do not have that figure to hand, but I am sure that we can get that for you.

Additionally, we have worked with BT to ensure a range of 2,500 Mi-Fi devices, which have mobile connectivity, and we have provided 8,300 Wi-Fi vouchers for disadvantaged children. More generally, the C2k education system supports online access to school services in a way that puts us in a better position than some other jurisdictions. At present, significant elements of the service can be

accessed remotely. All users have access to C2k's secure online learning cloud from home, and they will be addressed by myschoolportal.co.uk.

Nobody is suggesting that any form of remote learning is the ideal situation, and that is why it is important that we have face-to-face teaching. However, there are provisions that are put within the system. Mention has been made of the Engage programme and, in that context, £11.2 million has been made available and allocated to schools. It is up to individual schools, according to the budget that they have, as to how that is directly used, so there is no direction from the Department as to how to do that. Indeed, this is about the point that Members have referred to with the various levels of academic catch-up. Additionally, some other schemes have been put in place.

Safety has been mentioned. We anticipate that a range of measures will be put in, but I will come to those in a moment. However, the setting of admissions criteria is, in particular, a matter for the boards of governors of individual schools. The Education (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 provides the legal power for setting admissions to the boards of governors, not to my Department. A Member asked why that is being allowed. In part, because it is the law and, indeed, I would be in legal breach if I was to move away from that. My Department can and does publish guidance on the post-primary admissions process, which schools have to give regard to, and recommends what schools should and should not use, but it remains for individual boards of governors to define the criteria that they wish to use to select children for admission.

One of the concerns that parents will have will be about the safety measures that are put in place. First of all, let us put this in context. We are saying, "Can safety arrangements be made on particular days on which, roughly speaking, about 10,000 pupils will actually be sitting tests?" We should also realise that, in the school system, about a third of a million children come through the school gates every single day. So, can provision be made to ensure that there is adequate safety for children? Yes, it can, and that is by way of a range of measures. While, ultimately, that is the responsibility of the schools concerned and the testing organisations, a range of arrangements have been put to the organisations to ensure that there is safety. We are talking about a staggered arrival in school groups and bubbles and hand sanitisation on arrival to buildings and classrooms. Indeed, this can be — I will outline a number of these — a precursor to what will actually happen with examinations, because the public health arrangements will, on this occasion, be the same as will be happening on a daily basis.

There will therefore be the option of face coverings for pupils. Pupils will be seated in class bubbles, which are 2 metres apart. There will be a range of handwashing arrangements. There will be no food on site. Centre heads will have oversight of arrivals of pupils in bubbles; will ensure that no parents or visitors are directly on school grounds while tests are taking place; and will ensure that school gates are closed to parents and visitors while tests are taking place. There will be an explanation of arrangements to pupils and oversight of staff and pupils. There will be oversight where pupils are wearing face coverings. Indeed, a wide range of measures will be in place: supervision; maintenance of a safe distance when checking examination numbers; encouragement of

frequent handwashing; supervision of class bubbles; and social distancing in the classroom.

Arrangements are being made for around 10,000 pupils on those particular occasions. I should point out that there is a slight inaccuracy when we talk about the potential for five tests. The PPTC offers two tests, the second of which is essentially for those who have missed the first test. Around 1,000 pupils will do both tests.

A range of contingencies will therefore be put in place. The motion calls on me:

"to outline contingency plans for post-primary arrangements."

If that means that the Assembly wishes me to detail the admissions criteria that will be used should entrance test scores not be available, I am not in a position to do that, because the legal responsibility for setting admissions criteria lies with boards of governors. I cannot set the criteria that are used by schools.

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister give way briefly?

Mr Weir: I will give way briefly, yes.

Mr Lyttle: Law has been enacted in the Assembly during the COVID-19 crisis that has suspended statutory duties towards kids with special educational needs. Are you not the Minister of Education? Can you not change the law?

Mr Weir: Frankly, I will not be changing primary legislation. I cannot do it on that basis. That would be a quick way to judicial review.

Let us take a look. Schools' boards of governors have got the right to use academic selection or not to use it. That right has been used successfully for both. On this occasion, a number of schools have indicated that they will not use academic selection on a one-year basis. I believe that Mr McNulty referred to this, but, in the press statement that they released to say that they were not going to use academic selection, what those schools revealed about the criteria that they intend to use is that they will draw largely on their existing criteria, which prioritise the children of existing teachers at the school; those who have a sibling at the school; and those for whom it depends on an accident of birth, by which I mean that it is an all-boys or all-girls school and depends on whether they have a brother or a sister. In some cases, it will depend on whether their parents went to that school. If we are truly looking for a more egalitarian society, schools are certainly entitled to use their own criteria, but I have to say that a system in which selection for grammar school is done by a form of hereditary right is not one that strikes me as being more equal than what exists at present.

Let us cut to the heart of the issue. It is perfectly reasonable to make an argument essentially for comprehensive education. I cannot remember whether it was Mr McCrossan or Mr McNulty who said that, from day one, the SDLP has opposed academic selection. I perfectly accept that. It is a perfectly reasonable position to take. The party opposite has also been fairly clear for many years about where it stands on academic selection. First, if we simply go down the route of abolishing academic selection, what we will have —.

A Member: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: No. I want to get through some things. I will not make the same mistake that Mr O'Toole made with me.

The position with academic selection is that, if we were simply to abolish the right to have it, notwithstanding the fact that that would require changes in law, we would have a largely comprehensive system, but it would operate largely as it does in England, with a small percentage of students at fee-paying public schools. Again, I challenge anybody to say that that is a fairer position. It is, however, at least a reasonable enough position to put forward, and one that some parties have put forward for many years.

What is not the case is that we can have academic selection without transfer tests.

There is no adequate level of information that allows comparisons between pupils that can allow academic selection without transfer tests. We have to face reality: if we abolish or stop transfer tests, we are not using academic selection. That is a logical construct.

If we do not use academic selection, we destroy the basis on which grammar schools exist. There is a perfectly reasonable argument for saying, "Abolish academic selection and have an entirely comprehensive system". That is, at least, a fair and valid argument. What cannot be made is an argument that says, "Abolish transfer tests, abolish academic selection, but we are very much in favour of the grammar school system". That is, at best, intellectual gymnastics; it is dancing on the head of a pin. It is intellectually dishonest.

I have a lot more faith in those like Clare Bailey in the Green Party who say, "Abolish academic selection. Let us have an entirely comprehensive system. Let us not have grammar schools". However, let us not pretend that you support grammar schools while abolishing academic selection. It is simply —

Mr Lyttle: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Weir: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Lyttle: He is targeting that at me without saying so and accusing me of intellectual dishonesty, which is an absolute disgrace, given the topic under discussion.

There are non-selective grammar schools in Northern Ireland. How does that square with what he says? This is not about schools; this is about educating children. For the avoidance of doubt, the Alliance Party is absolutely clear: we do not think that academic selection is fair or necessary. Can you move on to saying what the contingency plan is here rather than making bizarre attacks on me?

Mr Weir: Interestingly enough, I never actually mentioned the Member. It seems to have hit a bit of a sore point.

You cannot have your cake and eat it. If you want to have grammar schools, you have to have academic selection; if you have academic selection, you have to have transfer tests. There is no point in trying to pretend that that magic circle can be squared.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Minister for giving way. There is a primary school in my constituency that does not have standardised tests. They believe that enough data exists to ensure a form of academic selection without having the transfer test, to the extent that his permanent secretary, before the Minister's appointment, visited the school and

commissioned a report on it. Is that something that the Minister wishes to comment on?

Mr Weir: When you are judging whether all schools at primary level are doing everything like for like, are holding data like for like, are doing internal testing like for like, the reality is that, in any school, selection will happen. Let us not kid ourselves: selection will happen in the system whether we like it or not. The only issue is that, whatever the flaws in the current system, it is largely based, for grammar schools, on academic selection. If we move to a situation in which you cannot, ultimately, compare pupils like for like — we are certainly not in that position — you cannot have academic selection. That is the simple reality.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for giving way. It is unfair to characterise the criteria being employed by the Newry schools and the Kilkeel school as anything other than egalitarian.

Mr Weir: I have no doubt that the Member will, rightly, want to defend the schools in his area. To be fair to them, I do not think that they have finalised their position, but they said in their proposals that they would base their selection largely on their existing criteria. Four out of five of those in at least four of the schools and, I think, three out of four or five in the other school centre on the links that a person has to the school through their family.

Mr McNulty: That is one criterion.

Mr Weir: No, the Member is wrong in relation to that. In at least a number of cases, it is about whether your parents went to the school; whether your sibling went to the school; whether, indeed, you are the oldest child or it depends on how your brother or sister got on; and whether you are the son or daughter of a teacher at the school. All those criteria are directly linked to personal circumstances. They have nothing at all to do with academic ability, so let us not pretend otherwise. Those schools have a perfect right to do that, and I have indicated to them that, if that is the position for this year, legally that counts not as a development proposal. They are entitled to use those criteria, but I find it difficult to justify how that is in any way fair.

We will make sure that all actions are taken to ensure that transfer tests are done in line with public health criteria. No one has anything to fear from transfer tests. There is no doubt — we will come back to it — that there is a fundamental divide in the Assembly and society as a whole on academic selection that will not be sorted out today.

5.30 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Minister to draw his remarks to a close.

Mr Weir: On that basis, I await the verbal punishment beating from the Chair of the Committee.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call the Chair of the Committee, Mr Chris Lyttle. You will have up to 10 minutes to wind on the debate.

Mr Lyttle: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will begin by speaking as the Chairperson of the Education Committee. On behalf of the Committee, I thank the 8,500 respondents to our online post-primary transfer survey and the Education Minister and Assembly Members for contributing to this important debate. I pay tribute to the courage and public service of the teaching and non-

teaching staff in schools across Northern Ireland. The Education Committee thanks you and will continue to support you.

The Education Committee online survey and the motion are about the safe and fair post-primary transfer of thousands of 10- and 11-year-old children during this year's global public health pandemic. The responses to the survey merit close consideration. One of the clearest responses was the rejection of the decision supported by the Education Minister to delay the AQE and PPTC examinations until immediately after the two-week non-school-based Christmas break. The Education Minister —

Mr Weir: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lyttle: I am happy to, if you do not take too long.

Mr Weir: I will be brief. Remember: we are able to facilitate transfer. The choice of dates and the change to it is legally of the two organisations: I have not chosen to delay on that basis. However, I can ensure that the transfer takes place within the proper time frame on those dates.

Mr Lyttle: OK. The Education Minister therefore ought to reflect on what the public rejection of that approach says about the decision-making to date on the matter.

There may be some variance of opinion in the Assembly on post-primary transfer testing in 2021 and in the future, although I think that there is more of a consensus here than some want to accept. The Education Committee online survey has, at the very least, demonstrated a serious concern for post-primary transfer testing this year, a need for further urgent consideration of the matter and a clear demand from parents and teachers for reform of post-primary transfer arrangements. The Education Minister's approach of doing nothing is clearly at odds with that demand.

Regrettably, the collapse of the Executive for three years during this mandate has prevented the Education Committee from showing leadership on the issue and restarting its inquiry into the matter. The educational underachievement panel and independent review of education must therefore consider post-primary transfer reform and how we build an integrated education system to deliver equal educational opportunity for all.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for taking an intervention. First, can I highlight that we are no wiser as to the contingency plans? Maybe it was the Minister's generosity in taking interventions, but I am no wiser as to what the contingency plans are in the event that there is a lockdown and the tests cannot go ahead.

Will the Member agree that we have had inquiries, reports and so much information to tell us that academic selection is bad for our children that we could bury ourselves and every school in the Six Counties underneath it? We now need to take action.

Mr Lyttle: I wholeheartedly agree; indeed, the last of those reports investigating links between attainment and deprivation was commissioned by the joint Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It clearly recommended reform of post-primary transfer, and, yet, delivery on that has not taken place.

I will now speak in my capacity as an Alliance MLA and turn to the contributions to the debate. I will start with the Minister of Education. He has accused some of

us who have expressed concern on the issue of being opportunistic. That is disgraceful. Two thirds of 8,500 people have expressed legitimate and serious concerns on the matter.

He legitimately raised the issue of the survey's limitations. Of course, all surveys will have limitations. The question is this: what has he and the Department of Education, with its sizeable resources when compared with those of the Education Committee, done to engage with parents, teachers, children and young people on the issue?

The Minister referenced, as did some of his colleagues, that 85% of respondents said that they will still sit the tests. He failed to acknowledge, however, that 46% of that 85% stated, in response to the survey, that they are doing so because they feel as though they have no other choice.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he share my concern that the Minister's approach, maybe to himself sometimes, in his constant obsession towards solecism and attacks towards me are a reflection of a Minister who is not confident with his disastrous handling of the education system throughout the pandemic?

Mr Lyttle: We need to engage respectfully with each other on the issue. It is regrettable when the debate descends below respectful engagement. Even though opinions differ, there are points of engagement, and I really wish that the Assembly and the Education Committee, if it has time, would engage substantively on the issue and take views from all MLAs and all concerned parties. At the end of the day, that is at the heart of what the survey was about.

The Minister referenced mitigations that he put in place to address educational inequality during lockdown, but, in my opinion, there was a lack of specificity. He referenced laptops and Chromebooks, and yet, in a debate today on post-primary transfer, he cannot specify how much of that resource has found its way to primary 7 children.

He referenced the Education Order that provides that schools' boards of governors set the admissions criteria. As I said in an intervention, the Assembly and the Executive have enacted exceptional changes in law during this time. We have changed the fabric of our way of life, so to say that he cannot intervene in those ways is, I think, an abdication of responsibility.

The Minister referenced safety measures — limited safety measures — such as masks, handwashing, no food and entrance arrangements. My colleague Kellie Armstrong asked some extremely legitimate questions about what advice he has sought and received from the Public Health Agency and the Minister of Health on the risks involved in bringing together that number of children, outside their bubble, in order to sit four transfer tests in January and February. I ask this: if there are Members of the House who have loved ones in shielding circumstances, how would they feel about sending them into the circumstances that the Minister is planning to support in January and February?

The Minister responded to the issue of the admissions criteria being used by other schools that have courageously decided to postpone the use of academic selection in this transfer-test year. His Department has a circular for all grant-aided schools on admissions criteria. What has he done to lead on the non-academic criteria that are being used by schools? I have not heard a

substantive proposal from him on what the non-academic criteria ought to look like. Yet, his Department has a circular on what the criteria should like, one of which is having a sibling at the school. The circular recommends against going beyond that in terms of family relations, but there are criteria there.

The Minister then attacks me, as he has become prone to doing, in relation to intellectual dishonesty. Well, that is a new one that I have heard. The Alliance Party is clear: we are against selective schools. It is my understanding that grammar education is an approach to education, not a system of academic selection. As I said in my opening —.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Member for giving way. He is quite correct: "grammar" is a managerial term in education that is set out in law. The term "comprehensive" has become a dirty word in education, because, in England, comprehensive schools were not properly politically led from the top and were not properly invested in. Comprehensive education is a good form of education when properly led and properly funded.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member for his intervention. As I said in my opening remarks, I do not think that it is edifying or a serious response to this important matter to go down the route of using rhetoric.

I regret that I am out of time and cannot reference the many substantive contributions throughout the debate. There has been an attempt to describe this as a fractious or divisive issue, yet Members from many of the political parties who contributed to the debate were of one voice. That one voice is fairly clear to me: it cannot be fair for the Education Minister to allow private transfer test —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Lyttle: — providers to set the tests in January and February for admission to post-primary schools. I hope that the Minister takes action to put alternative contingency plans in place.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly takes note of the feedback to the Committee for Education's online survey into post-primary transfer testing and calls on the Minister of Education to outline contingency plans for post-primary arrangements.

Adjourned at 5.41 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 3 November 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Executive Committee Business

Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill: First Stage

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): I beg to introduce the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill, which is a Bill to amend the law relating to committal for trial.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Ministerial Statement

Housing Policy

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister for Communities that she wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members that, in light of social distancing being observed by parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members still have to make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called, but they can do that by rising in their place, as well as by notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their questions.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, and thank you for the opportunity to make this statement to the Assembly, in which I intend to outline my plans to address some of the most significant challenges facing our housing system. These are challenges that I will not shy away from, and I am asking today for Members' support in progressing this ambitious programme of work. Everything that I do will be focused on ensuring equality, addressing the highest need and fundamental transformation.

Members will know that the number of households in housing stress means the number of households on the social housing waiting list with an acute need for a home. At the end of 2002-03, the number of such households was 13,042. At September 2020, the number was 29,539. Successive Executives have invested in increased social housing supply, and I commend them for that. However, in that 18-year period, housing stress increased by 17,000. The Executive have invested £2.3 billion to build 30,000 new social houses and, in the last seven years, we have, on average, started the construction of nearly 1,550 new social homes each year. However, housing stress has risen by an average of 1,000 in each of those years, and we see the human face of that every day in our constituency offices.

Our population is changing. The number of households is projected to increase as we are living longer. The broader housing market has also changed dramatically over the past few decades. A generation whose parents are homeowners or who live in social housing is now renting privately. There are far more families with children living in the private rented sector than in social housing, with all the insecurity of tenure and the high cost that comes with that. The demographic and economic forces that are pushing increasing numbers of households into housing stress are

too great to be countered by our current efforts to increase supply. We must do more social housing development, but upscaling current action will not be enough, and we have to face that. We need to do more, but we also need change. We need to secure the future of the social houses that we have. We need to increase the rate at which we add to them. We need to build and allocate more social homes to meet growing need. We need housing sectors beyond social housing to provide affordable and suitable homes. That was reflected in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA), which, amongst a range of vital housing priorities, committed to the inclusion of a housing outcome in the next Programme for Government. That was a recognition that a good home is the foundation of social, physical and mental well-being and is central to addressing our most pressing societal challenges, including poverty and inequality.

Today, I wish to specify how I plan to deliver against those challenges in the current mandate. This will include proposals for legislative and structural change. My ambition in delivering that programme of work is, ultimately, to ensure that every household has access to a good-quality, affordable and sustainable home that is appropriate to its needs. First, I will revitalise the Housing Executive. The huge investment challenge facing the Housing Executive is a long-standing issue that has previously been communicated to the Assembly. New Decade, New Approach committed the Executive to tackling that challenge. I have, therefore, recently written a letter to my Executive colleagues setting out my plans, and I may now share those with the Assembly.

Many of you will be aware of the current set-up of the Housing Executive. It comprises two areas: the landlord piece and the overarching regional housing authority. The housing authority side is responsible for vital and sensitive housing functions such as assessment of need, the management of the common waiting list and the geographical distribution of new social build. The landlord side is focused on 85,000 homes. A 2018 analysis found that the landlord side needed to invest around £7.1 billion in those 85,000 homes over the next 30 years if they are to remain decent homes for households and families. Of that investment, £3 billion is required over the next 11 years, but the Housing Executive can only afford about half of that requirement. The Executive could fund this by allocating about £100 million from capital DEL each year to the landlord maintenance requirement, but where should we take that from? Should we take it from hospitals or schools, or from all the money that my Department currently invests in building social homes? That would be the choice were the Executive to fund the Housing Executive's investment requirement. Our choice would be to lose either 40,000 of our old social homes or the next 11 years of new social development. Either option would propel housing stress faster and higher. Neither option is acceptable to me or, without doubt, to the Assembly. We are seeking an alternative that will enable the Housing Executive, as a landlord, to borrow. While the Housing Executive remains classified as a quasi-public corporation, as a landlord it cannot borrow.

If we can change that classification, the Housing Executive as a landlord will secure the freedom to borrow and have the ability to invest in its own homes.

I plan to change the classification of the Housing Executive landlord to a mutual or cooperative designation so that it may borrow and secure a sustainable future for all of its 85,000 homes and provide security for current tenants and future generations. To change the classification of the Housing Executive landlord in the manner that I propose will mean its separation from the regional part of the Housing Executive. The Housing Executive regional authority will remain accountable to a publicly appointed board and will continue to remain under the oversight of an Executive Minister, meeting objective housing need in an equality and human rights context.

The current rental structure does not work. An important part of these plans therefore will be a comprehensive rental review, leading to financial sustainability, in line with the commitments agreed in New Decade, New Approach. Social rents must be affordable to tenants, and they will be. The Housing Executive currently has the lowest social rents in these islands. I will ensure that they remain the lowest.

An important contribution to my plans for revitalisation may also be made by exempting the Housing Executive from corporation tax liabilities and by finding better options to remove its historical debts. My officials are actively exploring those issues with colleagues in the Department of Finance and the British Government, as those were commitments made in New Decade, New Approach.

More work needs to be done on the proposal briefly outlined here, and two years have passed since the most recent analysis of the scale of the investment challenge. The current situation is most certainly worse, and the scale of the investment needed is even greater. The new investment requirements have materialised since 2018, as a consequence of the Grenfell Tower disaster and the ambition to reach a position of carbon neutralisation in our homes by 2050.

I have set out to my Executive colleagues that I will focus consideration on options that promise to retain what is valuable about our Housing Executive model. I am interested in options that will see part of the Housing Executive revitalised as a cooperative, or as a mutual. We can learn from models of best practice. We can avoid the pitfalls that other models have experienced. Ultimately, we can build a model that is effective and that meets the needs of our tenants. I have asked officials to commence the work, and I anticipate that I will return to the Executive before the end of 2021-22.

The revitalisation of the Housing Executive is also about the other ways in which we need to protect social housing stock and about the imperative on the Department to reduce housing stress. Although the Department has invested well over £100 million of capital in building about 1,800 new social homes, we have sold, on average, 483 social homes under the right-to-buy scheme. We have sold those social homes at a discount of up to £24,000: a discount that the public have funded. Clearly, we have one policy that is in direct conflict with another. I will make sure that we have a suite of options to secure community stability and enable everyone to buy a home if they so wish. That must not reduce the social housing supply that we are striving to increase, however.

In June of this year, the Assembly passed legislation that will end the house sales scheme for housing associations

in August 2022. At that time, I committed to bringing forward a consultation on the future of the Housing Executive's sales scheme. I will do that this month, and I aim to make changes before the end of this electoral mandate. That will address the need to protect social housing stock and deal with the inequality in social housing.

We have never achieved more than 2,200 social new-build starts in one year. I want to change that as soon as possible. I have already told the Assembly that the targets for social housing are far too low. I am looking at assigning significant budget and policy changes to increase the capacity of the social housing development programme. I need to ensure that areas such as north and west Belfast and Derry city, and all other areas with acute housing need, are prioritised. I therefore intend to reintroduce ring-fencing.

We need mechanisms that mean that houses are built where they are needed. I have asked the Housing Executive to identify those mechanisms, and I am confident that it will provide them.

10.45 am

I am also working with housing associations and have been encouraging them to identify land that is available for social housing. I am conducting, on behalf of our Executive, an exercise to identify surplus public land that can be used for social housing. My officials and Housing Executive officials have been engaging with a range of public bodies to explore the delivery of increased social housing. Some of the initiatives can be implemented in the immediate to short term; others are more strategic measures to be explored in the longer term.

The revitalisation of the Housing Executive is also about how it allocates social housing. Ensuring an effective and fair social housing allocations system is fundamental to easing housing stress and making sure that allocations to social housing are based on objective need. That is why I have been actively considering how I wish to progress the outcomes of the 2017 consultation, 'A Fundamental Review of Social Housing Allocations'. I have committed to Executive colleagues that, later this autumn, I will publish a report of that consultation and an action plan for implementing changes.

Two of the 20 proposals need more work. The first is regarding intimidation points. I do not intend to proceed with the proposal to remove intimidation points. People in danger in their own home need prioritisation under the selection scheme. The manner of that prioritisation needs to be tightly focused on such people, including victims of domestic violence. Consistent with that, the mechanisms for such prioritisation need to prevent abuse and provide robust verification. They need to ensure that the manner in which the scheme responds to cases of intimidation does not distort the list. Officials are investigating options for an alternative proposal, including consideration of a statutory body to independently manage the verification process. I will be able to update the Assembly further on that in due course. The second proposal that I will not proceed with as per the consultation is the removal of interim or temporary accommodation points. I believe that people who find themselves in any form of temporary accommodation should be awarded points to recognise the additional stress associated with being insecurely housed in whatever form that takes, whether in hostel accommodation or sofa surfing with friends or family. That

would involve extending interim points to a wider range of people who are homeless. The new proposal will require further analysis, and, again, I will update the House on that in due course.

As the plan will make clear, I will implement the other 18 of the 20 changes proposed in the 2017 consultation. The changes will make our selection scheme fairer and better at responding to objective need. We will also consider what support before and after allocation can facilitate a successful and sustainable tenancy.

There are other areas of challenge. I know that there are long-standing issues with adaptations. We have affected some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Issues with procurement have led to some of the problems that have been experienced. The Housing Executive's pilot scheme in its southern region has shown that it is possible to reduce the time taken for that work by an average of 43 weeks. I will ensure that the Housing Executive continues to prioritise that work.

I will revitalise our social housing. I will make it work better, and I will make sure that there is a lot more of it.

I also want to talk about another group of people who struggle with their housing: our private renters. The private rented sector is now similar in size to our social sector. It houses an increasingly diverse range of households, including a growing number of households with children. There are twice as many families with children in private rentals than in social housing. They can be asked to leave within four weeks. Just imagine the stress if that happened to you. The private rented sector was one of our most urgent areas of intervention as the coronavirus crisis developed. An emergency Bill was drafted from a blank piece of paper and passed by the Assembly in less than five weeks. That was a remarkable achievement, and I thank you all for your help. It has ensured that around 140,000 private-rented households will not have to leave their home during the crisis. For me, the Bill focused our attention on the tens of thousands of families and hundreds of thousands of people who live in private rentals and highlighted just how vulnerable they are. For some, it is a suitable option, but, for many others, it is their only choice. We have not built enough social housing, and therefore a generation has been excluded from having a secure home. I will provide a suite of options to help people get a family home and secure community stability.

I will develop new ways to help people into homeownership if that is their choice. We have supported shared ownership schemes such as Co-ownership, which has helped more than 30,000 families into homeownership. The Co-ownership scheme is currently helping over 1,000 people a year to buy their first home, whether that be a new build or an existing home, but we need to deliver more.

As well as increasing the supply of social housing, I will expand the rental options available by introducing intermediate rent here. That will provide an additional supply of good, well-managed and maintained homes that are affordable for lower-income people and families. Intermediate rent homes can be a stepping stone for some into low-cost homeownership or can provide a better, more affordable rental solution for others. My officials are working closely with the sector and exploring options to develop a type of intermediate rent that works here.

I will ensure that there is no need to choose between social housing investment and affordable intermediate housing by maximising the potential of newer funding streams, such as financial transactions capital (FTC) loan funding, to deliver on the additional housing options.

I will develop a fundamental housing supply strategy. The strategy will have mixed tenure at its heart, ensuring stable, secure communities for everyone. I will work with Executive colleagues and councils through the local development plans.

About 40% of housing benefit is paid to private landlords. More than half of private tenants get housing benefit. It is right that we make sure that, when hundreds of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money is paid to private landlords, it is not paying for low-quality, overpriced housing.

I will bring forward legislation to the Assembly that will improve the safety, security and quality of the private rented sector. Four weeks is too short a time for anyone to be asked to leave their home, find a suitable new house that they can afford, maybe find a new school and childcare for their kids and pack up their belongings. It is just not enough. My Department previously consulted on extending notice to quit to eight weeks. That would be a start, but my view is that it should be a lot longer, more like six months. I will see what is possible, given the limits of our legislation, and bring proposals to the Assembly.

Rented homes should have safe electrics, and tenants should be safe from the threat of carbon monoxide poisoning. This is all fundamental stuff, and I am sure that no Member of the Assembly will disagree with any of it. Part of my work will be to consider an enhanced role for our councils in registration and enforcement.

I talked earlier about making sure that social rents were fair. My work on that will extend to rents in the private rented sector. Tenants in that sector face the highest rents and often get least for their money. I accept that landlords run a business, but I will not let them exploit tenants, especially given that so much of the rent they receive comes straight from taxpayers. It does not matter if you rent a social home or rent from a private landlord: I will bring forward proposals to ensure that your rent is fair and secures you a good home.

I am not stopping there. There are other things that we need to look at over a longer timescale, including letting agent regulation, the introduction of grounds for eviction and fitness standards. We will start work on those as well. I am calling time on bad landlords and rogue letting agents. Houses are homes. Everything that we do must be based on that fundamental principle. It is a basic human right for individuals and families to have a safe and secure home.

On average, 1,500 people present as homeless here every month. In parallel with all the work to protect and enhance our social housing and to improve the situation for those in the private rented sector, I will prioritise action to improve our response to homelessness. Our future homelessness policy will build on lessons learned from how we dealt with the COVID-19 crisis. That will include informing the roll-out of an interdepartmental homelessness action plan, as well as our work in continuing to support the Housing Executive to deliver on its statutory responsibility for responding to homelessness.

I know that I can rely on your support in this work. I have covered a lot of ground in the statement and set out a way forward on a number of important issues. Some of those are deep, underlying issues that have been there for some years. If it sounds like a lot of work, that is because we can no longer afford to talk as housing stress spirals out of control. We need to get on with it. We need to build more social homes, to sort out the long-term future of the Housing Executive and to make sure that it can repair its homes, regenerate its estates and start building again. We need to get the Housing Executive building again. We need to make sure that our social housing system works better and that it is fair and helps the people and families who need it most. We need to help people and families in the private rented sector. If homeownership is right for them, we need to help them. If it is not, we need to help them. If the private rented sector is their only option, we need to make sure that people and families pay a fair rent for a decent, secure home. We need to change our approach to homelessness to focus on prevention rather than management and to make sure that homelessness occurs as seldom as possible. If it occurs, we need to make that time of homelessness as short as possible. We need to make sure that people do not fall back into homelessness.

I look forward to your questions and comments, but, before I sit down, I remind you all of our human rights obligation. Equality and rights are the basis of my approach, and you cannot get more basic than the right to housing. Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises that right. Everyone has the right to a house adequate for their health and well-being. We have work to do. We all agreed in NDNA that we would do it. I look forward to your help and a busy two years.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): I thank the Minister for today's extremely comprehensive statement. I also thank her for meeting me and the Committee Clerk yesterday, giving us advance notice and getting a copy to all the members early. We have had so much doom and gloom in the Chamber over recent months that it is good at this stage to get a statement that is positive, visionary and very much welcome.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I want to ask a couple of questions, if that is OK. The first is on our constituency of North Belfast. The Minister and I represent a constituency that has major housing stress. On top of that, we have a tower block strategy, and we have the most tower blocks in Northern Ireland. How does that displacement of people fit into the already overburdened housing list?

Secondly, as MLAs, we represent not just one section of the community but everybody. That includes all those young people who would not naturally want social housing. They are first-time buyers and young professionals. The Minister mentioned having some sort of scheme to allow them to buy and to get into the housing market, but some of them want to rent. How do you see that fitting into the model, when they will not have housing points?

Lastly, I want to ask about the Minister's timeline. We want to see this through as quickly as possible, with the right scrutiny from the Committee, of course. What are your priorities? Will you prioritise the points system or something else?

Mr Speaker: You got four questions in there. It is up to the Minister to determine how many she answers.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will answer them all. I have to look after the Committee Chair.

The Chair is right about our constituency. Fair play for getting that in first pot, Paula. North Belfast has the most tower blocks, and that is where the challenge lies. For anyone to be decanted from those tower blocks, the Housing Executive needs to get land. Until now, land has been very scarce. We are trawling to look at what land is there in the social and even private sectors. We will work out how we can purchase it to enable decanting.

11.00 am

The Member asked about intermediate rents. I chatted to representatives from the Housing Executive yesterday and asked them for timelines, which might tie in with some of the Member's other questions. I have not prioritised my priorities; I want a timeline for all of them. I want to know what can be done in the short to medium term and in the medium to long term. All of it needs to be completed in this mandate.

The Member asked for information on the rent-to-buy co-ownership scheme. I also want that to be more accessible to young people or, for that matter, anyone else. It is a scheme for affordable home ownership, if that is what people choose, but among the feedback that I have received recently is that people have to pay six months' rent in advance. For one person, that is almost £15,000. That is not accessible. At the end of this item of business, I will gather all the questions, share them with Members and keep the Committee informed as we progress.

Ms Anderson: I am blown away by the statement. It is the most important housing statement that I have heard in years. The Minister is delivering not only on a strategic level but on the ground. I got her response in relation to the Triangle area in the Waterside, and I am pleased to see that that is moving forward. I would love to take this opportunity to ask a number of questions, but I know that I will not be allowed. I will stick to one. Paragraph 23 of the statement mentions the Minister's intention to reintroduce ring-fencing and states:

"We need mechanisms that mean houses are built where houses are needed."

Will robust monitoring be put in place in order to ensure that that policy is delivered, given its importance in addressing persistent and chronic inequality in housing in Derry and in north and west Belfast?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question and sentiments. Míle buíochas. They are much appreciated. All the priorities will be monitored by the Minister for Communities. I have made the statement on behalf of not only the Department but the Executive. I assure the Member that we will bring in protections for the areas that have not only faced the most housing stress but have done so consistently and suffered the greatest increase in housing stress for decades. We will ensure — I will ensure, for as long as I am here — that that will happen. Since our meeting yesterday, the Housing Executive knows what it needs to do. Its officials and my officials will be sitting down this morning and over the following days to work through what some of the priorities mean, and the

Committee will have first sight. I assure the Member that all the priorities will be closely monitored by the Minister for Communities.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister and very much welcome her statement. It outlines her ambition and approach to tackling our housing crisis. However, as legislators, we will be judged on what we do, not on what we want to do. I look forward to working with the Minister and colleagues to realise these much-needed and desirable changes.

It is difficult to find something that is not in the statement, but I have managed it. As the Minister outlined, prevention must play a part in the homelessness strategy, but the statement does not mention how we can support people or prevent them from falling into homelessness. I am thinking particularly of those people who are struggling now to pay their mortgage and those who will struggle greatly to do so in the future. Previously, we had a mortgage support scheme. Will the Minister commit, with her Executive colleagues, to looking at the possible reintroduction of such a scheme, given the high likelihood if not inevitability that a lot of people will fall into difficulty?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I asked for information on support for mortgages. As the Member will know, the British Government ended that support some time ago, much to the dismay of many of the devolved institutions, but more so to the people who found themselves in hard times. That was well before the COVID-19 crisis. I commit to exploring again any opportunity to support people who are in mortgage distress. Since the emergence of COVID, the Executive have gone above and beyond in trying to support people as best they can. I am acutely aware of not only the financial but the emotional turmoil, stress and shame caused by losing your home. I want to ensure that we try to help people as best we can. I do not have that information yet. When and if I get that information, I will share it with you and the rest of the Committee.

Mr Nesbitt: I welcome the Minister's statement. The Ulster Unionist Party is broadly supportive of this in principle, although obviously we would like to scrutinise the detail. On the detail, will the Minister tell us a little bit more about the governance arrangements for the proposed new body that will be the landlord? As I understand it, it will have to sit outside the public sector in order to secure borrowing powers, so will it have access to financial transactions capital (FTC), for example? What happens if a tenant comes to one of our constituency offices to complain about this new body? Where is the control mechanism?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his questions. He can be assured that Andy Allen will definitely scrutinise the detail in his absence.

I will deal with your last question first. Any service, product or support delivered by the Housing Executive, regardless of how it is configured, will be accountable to tenants and, indeed, to the Department. I give the Member that assurance. I am looking at a mutual or a cooperative in designation, because the Housing Executive as it is currently configured cannot borrow money. In order to do that and to protect the 85,000 homes, let alone look at our maintenance budget and our much-needed adaptations, we need to give it the freedom and flexibility to be able to borrow money, including FTC. We also need to do that to make the Housing Executive exempt from corporation tax

and to try to get its historical debt written off. There will be no threat to any public accountability. People will not even notice any difference. In my opinion, this also protects for the future the jobs of Housing Executive staff who currently work on the landlord side. This is what we need to do. We need to protect our public services, but, even more so, we need to protect our social housing stock, which 85,000 tenants live in.

Ms Armstrong: Thank you very much to the Minister for a very ambitious housing plan that has come to the House today. At the start of your statement, you asked us for support. The Alliance Party will not be found wanting in that, because this is well needed across Northern Ireland. I noticed that, in paragraph 38, you talk about mixed tenure being at the heart of this. Does that mixed tenure extend to shared housing? The Executive's commitment to shared housing has been very welcome over the years. I want to make sure that, when you talk about mixed tenure, that extends to the people who live in those houses and shared housing.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her sentiments and, indeed, for her party's support. Shared housing is there, and it will be there. Under the local development plans that local government is taking forward, mixed tenure for me means that if a private developer says, "I want to build 100 homes", 20 of those need to be social housing and they need to be on the same site as the development and tenure blind. That is what we need to do. This is not just about social clauses or developers' section 76 obligations. This is about them being part of the security of tenure for a lot of people. I have learnt many lessons from bad examples of this on these islands. I went to a place in Dublin where the social tenants were moved three miles out of the private development. That will not happen here.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for her statement on what promises to be the biggest shake-up in housing ever. It is all very exciting.

In my constituency, there are over 1,700 people on the housing list. Can the Minister guarantee that different types of housing will be looked at in order to address the different social needs and deal with adaptations, which there is a chronic shortage of?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. Adaptations to homes is one of the issues that I get questioned on constantly here. Our population is living longer, and that is a brilliant thing. We need to look after our ageing population and ensure that their homes are fit for purpose. Part of this, on the landlord side, will make sure that there are additional budgets to look at those adaptations.

In looking at the different needs of the populations in our constituencies, we need to take a needs-based approach. I do not want to see families growing up in a one-bedroom flat anywhere. I do not want to see people who really need a stairlift or a downstairs bathroom going up and down the stairs on their backside. We know loads of people like that. That is inhumane, so we want to make sure that all that is changed and that we try to get the best mix, not just to deal with our population now but to try to future-proof it for generations to come.

Ms Ennis: I concur with my colleague Martina Anderson: this is an absolute game changer. I welcome the reclassification as the catalyst for the transformative

changes in the Housing Executive, which are long overdue, but how realistic is this without the removal of historic debt and the continuation of being taxed as a corporation?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. As I said to, I think, Mike Nesbitt, the Executive will not be able to make the Housing Executive exempt from corporation tax or, indeed, tackle its historic debt unless we go for this reclassification. My instinct is to go for a mutual or a cooperative that is non-profit and almost with a charity basis, that has its own board that will be as public and accountable as the Housing Executive board is now. I am in no doubt — I have exhausted this inside out — that this is the only way that we can secure the homes that we have and bring forward the additional capital that we need to invest in our homes and, indeed, as I said to Alex, for the adaptations and all the maintenance that we need. This, for me, and, indeed, for the Executive, is something that we have to do to get over some of the most fundamental barriers that have stopped us from increasing housing supply.

Mr Buckley: I welcome the Minister's statement and support the transformation of the Housing Executive, but she will remember from my time on the Committee and from my comments in the House that I was critical and sceptical of the removal and closure of the right-to-buy scheme, which she mentioned. At the time, the Minister of the day and Department officials said that they would bring forward practical alternatives to that scheme, because I believed that it was crucial to allow working families to fulfil the aspiration of home ownership. Can the Minister elaborate on those potential alternatives? We know that land availability is a serious issue. A number of months ago, the House passed a Living over the Shop scheme. Has the Minister had any further consideration of a potential scheme to meet that need?

Ms Ní Chuilín: My memory is that we did not pass the Living over the Shop scheme, but maybe we did. I certainly did not support it.

The Member is on the record in the Committee, to be fair to him, about looking at alternatives to the right to buy. That is why co-ownership needs to provide better models. The right to buy was introduced in 1979. We have sold over 483 social homes under right to buy, and we have sold those homes at a discount of £24,000, which is all public money. The conflict that we have between increasing social housing and the right to buy is one that we cannot continue with, because, under right to buy, the stock was never replaced, and that is one of the reasons why we are in the position that we are in. If people want to own their homes, I am trying to help them as well. As I said to the Chair, I am happy to look at other ways in which co-ownership can be made easier for people who want to enter into home ownership at an affordable rate. It will certainly not be as affordable as we enjoyed under right to buy, but it does need to be affordable and they need to have access.

Mr Lynch: Minister, here in the North, the private rented sector is the most unregulated across these islands, and the tenants within it are the least protected. What is the Department's plan to address that issue?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will have heard that this is all about intention. This is a statement of intentionality, but

we certainly need to prevent tenants from being placed in homes that are not safe in the private rented sector and being subject to the whims of a landlord or letting agent if it does not suit them any more. We also need to make sure that the public investment in the private rented sector gets a return. We need to protect residents in the private rented sector as much as we possibly can.

As I said in the statement, I will bring forward proposals to ensure that their rent is fair, but, more importantly, I will bring forward proposals to ensure that they are protected. We also need to ensure that the systems, intermediate rent homes and mediation that we need are in place so that people are clear about what is available to them and what support they have.

11.15 am

Mr O'Toole: Like others, I welcome much of the statement. There is definitely a lot of ambition in it. I am glad that the Minister has made the statement, but we will need to see delivery on it. She mentioned reclassification and the broader powers around borrowing but specifically mentioned financial transactions capital loan funding. If I am right, in the October monitoring round statement, which we got not orally but in written form last week, there is a £39.3 million allocation of FTC. Is the Minister confident that her Department can spend that this year? What will it be going to, and will it be spent in-year, as in by the end of the financial year?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Co-ownership has given my Department the assurance that it can spend every bit of that FTC. I do not want any FTC ever being returned. Since COVID started in March, it has been more difficult, particularly for the construction industry, and that put pressure on the ability to spend the FTC budget.

The allocation will cover this year and, indeed, next year, so it is better to overcommit to that budget, and it is better for Co-ownership to be overambitious about being able to spend that budget. As the Member said, with the landlord side having a new designation, that will hopefully mean that never again will this Department return any FTC underspend.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for her statement. I spent a very brief period on the Committee for Communities with you previously. Although there is much to applaud you for, Minister, one thing that jumps out at me is the piece in and around intimidation points. I understand that the sentiment to protect people who are under threat is well made. As has been spoken about many times, however, the scheme is also abused, and we see people in housing stress being jumped over and overlooked. Will you outline what steps you will take, perhaps in conjunction with the Justice Minister, to ensure that the process is as fair and appropriate as possible?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have not discussed this with the Justice Minister, and it is a good idea to do so, but the responsibility is mine, so I am not passing the buck to anyone.

Most of us will remember a debate that we had in the Chamber on a motion on intimidation points that, I think, Fra McCann brought forward. Every party agreed with the sentiment that the scheme was necessary but that it was widely abused and misused. As sure as the day is Tuesday, if a new housing scheme were released,

allegations of intimidation would increase. That meant that the very people whom I spoke about in the statement — the people who are homeless, living in hostels or sofa-surfing — were effectively being queue-jumped by others. I want that situation to end, but, in my opinion, the difficulty with the scheme was that verification needed to be stronger to prevent that happening. I want to bring on board a statutory body or some other body to make sure that the need for such verification is in place. The PSNI will be involved.

I also want to make sure that people who have to leave their home as a result of domestic violence are now considered to have been intimidated. I want to make sure that asylum seekers and refugees who have come through the worst possible experiences and have made our place their home are also included on any intimidation lists, because currently they are not.

Mr Stalford: Like me, the Minister is from inner-city Belfast, and she knows that an insidious combination of private landlordism and overdevelopment is destroying the character of many of the communities in the inner city. Specifically in my constituency, I think of places such as the Woodstock Road, the Ravenhill Road, the Holylands, the Market, Sandy Row and Donegall Pass. Private landlordism is destroying the character of those communities, and, on the other side of that, they are being eaten away by overdevelopment and by the promotion of developments that local people simply cannot afford to live in. How can the Minister assure those communities that this policy statement will address those issues?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Deirdre Hargey would be delighted that you referred to her area in her constituency as “the Market”, so fair play.

Mr Stalford: No “s”.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Always.

Mr Stalford: No “s”.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, absolutely; BT7 all the way.

I have seen what has happened in the Village and Donegall Pass. As a Member, I have also seen and pointed out what has happened in the Market. On the one hand, you have a community where people are literally living on top of one another, while, on the other hand, you have tall, shiny buildings going up, but the people who would like to live in them cannot get access to them. That is the most hateful position to be in. They really are on the outside looking in. If people want to live in those buildings, we need to make it easy for them. That is the bottom line. Belfast will go through massive regeneration. As the Member will know, local development plans are the first to be put out by local government, and in them is a guarantee that there will be an eye to social and public housing along with private housing.

However, we need to ensure that the Housing Executive, in particular, uses the vesting powers that it has so that, if there is an opportunity to develop family homes in those communities, it ensures that it has that land. I have spoken to Conor Murphy on several occasions. As well as looking at the market rate measurement, he is also considering looking at the social-value measurement in order to make it easy to buy land in our constituencies to ensure that there is better housing supply. We do not need skyscrapers all over the place instead of social housing. What we need are

good-quality homes to sustain our communities. Frankly, our communities have sustained us through thick and thin, and we need to look after them.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for her statement. Since different parts of Belfast have been referenced, I want to highlight that, in areas of west and north Belfast, rents are increasing through a market demand that is coming from lower-income families that are struggling to access social housing. Will the Department consider looking at rent caps or creating rent-pressure zones in such areas?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I think that everybody has mentioned their constituency, so well done. That is what we are here for. At the minute, the local housing allowance almost puts a cap on what can be charged. However, it is too fragile and too volatile, particularly when the market rate goes up and landlords or businesses put the rent up. That leaves people having to choose between their rent or their rations, as we used to call them — or food, for all you young people below the age of 30. The purpose of my looking at intermediate rents is to ensure that anyone caught in that cycle is protected. The position is also that the Housing Executive — fair play to it; I want to put that on the record — has done its best, as have this and previous Executives, to ensure that Housing Executive rents remain affordable. However, housing association rents are becoming unaffordable. Some are charging £125 a week, as opposed to the less than £70 a week being charged by the Housing Executive. That is a problem. We need to look at bringing that into the intermediate rent as well, because the last thing that we want is for tenancies not to be sustained even before an allocation is made, because they certainly should be sustained as part of anyone's experience of growing up in social or public housing.

Mr Speaker: I call Paula Bradshaw. You might want to mention Lenadoon and Tullymore while you are at it. *[Laughter.]*

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for her impressive statement. I thank my colleague Christopher Stafford, who stole my question. However, I have another one. The Minister mentioned human rights and the right to family life. I work with constituents, and with one in particular whose child is on delayed discharge in the Iveagh Centre in west Belfast because there is no suitable accommodation to which to bring that child home. We have seen what has happened at Muckamore and other places, where beloved family members with complex needs have languished. Can the Minister tell me where she is collaborating with the Department of Health to start to introduce housing that would fit the needs of people who require a live-in carer or live-in nurse? Where is that mentioned in the statement?

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is covered by the part of the statement that talks about reclassifying the Housing Executive as a landlord in order to allow it to build homes, and also the adaptations. I have been here long enough to remember the Bamford strategy. We are still waiting on much of its implementation. That is not good enough. Families that are forced to separate, particularly ageing families looking after ageing children, need as much support as possible. This strategy will ensure that the Housing Executive will have the capital that it needs to look at adaptations, to purchase and develop homes, and to look at the maintenance issues that will really improve the quality of

life for all tenants and citizens. That is the intention of this statement.

That is one of the issues that I will be talking to the Minister of Health about. I will also be talking to other ministerial colleagues about how their Departments and mine can work together on the proposals in the statement.

Mr Gildernew: Go raibh maith agat, Minister. It will be no surprise that I will mention Fermanagh and South Tyrone, parts of which have huge housing stress. I welcome the statement. This is truly a once-in-a-generation shakeup of housing here and is long overdue.

Minister, I know that you recognise the problem of homelessness and that not all homelessness is necessarily rough sleeping. However, at the start of the pandemic, your Department's efforts in relation to homelessness were second to none. What work is being done now to ensure that the tackling homelessness strategy is not just successful but sustainable?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I recently had a meeting with the Chartered Institute of Housing. An issue that it majors on, which makes not only a lot of sense but articulates and encapsulates the concern that we have had in the Assembly, is sustainable tenancies.

If people are homeless, particularly if they are vulnerable and have mental health or addiction issues, we need to help them, work with them and support them when their tenancy is allocated and then support them throughout their tenancy. We need to give hope to the youngsters and families who are sleeping on people's living room sofas or on two sets of bunk beds in a tiny room that that is going to end and will not be the way that they are going to rear their kids, be that in Lenadoon, the Markets, Fermanagh and South Tyrone, Upper Bann, North Belfast or wherever. That is what we need to do.

We need to give people hope, but not just for the sake of it. They need to know that they have somebody in this Department who is working on behalf of all — not just my constituents or yours, but for us all. We are here to serve everyone, and that is what we will do.

Ms D Kelly: I thank the Minister for her statement. I know that the Minister is passionate about social housing, which is going to be an enormous ask given the opportunities around publicly owned land.

How does the strategy intend to address the issue of empty homes, of which there are many, and what plans do the Minister and her Department have for working alongside local authorities, which also are huge land owners, and for showing greater aggressiveness in vesting land for social housing?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. She will know, like many of us, and going back years, that one of the biggest issues in your constituency office is that of homes. It is awful to have a family, or anyone, coming to you for a home and pointing out three houses that are steeled up, particularly in the social housing sector. That applies to the Housing Executive more than to housing associations because housing association properties are more modern. However, if homes are empty and beyond repair, we need to condemn them and regenerate that area.

I intend to be more aggressive on behalf of everyone on the housing waiting list, particularly those in stress, in ensuring that landbanking does not continue as the norm, and to get into sensible and mature conversations with developers about what we can do to buy that land off them. For me, land is key to increasing housing supply.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for the comprehensive statement. I want to ask about the housing allocation scheme, to which I have referred before, and any scope in the statement for covering that.

We have a large development in Downpatrick of over 100 social houses. There is the usual concern that local people will not get access to those homes. At the same time, we have to recognise that the whole of the North is one unit, therefore people have to be offered those houses.

Is there a way in which we can give comfort to local people by enabling them to get access to those houses, so that they and their families and friends can remain in the communities in which they grew up?

11.30 am

Ms Ní Chuilín: To be honest, I cannot give any guarantee. You are right: it is seen as one unit. When someone is allocated their points and puts their preference down, that is what they are entitled to. What I can give the Member an assurance on is that, when it comes to people claiming or alleging to have been intimidated, as we have seen across each of our constituencies, we will be very robust in verifying their claim and getting down to the nitty-gritty of it. As I said in response to, I think, Christopher Stalford, when new schemes come on board, the level of intimidation claims literally goes through the roof. I do not want that to happen in your constituency or, indeed, anyone else's.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for bringing this ambitious statement to the House today. I have a number of questions, including some about landlord function and unaffordable rents in the private rented sector. I look forward to engaging with the Minister in the future, if she will meet me, to discuss the issues, especially those in North Down — I had to get that in there.

I hope that the changes will come with an uplift for Supporting People. I note that there is an intention to implement all but two aspects of the 2017 consultation. Does that include the discharge of the homeless duty to the private rented sector? In order to qualify for the discharge, a secure tenancy must be one that lasts for a year only. Does she intend for the homelessness duty to be discharged to tenancies that last only for a year? Why can it not be two?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. I am looking at that, because, for a lot of people — in fact, for everyone — a year is too short. To be fair to those working in Supporting People, particularly on homelessness, they have consistently raised that with us.

As I mentioned before, the other aspect is that, before someone is allocated a house or before they even go into the private rented sector, for example, I want to ensure that their application for a home is supported throughout the duration of their tenancy. Most of the Supporting People providers have told us that their level of engagement with people goes well beyond what they are statutorily

obligated to do. Those people are doing the front-line work on our behalf, particularly during the pandemic, and we need to support them. I assure the Member that I am looking at that as well.

Mr Carroll: Thanks to the Minister for her statement. She mentioned the private rented sector and how it has been impacted and how support systems are needed for it. I refer to the Loughran v Piney Rentals judgement that deemed letting fees to be unlawful and a joint ministerial communiqué from her Department — I think that this was before she was in the Department — and the Finance Minister earlier this year that provided further confirmation on the issue. It appears, however, that some letting agents openly continue to charge letting fees and are sometimes rebranding them. What are the Minister and her Department doing to challenge letting agents who charge those fees, and what is being done to support renters who are in a situation in which they feel powerless?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will certainly pick that up. The Loughran judgement had a significant impact, given the changes and protections that it brought for private renters. Under company law, companies cannot change their title and status to suit their circumstances and expect public money and a difference in approach. I guarantee the Member that I will certainly look at that. I do not support any divergence from what was cited in the Loughran judgement. If anything, it should be the floor rather than the ceiling of protection for private renters.

Mr Lunn: There is so much to welcome in the statement that I almost feel like a party pooper for even asking a question about it. It is a very good statement.

I want to ask the Minister to develop her answer to Robbie Butler's question about intimidation points. I do not have a problem with their existence, but I have had a constant problem with their allocation. I note the proposal to bring together a statutory body. Can we take it that that statutory body, perhaps unlike some other statutory bodies in the past, will not contain members who may have a connection with organisations that may have intimidated people out of their property to start with?

Ms Ní Chuilín: You are so eloquent in your diplomacy, Trevor. Fair play to you. That is one of the reasons why I want to change the verification process. We should just call it for what it is: people can buy intimidation at one door and walk out with their points to another. That is ending. We are calling a quit to that and putting a halt to it. The PSNI needs to be more involved in the verification of intimidation. We also need to ensure that people who are genuinely intimidated are given the support that they need while showing the door to those who are not.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Minister for her statement. It is a comprehensive piece of work that, no doubt, started with Minister Hargey, and I hope that she continues to recover from her illness.

Minister, I appreciate that, because of population, we will tend to focus on cities like Belfast and Derry. However, I want to point to my constituency of East Londonderry, which is a predominantly rural area. I would like to hear more about your plans for how we can provide housing in rural areas. I would also like to know how we will provide specific housing, because sometimes it is not possible to build houses for everyone, be they larger families, people with specific needs or people who want to live in

the country away from bigger developments because of mental health issues. How will you address that in your plans moving forward?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. I assure her that this is not just an urban regeneration plan for housing; we need to sustain and support rural communities as well. I have been talking to councils, particularly during the pandemic, about additional support, and I have asked them to look at their plans. Many councils are up for it, particularly with regard to sustaining rural families and looking at the needs of rural communities. They want to get into a position in which they are offering public land for public housing. They want to do that, and I want to do that. I recognise that there is need in every constituency, and I have to ensure that I address that need as best I can. I give that commitment to the Member.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the Minister's statement and the radical opportunity to change the failings in our housing system. The Minister will recall that she and I, along with a large delegation of Sinn Féin representatives, met the Housing Executive several years ago. During that meeting, it was revealed that 500 social houses had been built in the most affluent constituency in the North, while I and other representatives of the Woodville and Drumnacree wards in north Lurgan, which are some of the most deprived wards in the North, saw only a small number of houses — 10 or 12 — built there in the last 10 years. Will the Minister assure us that housing will be built in areas of need and distributed fairly and equitably?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question and congratulate him for getting in not only his constituency but areas in his constituency. I am sure that they will be delighted to be namechecked. I remember that meeting well, and I know that the Housing Executive remembers that meeting well. It is not that any constituency is not entitled to housing, but building more houses in areas that did not have the level of need of others was certainly questionable. I want to ensure that, in areas of highest demand and, indeed, in all areas of demand, land is available to deliver much-needed homes. Never again should we go into a meeting with any public body and look at fewer than 20 houses being built in an area that is busting at the seams while there are hundreds of houses for which people can just put down their name and get one with fewer than 40 points, with people in other constituencies sitting with over 200 points and no hope of getting a house. That will change.

Mr Allister: I want to follow on from Ms Sugden's point about rural areas. In the north of my constituency, there is a string of five villages: Armoy, Bushmills, Dervock, Mosside and Stranocum. The Minister told me yesterday in answer that there are plans for nine new social housing units in Armoy. The problem is, Minister, that there is no sewage capacity left in Armoy. In all the other villages that I named, there are no plans for social housing, and none of them, apart from Bushmills, has sewage capacity. Where is the joined-up delivery? It is all very well to say that there is a commitment to provide extra houses in certain villages, but, if there is no sewage capacity, there will be no houses.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question and for getting five villages in his constituency namechecked. The Member is right: there needs to be the infrastructure for those houses to be developed. I will be talking to the

Minister for Infrastructure, who quite rightly has been banging on about the issue since she came into her Department. There is a lot that we can do. We cannot build houses without that infrastructure, but nor can we leave areas like Armoy and Dervock without any hope of getting homes built to meet the needs of a growing population. Is the task that is in front of us a mighty one? It absolutely is, but we will tackle it as best we can to bring change to people and give them hope of having a home in their community.

Mr Speaker: That concludes questions on the statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a few minutes, please.

Executive Committee Business

Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period for Meetings of Registered Societies and Credit Unions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

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

That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period for Meetings of Registered Societies and Credit Unions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

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

Mrs Dodds: I seek the Assembly's approval of the statutory rule, which was made on 28 September and came into operation on 1 October. The regulations are made under powers set out in the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020, which was made at Westminster on 25 June 2020. The Act is a piece of emergency legislation that extends to the whole of the United Kingdom following a legislative consent motion passed by the Assembly on 2 June 2020. The Act contains provisions to help companies and mutual societies, cooperatives, community benefit societies and credit unions to deal with the serious economic consequences resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and includes corporate insolvency and governance measures.

In relation to the regulations, the Act includes a temporary relaxation of the manner in which meetings of mutual societies can be held. As some mutuals are bound by their constitution to hold meetings in a physical location, the Act sets aside requirements to hold physical meetings so that those organisations can continue to operate throughout the period of public health restrictions. The measure allows flexibility in how a meeting can be held; for example, an organisation may make use of technology and hold a virtual meeting or postal votes could be used instead of the usual show of hands at a meeting. That temporary measure was originally to expire on 30 September 2020; however, the Act allows my Department to extend the temporary measures for mutuals in Northern Ireland if it is considered necessary.

Meetings, especially annual general meetings (AGMs), are required to progress corporate governance in mutuals, and crucial decisions can be made only following a vote by members. Trade representatives have detailed how corporate governance and oversight is likely to be affected or, indeed, suspended, if flexibility in how they hold their statutory meetings cannot be extended.

Credit union representatives specifically explained how planned annual general meetings must be held in the coming months so that decisions can be taken about dividends. Many of their members are financially excluded and rely on annual dividends and interest rebate payments as part of their financial planning.

11.45 am

The coronavirus pandemic has not been the isolated and short-term event that was envisaged when the Act was passed earlier this year. I consider that it is now prudent to extend the measure to provide continued support to local mutual organisations. The Act allows my Department to extend the measure by up to three months at a time, so this statutory rule extends the temporary period by three months until 30 December 2020. Following consultation with sector representatives, it is appropriate to extend this measure from 1 October 2020 to allow cooperatives to hold their annual general meetings.

The regulations that the House is being asked to approve have been agreed with the Department's Committee, and the Executive were advised prior to their being made. The measure has the support of sector representatives. The extension of this measure and the date to which it will be extended correspond with what is being done in the rest of the United Kingdom. It is imperative that mutual societies in Northern Ireland can avail themselves of the same easing of requirements as their counterparts in Great Britain. However, I am aware that many credit unions hold their AGMs in January and February, and my officials are working on a subsequent statutory rule to further extend the period to ensure that none of our hard-working mutuals are disadvantaged. I have written to the Committee and the Executive to inform them of this further extension of support to the sector.

In conclusion, the extension of this temporary measure will provide continuing support and assistance to local mutuals and their members. Therefore, I move that the Assembly should now approve these regulations. Thank you.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): I rise to speak, briefly, on behalf of the Committee and to support the motion on its behalf.

As the Minister has indicated, the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period for Meetings of Registered Societies and Credit Unions) Regulations (NI) 2020 amend the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 by extending the temporary relevant period for mutual societies to hold meetings in a flexible manner. The regulation replaces the end date of 30 September with the new date of 30 December 2020.

The Committee considered the SL1 for the regulations at its meeting on 23 September 2020, and members were content with the policy direction. The Committee agreed to the statutory rule for the regulations at its meeting on 7 October, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules. The rule came into operation in September 2020. The Examiner of Statutory Rules has raised no issues with the rule. I support the motion to affirm the statutory rule on the Committee's behalf.

I also support the motion in my role as Sinn Féin's economy spokesperson. I had been contacted in September by some credit unions that were concerned about the expiration of the previous regulations, as the Minister has outlined, and the need to hold AGMs. This regulation extends the relevant period until the end of December and allows credit unions to conduct their business and continue to operate, either virtually or by other means.

It is important that we support businesses and other organisations during the exceptional circumstances that we continue to face. I welcome the fact that the Minister has outlined a further extension of support, if necessary, to support our local mutual organisations. This is a very difficult time for businesses and individuals, and it is important that these mitigating measures are put in place to allow business to continue.

Mr Stalford: I support the statutory rule that the Minister has brought forward. This represents just the latest example of the suite of measures that her Department has undertaken to support credit unions and mutual organisations during this difficult time. I declare an interest, as I am a member of a credit union. Those of us who know the credit union movement know the valuable and very important work that it undertakes in our communities. For many people, it is the credit union movement that provides access to the credit that they would not get through banks or other lenders. I am pleased that the Minister has moved to protect the credit union sector throughout the pandemic.

This is a positive measure, allowing credit unions and other organisations to undertake their important work and further protecting them during these difficult times. I say on behalf of the Democratic Unionist Party that we support the measures.

Mrs Dodds: I thank colleagues across the Chamber for their support for this very important issue. It is incredibly important that our mutual societies and credit unions can operate efficiently and function on behalf of their members in very difficult circumstances. I am content that the regulations will meet that need.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period for Meetings of Registered Societies and Credit Unions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a few minutes.

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

Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill: Second Stage

Ms Ni Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 10/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated any time limit to the debate.

Ms Ni Chuilín: I think that everyone in the Chamber will welcome the Bill, particularly the measures that will support the hospitality sector when we reach a time — hopefully in the near future — that society can operate under more normal circumstances. The majority of the measures in the Bill mirror those that were brought to the Assembly during the previous mandate, with some notable amendments and additions. The aim of the measures remains the same: to contribute to a reduction in alcohol-related harm while providing some much-needed assistance to the hospitality sector as it supports our tourist offering.

The Bill contains 36 clauses, which are divided into provisions that affect licensed premises — pubs, restaurants, hotels and the like — and will amend the Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 and provisions that affect registered private member clubs and will amend the Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. There are two schedules to the Bill. One details minor and consequential amendments and the other details repeals. Many of the provisions affect both licensed premises and registered clubs. Although they are provided for separately in the Bill, the policy is ultimately the same.

I now turn to the detailed provisions. I am removing all additional restrictions on licensed premises and registered clubs over the Easter weekend.

That will mean that, for licensed premises and registered clubs, the Easter weekend will be treated like any other weekend throughout the year. The period of drinking-up time at the end of a licensed premises' and registered club's permitted hours will be extended by 30 minutes to one hour. That will discourage customers from stockpiling drinks during last orders and drinking too quickly and will allow for a more gradual dispersal of people onto the streets, allowing staff more time to clear the premises in an orderly fashion. It will reduce the impact on communities at closing time, in particular allowing people to remain inside while waiting for a taxi. The Bill also includes a power to revert to 30 minutes by regulation should there be difficulties with the new arrangements.

The Department will have a power to designate an event as a major event. This is intended only for prestigious events, such as last year's Open golf championship in Portrush or the MTV European music awards. Once an event has been designated as a major event, the Department will be allowed to vary the permitted hours for it.

Licensed premises and registered clubs will no longer be required to obtain a children's certificate; however, all current conditions must be met if children are to be permitted on the premises. Young people will be allowed

to attend functions in certain licensed premises and registered clubs, provided that a number of conditions are met. That will ensure that young people have a safe environment in which to hold events, such as school formals, where adequate safeguards are in place and no opportunity exists for young people to obtain alcoholic drinks. Young people will also be allowed to stay with their parent or guardian in certain premises to celebrate a special occasion together, provided that a number of conditions are met.

The sale and supply of alcohol by self-service and vending machines will be prohibited. That will ensure that the sale of alcoholic drinks is always supervised, allowing trained staff in a regulated environment the opportunity to monitor alcohol consumption and to refuse the sale of alcoholic drinks if necessary.

The Department will be able to approve a code of practice for the licensed trade. Courts will then need to be satisfied, either at grant or renewal, that the licence holder is aware of their responsibilities under the code and has been complying with those responsibilities.

Those pubs and hotels that are already permitted additional hours to 1.00 am will be permitted to apply for an additional hour up to 2.00 am up to 104 times a year. That would, in effect, allow later opening every weekend, but, equally, late openings could be saved for special occasions, such as New Year's Eve if it occurs during the working week. Liquor licences and entertainment licences will be aligned so that the entertainment cannot continue after the end of drinking-up time. That will ensure that there is no opportunity for illegal sales of alcoholic drinks and ensures a level playing field for all licensed premises.

Smaller pubs that do not provide food or entertainment will be allowed to apply to the police for late opening to 1.00 am on up to 85 occasions. That is an increase from the current 20 and in line with the number of late nights permitted for registered clubs. Larger pubs that have late opening granted by the courts will also be allowed to apply to the police for ad hoc late nights up to 20 times a year. That will mean that they can react to late-notice events that are on days not included in those allowed by the courts.

Licensed racetracks will be permitted to sell alcoholic drinks on a Sunday. That will be restricted to 30 minutes before and up to 30 minutes after the entertainment and only between the hours of 12.30 pm and 10:00 pm.

Local producers of ciders, beers and spirits will be permitted to apply to the court for a liquor licence that will permit three things: local producers to sell their own product from their own premises for consumption off the premises. That will, by default, include online sales. It will allow local producers to sell their own products from certain other licensed premises for consumption off the premises, and it will also allow local producers to sell their own products from unlicensed premises for consumption off the premises. In all three scenarios, samples can be provided for consumption on the premises, but the size of those samples will be prescribed in regulations.

12.00 noon

Over the past number of years, there has been an increase in the use of websites and apps for buying off-sales. Where a sale takes place in any way other than face to face, the place of dispatch must be licensed. There will

also be a requirement placed on delivery drivers collecting alcoholic drinks on behalf of the customer to carry a receipt from the sale with the purchase and to deliver without unreasonable delay.

The law in respect of children will be strengthened to ensure that young people can no longer accept a delivery of intoxicating liquor at the home address of the purchaser. Delivery drivers will be required to record in a logbook the occasions on which they requested identification and detail the form of identification provided.

Licensed restaurants will be required to display a notice detailing the conditions under which alcohol may be sold on the premises. This will provide clarity to the restaurants by openly showing the conditions they are bound by. That will address growing concerns in relation to licensed restaurants that are operating more like pubs but without the associated overheads of a pub.

Off-sales premises, including supermarkets, will be permitted to advertise alcoholic drinks only within the licensed area of their premises, the area where drink is displayed for sale. That is intended to reduce instances of impulse buys of alcoholic drinks, particularly in supermarkets. They will also be prohibited from advertising alcohol promotions within 200 metres of their premises.

All licensed premises will be prohibited from awarding or redeeming loyalty or bonus points for the purchase of alcoholic drinks. That will reinforce the message that the sale of alcoholic drinks is regulated because they are not a normal commodity such as groceries.

Courts will be able to impose conditions on an occasional licence, and, if conditions are not complied with, there will be repercussions for the licence holder. Body corporate licence holders will be required to notify the courts and the police of any change in directorship within 28 days.

Angostura bitters — I hope I said that right — will no longer be exempt from the definition of “intoxicating liquor” and, as such, may only be sold in licensed premises. That brings the duty of licensing regimes into line, following the repeal of the excise duty exemption that previously applied to Angostura bitters.

A sporting club will be able to apply on six occasions per year to extend the area of its premises licensed to supply alcohol, provided certain conditions are met. That will allow sporting clubs to take advantage of events at their clubs, such as Captain's Day, which attracts large numbers of members and guests, by extending the area where they can supply alcohol to the club grounds.

Young people will be allowed to remain in the bar area of a registered club until 11.00 pm during the summer months, from 1 June to 31 August, or to attend an award ceremony on one occasion in the calendar year. That will allow young people to avail themselves of the full range of sporting activities open to them during the summer months, which often extend into the evening. The award ceremony allows sporting clubs to celebrate the success of young people who have participated in the sporting activities offered by the club.

A registered club will be allowed to advertise any function outside club premises where the advertisement clearly states that only members of the club and their guests may attend. Currently, members of the general public are permitted to attend functions where the proceeds are

devoted to a charitable or benevolent purpose. However, the law prohibits a registered club from publicly advertising the function. This provision will ensure that there are no restrictions on the advertising of such events.

Many people would like the licensing regime to be more flexible and allow licensees the freedom to open and close when they like. On the other hand, many people, concerned about the harm caused to our society by the misuse of alcohol, wish to see greater restrictions on the advertising and sale of drink. I believe that the Bill strikes the right balance between offering a level of support to the hospitality sector, which we all agree is much needed, and protecting our communities by ensuring that the sale of alcoholic drinks is controlled.

It is clear from discussions with stakeholders and many other parties that there is significant support for these balanced proposals. On that basis, I hope that Members can support the Bill's Second Stage.

Ms P Bradley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Communities): On behalf of the Committee for Communities, I welcome the Second Stage of the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill. The Minister introduced the Bill on 19 October. That marked the start of the process to bring about these important and long-awaited changes to the liquor licensing laws in Northern Ireland. I say "long-awaited" because, as Members will know, the current legislation relating to the sale of alcoholic drinks in Northern Ireland dates back to 1996. It is helpful to remind the House of the recent history in that regard, which has led to the Bill that is before us.

A review of liquor licensing laws in Northern Ireland was launched in 2011, and, over the past nine years, there have been a number of attempts to get such a Bill over the line. That finally resulted in the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill in 2016, which was introduced in the Assembly in September of that year but subsequently fell in January 2017. Some amendments have been made over the years, namely the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 and the Licensing of Pavement Cafés Act (Northern Ireland) 2014, and, in 2016, a private Member's Bill successfully added outdoor stadia as a category of premises that may be granted a liquor licence.

The Committee was briefed most recently by departmental officials at its meeting on 8 October, when we heard that the aims of the new Bill mirror and expand on the 2016 Bill to modernise liquor licensing laws by way of a balanced package of measures that are aimed at providing vital support for hospitality and tourism but which will also tackle alcohol misuse and promote responsible alcohol consumption.

The 2016 Bill was thought by some at the time to be too modest in its ambitions for the modernisation of licensing laws and to fail to recognise that patterns of alcohol consumption were changing, with people drinking less in pubs and more in their homes. On 8 October, the Department advised the Committee that the Bill has now taken account of many of the issues and concerns that arose during the evidence sessions for the 2016 Bill. That is to be welcomed and may make the Committee's scrutiny task somewhat clearer.

However, we are here today to debate the main principles of the Bill. The detailed work for the Committee lies

ahead. The principles are relatively straightforward to agree on, as they relate to bringing forward measures that seek to tackle alcohol misuse, to promote responsible consumption and to support the hospitality and tourism sectors. However, during the Committee Stage, we will seek to establish whether the Bill strikes the appropriate balance between those apparently competing objectives.

Alcohol has never been more affordable or available. In our support for the hospitality and tourism sectors, the Committee will not lose sight of the fact that alcohol misuse is a significant public health and social issue in Northern Ireland. It is estimated that we spend around £700 million annually to address alcohol misuse. That includes costs to healthcare, policing, prison services, social services and workplaces through absenteeism.

According to a departmental health inequalities report from 2018, almost a quarter of children in Northern Ireland aged between 11 and 16 are drinking alcohol, sometimes on a daily basis. All of us will have personal views on alcohol, based on experience or, perhaps, moral or religious beliefs. However, we are here to legislate for all of society. It will, therefore, be the job of the Committee to consider all evidence and arguments that are presented and to advise the House accordingly.

I do not intend to highlight all the clauses, but I will highlight a number of key areas. The Committee is sure that the hospitality and tourism sectors will welcome the range of proposals relating to increased opening hours. They will welcome not only the proposed removal of restrictions over the Easter weekend but the extension to drinking-up time and the increase in the number of days on which certain licensed premises and small pubs can open for longer. Small pubs are often a social hub in local communities. The Committee is pleased to see the proposals to align alcohol and entertainment licences to help to offset the issues associated with problem premises.

The Bill proposes to legislate for major events to allow the Department to designate an event as a special or major event, and to vary the permitted hours and allow certain off-sales at that event. In support of small producers of alcoholic drinks and in recognition of their contribution to food and drink culture and tourism, the Bill proposes a new category of premises for local breweries, cideries and distilleries. The Committee is looking forward to engaging with that sector. The Committee envisages that sporting clubs will welcome the proposals to allow them to extend the area of their premises within which they can lawfully supply alcoholic drinks on a limited number of occasions a year. We look forward to engaging with all the sectors that I mentioned in the coming weeks to determine the positive or other impacts of the Bill's proposals.

The Committee will also closely scrutinise the range of measures that impact on children and young people. These include allowing young people under 18 to be in the bar area of licensed premises and registered clubs after 9.00 pm and permitting young people under 18 to attend an awards ceremony in a sporting club one night per calendar year and remain on those premises until 11.00 pm. We know that licence holders, particularly in the current economic climate, are keen to allow their function rooms to be used for functions attended by young people. The Bill also proposes that young people may remain on licensed premises beyond 9.00 pm to attend a private

function such as a wedding or anniversary, provided they are accompanied by a parent or guardian and the main meal is being served at the table. The Committee is pleased to see that it is proposed to strengthen the current law to prevent young people under 18 receiving a delivery of alcoholic drinks to the home.

The Committee is keen to ensure that the Bill contains sufficient measures to tackle excessive alcohol consumption. It is known that drinking at home has increased in recent years. Therefore, the proposed restrictions on the advertising of alcoholic drinks in supermarkets and other off-sale premises are to be welcomed to encourage shoppers to make a conscious decision about whether or not they purchase alcohol. In order to encourage a reduction in alcohol consumption, there is a proposal to amend the law to prohibit the practice whereby many retailers allow loyalty points to be gained from the purchase of alcoholic drinks or exchanged for the same. The Committee will be keen to explore with relevant stakeholders the proposals to amend the law to allow statutory approval for voluntary industry-led codes of practice in relation to the sale and promotion of alcoholic drinks.

The Committee fully appreciates that we are working our way through the COVID crisis and recognises that it is causing particularly huge difficulties for the hospitality and tourism sector. Given the history of attempts to change law in this area and the challenges facing many in this sector and those on whom it impacts, the Committee will make all efforts to ensure that there is no unnecessary delay in the passage of the Bill. However, it must carry out thorough scrutiny and remain mindful of the fact that the scope of this Bill is considerably wider than that of the 2016 Bill.

We are also scrutinising the Bill with a view to changing licensing laws on a number of fronts, potentially for many years to come, and not just to assist a number of sectors to cope in the present pandemic and its immediate aftermath. That said, I am confident that a more flexible licensing framework with appropriate safeguards will not only assist those sectors to rebuild following the COVID crisis, when our society can again operate under more normal circumstances, but ensure that protections are in place to help to tackle alcohol-related harm. The Committee is supportive of the principles of the Bill and looks forward to considering it in much greater detail.

Mr Allister: I am much obliged to the Chair for giving way. The Minister declined and, therefore, I will pose the question to the Committee Chair. I am seeking some information and hope that she might be willing to give it.

Paragraphs 26 and 27 of the explanatory document refer to the PSNI being asked to provide estimates of the additional policing costs arising from the extra hours of opening and the extra administrative tasks. Paragraph 27 says that the PSNI undertook to provide those figures but they were not finalised at the time of publication. Now that we come to debate the Bill, have they yet been finalised? Can the House be told what, the PSNI says, are the extra costs of the proposals?

12.15 pm

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Member for his intervention. I imagine that that is an answer that needs to come from the

Minister and not from me, but we will certainly consider that as part of our Committee deliberations.

I have come to the end of outlining the Committee stance on this, and I want to make a few comments as a DUP MLA and a constituency MLA. I very much welcome the Bill. As I said, it has been a long time coming. I think that you, Mr Deputy Speaker, sat on the Committee for Social Development during that 2011-16 mandate, when we looked at liquor licensing and many people came to brief us. As a member of the Committee — other Members will be aware of this — I know that we are being lobbied heavily by all sections of the community: those that will benefit from this and those that will not benefit from it. They are lobbying us hard at this time.

As a member of the Committee and a member of my party, I will take all that evidence on board. As a Committee, we need to listen to that evidence. None of us should go into the Committee with preconceived ideas of how we will change or amend this, because the evidence needs to be listened to. We all need to be mindful of that. I know that, for many, the Bill will have gone too far and that, for many, the Bill will not have gone far enough. Some will be happy, and some will not. I advise my fellow Committee members to keep an open mind at this stage and to base their decisions only on evidence and nothing else.

Ms Ennis: I fully take on board the Chair's last few comments.

I thank the Minister for bringing this positive legislation through the Assembly. I know that Minister Hargey was keen to progress the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill and, indeed, launched the most recent consultation on our outdated liquor licensing laws in the North in 2019, so it is great to finally debate the Second Stage of the Bill today.

As the Chair said, there have been a few amendments to the original 1996 Order in recent years, such as amendments relating to closure powers for police and proof-of-age requirements in 2011 and the introduction of the Licensing of Pavement Cafés Act in 2014, the benefits of which we have seen come to fruition during the pandemic, as the hospitality sector has had to use every avenue available to it to continue trading in some form. All those amendments were made with the aim of striking a balance between facilitating the sale of alcohol, public safety and the public interest, and the same can be said for the most recent incarnation of the Bill, which the Minister has brought to us today.

I will not go into great detail on the Bill today. As the Chair said, we are still carrying out our scrutiny function through the Committee and very much look forward to getting on with that task, but it is important to talk about some of the headlines in it. The Committee considered the findings of the 2019 consultation, which revealed that there was a consensus amongst those who responded that legislative change was necessary. A large number who responded suggested that opening hours for public houses and other on-sales premises should be increased. Health organisations were in favour of placing advertising restrictions on off-sales, restricting access for deliveries of alcoholic drinks for young people and prohibiting the sale of alcoholic drinks by self-service. It is abundantly clear that change is wanted and needed in order to modernise our liquor licensing laws. We need fit-for-purpose, 21st-

century-proofed legislation to help make the hospitality industry more sustainable and to grow and build our tourism product. We need to do that while developing a more balanced relationship between responsible drinking and the economic realities of the sector.

The removal of additional restrictions at Easter, which the Bill proposes, will no doubt be most welcomed by the hospitality and tourism sectors, particularly at this time, when the economic impact of COVID is being acutely felt by the industry. That, accompanied by the authorisation of additional hours from 20 days to 85 days, will be a huge boost, and I sincerely hope that the Bill passes to allow the changes to take effect by 2021.

Perhaps the part of the Bill that I am most excited about is the proposal to create a new licence for local producers. In my part of South Down, we have a growing number of excellent local craft breweries. I can say that they are excellent because I have probably tried most of them. We have Whitewater Brewery, Killowen Distillery and Mourne Mountains Brewery, to name but a few. I remember visiting Mourne Mountains Brewery a number of years ago, and I was disheartened and saddened to hear that, recently, a group of American tourists pulled up outside the brewery fully expecting, as you would in any other part of the world, to get a tour and have a sample but, unfortunately, the CEO of Mourne Mountains Brewery had to turn them away.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. She will know my interest in the topic, given the vast number of microbreweries in my constituency and the cider producers in the orchard county. Will she agree with me that it is a sad reality that, to date, a lot of the microbreweries and craft distillers have been unable to sell their products even within the current pub/restaurant set-up, given the control element that large corporations have on those taps in bars and restaurants?

Ms Ennis: I agree. The Member makes a good point. That is another issue that we can get into in Committee, and I am sure that it will come up: the hold that the huge conglomerates have over our local pubs and our local hospitality sector. It is crippling for local producers if they are unable to get their products into those bars and restaurants. That is an issue.

From a constituency point of view, the changes proposed for local producers, such as offering samples during tours and selling their products for consumption off-site will give craft breweries in South Down and other places the chance to operate fairly and to become economically viable. That, in turn, will help to grow our tourism product.

Sinn Féin submitted a detailed response to the 2019 consultation. We believed that change was needed, and that change is reflected in the modern and sensible legislation that we have before us. As with most things in life, it will be impossible to please everyone, and I am sure that there will be some who think that the Bill does not go far enough. I believe that we have realistic, workable and fair proposals before us. I encourage Members to support the Bill, and I look forward to engaging with all relevant stakeholders as our Committee continues its scrutiny of the Bill over the coming weeks.

Mr Durkan: First, I declare an interest, as my family owns licensed premises.

The demands for the changes that the Bill will make were being made long before its previous incarnation in 2016. It is certainly long-awaited legislation, and our licensing laws are very much in need of an update. That said, our scrutiny of the Bill has to take account of the circumstances that the hospitality industry is operating in or, rather, sadly, not operating in at the moment. What the hospitality industry and, indeed, all of us would not give to be subject to the old system rather than the current restrictions that we now face as a result of the pandemic.

Pubs and the wider hospitality industry face a fight for survival, and many of them will struggle to open their doors again. They will need support to enable them to contribute once again to our job market, our tourism industry and our social lives. The measures in the Bill will play a role in that by laying the groundwork for their return and make the changes to modernise licensing even more pressing than they have been. We were initially told in Committee that the Bill would allow the removal of Easter weekend restrictions to come into force in time for Easter 2021, but I notice on the BBC today that it is Easter 2022. I would like the Minister to clarify that in her concluding remarks. Obviously, we do not know what lies ahead of us, but we all hope that enough progress will have been made by then for businesses and patrons to have the benefit of that change as soon as possible.

The Committee will undertake line-by-line scrutiny of the Bill, but there are three main points that I wish to raise now. I will save the painstaking detail until later in the legislative process. The first is suggestions from local breweries and independent pubs regarding clause 8. I suppose you could call them “draught proposals” [*Laughter.*] The clause makes no provision for on-site sales of their beer, which is allowed in Britain and increasingly in other regions across the world. I have met representatives of the industry. Everyone in the House will have been lobbied by its representatives. I fully expect that that will be a major point for the Committee to consider. We will have to look carefully at the detail around opening hours and products and the sort of licence that Ms Ennis mentioned, but there is real potential here for the economy and for tourism. I understand that there are reservations, but a balance can be struck. It should be possible to allow home-grown brewery businesses to sell their wares on their premises without creating a situation that would have people sitting in them drinking all day and all night, and many would question our ability to organise such an event even if we wanted to do so [*Laughter.*] If we do not deal with that issue in the Bill and take a holistic view of the whole industry, it is highly likely that we will have to return to the issue, sooner rather than later. I hope that we can come to some sort of consensus across the House on the issue during the Bill’s passage.

Secondly, it is within the scope of the Bill for the Committee and the House to look at the system of awarding licences, specifically their distribution as well as the total number available. The Bill is an opportunity to consider the provision of licences in rural areas in particular and the impact that the loss of one of the few local pubs, if not the only one, can have on a small town or village.

Thirdly and finally, much as the focus of the Bill is on the relaxation of licensing laws, we must not lose sight of the fact that we are always trying to strike the right

balance between having a vibrant hospitality industry and responsible drinking. For example, the Bill does not introduce minimum alcohol unit pricing, which our party supports. I recognise that that is not in the Minister's remit, but perhaps she can let us know whether the Executive have discussed the issue and whether anything will come forward from the Health Minister in that regard.

Moreover, extending opening hours has a knock-on effect on policing, as Mr Allister mentioned, and enforcement. In turn, it creates the need for more awareness of and around problem drinking. The Bill also makes changes to regulating the presence of under-18s in licensed establishments. That also has to be considered in the context of safeguarding and preventing any normalisation of unhealthy alcohol consumption. I look forward to hearing from the Minister and stakeholders about how the balance between economic and social activity and public health can be struck.

I will draw my remarks to a close by saying that I welcome the introduction of the Bill and the work that we as a Committee will do to scrutinise and improve it. It will be a welcome change to get our teeth into some proper legislative work that is not retrospective approval or a legislative consent motion (LCM) to give powers to Westminster. I hope that stakeholders engage with the Committee Stage and that the Bill can be an example of the Assembly legislating effectively, as opposed to another news headline about a crisis at Stormont. Not only is that important for the businesses and consumers affected by the Bill but it sends a wider message about devolution, these institutions and our efforts to restore public confidence in them.

Mr Butler: I do not think that I will have the Chamber in as much mirth as Mr Durkan did. I speak on the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party in the absence of our communities spokesperson, Andy Allen, who is self-isolating. You could say that I am a poor man's Andy Allen. I thank the Minister for her kind remarks about Andy. He is self-isolating, but I have relayed to him the fact that you pointed out that he would be scrutinising the housing statement. I am sure that he will apply that same scrutiny to the Bill.

As a party, we support the introduction of the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill. It is the second attempt at legislating, owing to the previous Bill having fallen on the collapse of the Assembly. I know that a lot of hard work went into the previous Bill, some of which is reflected in the Bill before us. When dealing with licensing and registration of clubs, it is vital that we strike a balance in supporting the sector. The Minister has already mentioned that and used those words.

It is vital to help the sector and local industries to grow and support them in creating employment whilst implementing appropriate safeguards. The Chair of the Committee spoke about that at length, and I thank her for that.

12.30 pm

It is estimated that the hospitality sector generates £1.2 billion per year for the local economy and is a significant driver in the tourism industry. As we know, however, and as Mr Durkan pointed out, COVID-19 and the restrictions have had a devastating impact not just in Northern Ireland but across the world. In recent months, the hospitality

industry has struggled perhaps more than others in these challenging times. Stakeholders have highlighted the fact that the growth of the industry in Northern Ireland has been curtailed significantly by restrictive legislation, which has inhibited the growth of the hospitality sector and, potentially, cost our economy millions of pounds. Modernisation of the antiquated licensing laws is long overdue. Given the difficulties facing the sector in Northern Ireland, it could be a welcome boost to the sector, and to the local economy, when we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Modern licensing laws, intelligently implemented, could alleviate problems, as well as revive the night-time economy of our provincial towns and villages. My colleague from Lagan Valley will speak in the debate with passion and vigour. I am sure that he will refer to Lagan Valley and bring his experience to that.

When considering changes to licensing regulations, it is important to acknowledge that alcohol misuse has been identified as a significant public health and social issue in Northern Ireland over many years. On average, 2,500 people are treated each year for alcohol abuse, with one in six admissions to A&E being as a result of alcohol misuse. The Bill covers a broad range of areas, from Easter opening to the introduction of a producer's licence. No doubt, many who wish to input to the Bill, or who wish to see amendments to it, will take part in the consultation. We invite them to lobby and to keep our in-boxes full and speak to the Committee.

It is vital that we get it right in alleviating the problems and that we implement the safeguards while supporting the industry. We support the Bill's progression to Committee Stage, and the Minister is correct to say that we need to strike the right balance.

Ms Armstrong: I thank the Minister for bringing the Bill to the House, and I confirm that the Alliance Party, of course, supports it.

I would like to thank Hospitality Ulster for some of these figures. The hospitality sector sustains 60,000 jobs, 40,000 of which are in tourism alone. Tourism delivers £750 million to the Northern Ireland economy, and food and drink accounts for more than 30% of visitor spend.

While the Assembly had targets to grow tourism income and the number of the jobs in the sector annually, unfortunately COVID-19 has caused catastrophe in the industry. Without the financial support provided through the furlough scheme, rates relief and other measures, many pubs and clubs would have closed, resulting in the loss of thousands of jobs across Northern Ireland. However, although we are in the grip of an economic crisis, we have to set aside the immediate concerns and create legislation fit for the future.

There is a lot to be grateful for in this legislation; there is a lot going forward and aiming for the future. The Alliance Party supports the increase in the number of late licences for pubs and clubs. We are delighted to see the changes to Easter opening times, which we have supported for some time. We welcome the clarification that school formals can remain on premises after 9.00 pm as long as alcohol is not served. I expect that there may be further debate about extended drinking-up time, given that it will mean people coming out of pubs and clubs as late as 3.00 am.

However, there are other aspects of the Bill that we will consider, and I look forward to doing so during the Committee Stage. For instance, one issue that has already been raised is the producer's licence. That licence does not allow local producers to sell produce from their own premises. Our current model inhibits the growth of local producers due to the fact that a licence on the private market can cost hundreds of thousands of pounds. That leaves publicans with no choice but to sign contracts with multi-national brands in exchange for financial incentives, cutting local producers out of the market and sending money out of the economy.

There is wide public support for local-producer taprooms, and we have all been approached by many people who would like to see them. Given that they are not currently legislated for, the only legal way for breweries to operate taprooms is by using occasional licences. Breweries acknowledge that that is not what occasional licences are designed for. That is the specific reason they are asking for the ability to obtain a producers' licence, and I am sure that they will come to the Committee to seek that. By using an occasional licence, a brewery can operate a taproom selling whatever drinks it likes and have the same closing time as pubs. I can certainly understand why pubs would be concerned about that. However, breweries are willing to compromise by selling only their own products and limiting their closing time to 11.00 pm.

Until 2016, national stadiums such as Windsor Park and the then Ravenhill rugby ground had to use an occasional licence for every fixture held at their ground. Hospitality Ulster argued that, because there was public demand for alcohol to be served at matches and occasional licences were not designed to be used in that way, a new category of licence should be created to allow national stadiums to serve alcohol at matches. That argument was successful, and a new category of licence was created. That is not dissimilar to what the breweries are seeking.

In Northern Ireland, 99% of beer sold is produced elsewhere. Building local brands will encourage more pubs to begin selling local beer on draught, keeping money and jobs in the local economy and increasing HMRC tax revenues. Local breweries already export the majority of their products. They cannot sell it on site, so they export. With Brexit looming, which may impact their export sales, they need a strong local market to enable them to invest in their employees and equipment in order to facilitate exports.

The nature of taprooms is that they are ancillary to the main purpose of breweries. It has been proven that breweries become less financially dependent on a taproom once they have established their brand in the local market, which the taproom allows them to do. We will look at that issue when it comes forward for further scrutiny.

One of the issues that has come up, and I have received an awful lot of communication about this, is the cost of buying a licence. I appreciate that that is not in the Bill. Private trade means that, while court costs for a licence remain within a few hundred pounds, the licence can be privately traded for five- or six-figure sums. That happens because of the number of licences available here. If anybody wants to buy a licence to open a new pub, they have to wait until someone else surrenders theirs. However, that person will have to compete with supermarkets or convenience stores to purchase that

licence. While I support competition, what has happened in Northern Ireland is that there has been the loss of local community pubs and an increase in off-sales.

Sixty-five per cent of alcohol may be drunk at home, and that may appear to suggest that selling alcohol through off-sales is the way to go. However, as has been raised here before by others, that means that the regulated, controlled environment of the pub is not there to protect and manage drinking. My colleague Paula Bradshaw MLA has said — indeed, Mark Durkan brought this up today — that we need to manage alcohol, and, indeed, we support minimum unit pricing of alcohol. We also support responsible drinking, as does the hospitality sector.

I am delighted to say that we support the Bill's Second Stage. The legislation is long overdue and is good. We look forward to its scrutiny. If amendments happen to come along, be they from the Minister, the Committee or whomever, we will look at those. I encourage the Department to consider the licence-surrender principle, if it is not in this legislation, because it is very concerning that we are losing our local community pubs to supermarkets and shops.

Thank you very much, Minister, for bringing forward the Bill. We are aiming for Easter, and, hopefully, with you, we will get the legislation through for Easter.

Mr Easton: The Bill has been brought forward because a similar Bill fell when the Assembly was dissolved in 2017. I will give some context to the Bill's introduction. A review of licensing legislation began in 2012, and it revealed that the problem of alcohol misuse in Northern Ireland was growing. The number of deaths related to alcohol consumption in recent years has been over 15% higher than that which was recorded just over a decade ago. That comes at a considerable cost to our economy and brings with it many social problems.

The hospitality industry has also raised concerns about licensing laws and feels that more could be done to support the sector. COVID-19 has obviously had a serious impact on the hospitality sector in recent times. Businesses have been forced to close, allowed to reopen and then asked to close again. Even when those businesses were allowed to open, they had to operate with a lower capacity to allow for social-distancing measures.

Whilst government support has been put in place for the sector, it is clear that that loss of revenue and the ongoing restrictions are causing many businesses to struggle.

The end of last year saw a follow-up consultation on licensing laws. The Department for Communities met interested groups, and there was general agreement among all the groups that there needed to be legislative changes on these issues. Given the ongoing pandemic, it is particularly important that the concerns of the hospitality sector be taken into account as we begin our economic recovery.

As a former member of the Health Committee, it is on those issues that I will focus most of my remarks. The Bill has significant implications for the health of our population. The interested health organisations that responded to the consultation expressed concern about prevalent excess drinking in the home. COVID-19 will have only exacerbated that problem and the potential harms that it can bring,

including domestic violence, cases of which, as we know, have risen during the pandemic.

The Bill aims to reduce the amount of alcohol that people purchase in supermarkets and off-licences. Clause 16 restricts the advertising of promotions and sales of alcoholic drinks to specific areas of the supermarket in which they are being sold. The clause seeks to deter individuals from purchasing more alcohol on a shopping trip than they had originally intended. For any company in breach of the new regulations, the Bill creates a fine of up to £1,000.

Clause 17 prohibits loyalty schemes and bonus points related to the sale of alcohol for all licensed premises. That will be punishable by a larger fine of up to £5,000. That should further serve to deter customers from purchasing excess alcohol, as they will receive no economic benefit from doing so.

Clause 15 concerns further policing access to alcohol. It states that self-service and vending machine options should be prohibited from selling alcohol, with some specific exemptions for vending machines in the likes of hotels that meet certain conditions. Self-service and vending machine options also allow easier access to alcohol for those under the age of 18, and the clause will ensure that a member of staff must have direct supervision of any sales that take place. Those measures may go some way to assisting the problem of excess alcohol consumption at home, which currently costs our economy around £900 million per year. However, that is clearly a complex issue, many of the solutions to which are beyond the scope of the Bill.

Health organisations also expressed concerns during the consultation about underage young people drinking. The Bill, therefore, seeks to restrict their access to alcohol in a number of ways. Clause 10 requires businesses that provide meals and sell alcohol to ensure that young people are accompanied by an adult and sit away from the bar. It also requires young people to leave premises by 9.00 pm or 9.30 pm depending on whether a meal is ordered.

Clause 11 establishes a fine for bars that host underage functions and fail to meet certain requirements, such as preventing access to the area of the premises that sells alcohol, or selling alcohol to an adult in the designated area of the underage function. The clause also inserts an amendment into the Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements Order to prevent gambling machines from being used in the area in which underage functions are taking place.

As for private functions in licensed premises, clause 12 provides that children must be accompanied by a parent, a meal must be served away from the bar area and no member of the public should have access to the private function area.

With the rise of online shopping, which has been further boosted by COVID-19, clause 13 introduces a fine of up to £5,000 and potential imprisonment of up to six months for licence holders or their staff who deliver alcohol to someone under the age of 18 at their home.

Part 2 of the Bill largely replicates the clauses from Part 1 of the Bill and applies them to sporting clubs. I would highlight that the lifting of advertising restrictions on private sporting club functions will help them to finance the

activities that they provide to their local communities and that would otherwise be unavailable. Those clubs clearly provide health and social benefits to local people and should be supported in recovering from COVID-19.

12.45 pm

In closing my remarks, I will touch briefly on the hospitality and small business sectors. The Bill allows for extended opening hours for the hospitality sector, which will also benefit the tourism industry as travel begins to open up in the aftermath of the pandemic. Additional revenue can also be gained from hosting underage functions under the strict conditions that are outlined in the Bill. That will be welcomed by a sector that has been badly hit by global events this year.

The Bill also provides for the introduction of producer licences for breweries and distilleries to allow them to sell their alcoholic products on their premises. That measure has received a great deal of support, and it will be a boost for those small businesses, particularly as they attempt to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr O'Dowd: I welcome the Second Stage of the Bill, when we speak broadly about its clauses. I wish the Committee all the best in its deliberations. I am sure that it will, quite rightly, be inundated with representations from a variety of sectors that are affected by the legislation.

Our society has a very difficult relationship with alcohol, dating back many centuries. Alcoholism has caused huge problems in family homes, in society and, as others mentioned, for the health service, and it has ruined many lives. The abuse of alcohol is something that we, as legislators, and society have to recognise. Nevertheless, we also have to say, in measured terms, how we will ensure that we create a responsible relationship with alcohol, and the Bill goes some way towards doing that.

We have to recognise that our society and the way in which people socialise and celebrate events in the calendar is changing. Easter, in particular, has changed over the past 20 or 25 years. I have reflected on a number of occasions in the Chamber that I used to work as a chef, and I also did many an hour behind a bar as a barman. That type of work gives you an interesting insight into human behaviour and the human mindset because you see the best and the worst in people.

In my socialising and in my work in the hotel and bar trade over many years, I have recognised one thing: a well-run bar, club or hotel is much more than simply a place where people go to consume alcohol. It is like a community within a community. When you have good bar staff and good owners of premises, people feel as if they are part of a community, particularly those who are elderly or lonely. People go round to their local for a bottle of stout or a whisky once a day, and that is their social event. That is where they go to socialise.

Much more importantly, however, a responsible bar owner and good bar staff listen and engage and become friends with their customers. They know their customers; they know when something is not right, and they offer a helping hand. That is why the proposals, whereby we have a responsible approach to alcohol and we have responsible bar owners, should allow us to push the boat out and extend our opening hours and the opportunities for venues to open longer, particularly on Easter Sunday.

The way in which families and individuals react to different events has changed. When I was working as a chef 20 or 25 years ago — maybe longer — you could take Easter Sunday off because it was a very quiet day. People did not go out as much to eat or maybe have a drink. I know that you cannot get Easter Sunday off nowadays because it is such a busy day in the hotel and restaurant trade. It is only right, then, that we have proper opening hours to reflect that and allow people to enjoy themselves and consume alcohol responsibly.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. Like him, I spent a large part of my life behind bars and some of it in front of them as well. I completely agree with what he said about the social benefit of pubs being incalculable. Does he agree that the structure of our licensing system is killing that in many ways? The structure of our system is creating incentives for small pubs to transfer licences to big supermarkets. That may not be for this Bill, but we need to look at it in the long term.

Mr O'Dowd: Yes, I was going to move on to that. I am deeply concerned about the changing trends in the growth of the off-licence sector and home drinking for a variety of reasons, but particularly because of the socialisation that happens in bars. When you are in a bar, your drinking habits are regulated. If you drink too much in a bar, the barman — trust me on this, because I was a barman — will put up with only so much before it is time for you to go home. However, in the house people may be drinking measures such as shorts, and they will tell you, for example, "I had three Bacardis last night", but they do not realise that the three Bacardis were actually triple measures. The drinks are not being measured using an optic. That is deeply worrying.

While this is not the responsibility of the Executive yet, I favour a method of having higher taxation on off-licences and perhaps lowering the taxation on bars in order to shift that trend.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. My intervention is in the same vein. I am glad that you mentioned in detail the societal harms of alcohol consumption. With two thirds of all alcohol sold being consumed in the home, it is, indeed, worrying that that is an unregulated environment. Clause 16 limits supermarket advertising, and, like me, I am sure that the Member welcomes that measure. Will you agree that, worryingly, the failure to regulate and limit digital advertising is a missed opportunity and is something that the Committee could take hold of? In the day and age in which we live, a lot of the information consumed by people is via Facebook, social media interactions and digital communication, and if we are trying to solve the advertising problem in supermarkets, we must also regulate advertising in the digital market.

Mr O'Dowd: That is something that the Committee should look at; we have to look at all modern forms of advertising.

I want to draw my remarks to a close before the 1.00 pm break. I will move on through them quickly. I welcome that automatic and self-service dispensers are going to be made illegal. They are an abomination that go against the principles that we talked about, such as good bar staff, good bar owners and socialisation. Self-service tills should also be removed from shops, in my opinion, because they do away with jobs and with that socialisation.

I also welcome the relaxation for the microbreweries and producers of alcohol. In a previous intervention, my colleague from Upper Bann mentioned cider and beer producers in the constituency, and that will be a welcome development. I know that there will be further discussions about how far that measure should go and what the other elements will be. However, that is a very welcome recognition of an industry with growth and tourism potential, and it will be of benefit to our economy moving forward.

The other thing that I want to mention before I end is that the staff who work on these premises are usually low-paid and are sometimes, but not always, on zero-hours contracts. That is not the responsibility of the Minister. However, the industry has to recognise that, if the Assembly passes the legislation and gives it more opening hours and better opportunities to promote businesses, it has to look after the staff. The industry has to look after the bar staff, waiters, waitresses and all the other people who are required to run it. The industry has to ensure that the staff are properly paid and looked after, particularly if they are working into the early hours. That has to be recognised, and the industry has to take that on board. I will draw my remarks to a close on that point.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Members, the Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I, therefore, propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Questions to the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The debate will resume after Question Time, and the next Member scheduled to speak is Matthew O'Toole.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 12.54 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Speaker: Questions 1 and 3 have been withdrawn.

Climate Change Act

2. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the delivery of a Climate Change Act to give environmental targets a strong legal underpinning, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA). (AQO 994/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I am currently finalising a discussion document consultation on a future Northern Ireland climate change Bill that I will publish in the next number of weeks. A climate change Bill for Northern Ireland must be given proper thought and consultation to ensure that the measures that we take are appropriate and will deliver benefits and that we allow business time to adjust to a new way of working and, where necessary, provide financial support.

I have written to the independent expert UK Climate Change Committee (CCC) for advice on what would be our equitable contribution to the UK's net zero emissions target. I want to consider that information to ensure that our emissions reduction targets are credible and evidence-based. Unfortunately, the CCC will not be 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.

I will consider the responses from the discussion document consultation on a future Northern Ireland climate change Bill along with the advice provided by the CCC and then present my findings to the Northern Ireland Executive to agree a way forward.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his response. What is the Environment Minister's timescale for the enactment of a climate change Act? Would it not be better for him to add his support to the passage of the cross-party climate change private Member's Bill?

Mr Poots: The lifetime of this Assembly.

No, it would not be, because rushed legislation is not normally good legislation, as the Member well knows. We are going about the process correctly. There will be a public consultation, which you normally do before you introduce legislation. Legislating without consultation is not good practice. It does not give the respect to the public that should be given. I will bring forward legislation that has been appropriately and correctly carried out, as opposed to the rushed legislation that he appears to back.

Mr McGuigan: The North is the only jurisdiction in these islands that does not have a climate Bill. Given that you, Minister, said in the Assembly two months ago that your

officials would begin work to scope out the options for climate change legislation, surely you are in a position to give a definitive time frame to the Assembly.

Mr Poots: The time frame is that we are close to having a consultation document ready and we will then go to public consultation. You take a decision after you publicly consult, not before. That gives the public some credibility. We will consult with the intention of proceeding with a climate change Act, but let us consult the public on it and do the thing appropriately, as opposed to ignoring what the public have to say.

Ms Hunter: Does the Minister agree that it is crucial that environmental targets are given a strong legal underpinning and that it is vital that we do all that we can to prevent coastal erosion in areas such as the north coast?

Mr Poots: Coastal erosion is a significant issue. It is probably an issue of even greater significance in County Down than County Antrim, but nonetheless we have a beautiful coastline that needs to be protected. That is a course of work that we are currently doing, and we will continue to support other organisations and provide our own qualitative work.

In terms of underpinning, we need to set targets that are reasonable and achievable and that will make a difference. We do not have to wait for a climate change Act to do some of that. For example, we are looking at targets at the moment of 65% recycling, which would be an increase on the 50% that we have achieved ahead of schedule. I would like to push that to 70%. The UK position is 65%. We have already overstepped our target on renewable energy. We were to produce 20% by 2020, but we are well over 40%; I think that it is around 45%.

I want to see that percentage go upwards still. We could be setting a target of 70% for renewable energy.

Those are all things that are achievable and will make a real difference, and that is what is important. An Act in and of itself is fine. I have no issues with having an Act, but an Act alone will not achieve those things unless we set ourselves targets that we fulfil. History tells us that we have been fulfilling targets, and we will set targets that we will fulfil going forward as well.

Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

4. **Mr Hilditch** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what progress has been made in reviewing the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. (AQO 996/17-22)

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. The Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act relates to a range of policy areas — gating orders, vehicles, litter, graffiti, dogs, noise and statutory nuisances — relevant to both clean neighbourhoods and the environment. Those policy areas are the responsibility of a number of Departments, including my Department and the Department for Infrastructure.

I can confirm that, although my Department has no plans to undertake a formal review of its sections of the Act in the foreseeable future, the issues of litter and dog fouling will be considered in DAERA's forthcoming draft environmental strategy for Northern Ireland. The strategy

will consider options for tackling those ongoing problems in the future and include the outcome of the current review of fixed penalty notices for litter and dog-fouling offences.

Part 7 of the Act relates to statutory nuisances. Sections 63 and 65 give district councils the power to deal with noise from premises, including land, that they consider to be prejudicial to health or amounts to a statutory nuisance. Where a council is satisfied that a nuisance exists, sections 63 and 65 require the district council to serve an abatement notice. There are no plans to amend the legislation at present. My officials, however, are in communication with the Department of Justice following its earlier consultation on antisocial behaviour. The Department for Infrastructure has confirmed that it has no current plans to review any legislation linked to the Act.

Mr Hilditch: I welcome the Minister's answer. I understand, of course, that enforcement of such a wide-ranging Act falls to local government. That is where I believe that things fall down, however, so I would welcome anything coming forward by way of any new Act. Is there any way in which the Minister can see better working happening with councils, which are the enforcers? Their record on enforcement over the past couple of years has been very poor.

Mr Poots: I am very keen that the legislation be properly and well enforced. I brought it forward when I was Environment Minister. We therefore want to see benefits arising from it. We will look at certain issues around fixed penalty notices for litter and dog fouling in the environmental strategy, and potentially in a new environment Bill. Hopefully, we can strengthen any legislation that needs strengthened in that form.

Ms Mullan: Minister, dog fouling is a blight on our neighbourhoods. In an area of my constituency, we have particular issues with rodents, which apparently feed off it. Are you considering making it mandatory for dog owners, of which I am one, to carry litter bags or appliances for removing foul when out walking their dog?

Mr Poots: I have not given that thought at this time, but, as part of the environment strategy, we will certainly consult on how we can further strengthen issues around dog fouling. Dogs are the most wonderful pets, and those of us who have them are very privileged to have them. Having a dog comes with a responsibility, however, and people have a responsibility to ensure that they clean up after their dog. It is as simple as that.

Mr Catney: Minister, I hope that you will agree with me that an independent environmental protection agency would be the most appropriate body to monitor the implementation of the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act.

Mr Poots: I am not sure whether you have informed local councils that you intend to take powers away from them and whether your local councillors will accept that. If the SDLP wishes to accept that as its policy, I will be happy to hear about it in due course.

Mr Beggs: One area that the Minister mentioned as being covered by the Act is abandoned vehicles, and vehicles being worked on in the street etc. In a number of locations in my constituency, that is problematic. Local neighbourhoods are blighted by such businesses working on footpaths and on the street, leaving oil and abandoned vehicles that cause difficulties for other residents who want

to park. The current legislation is not working, and I ask the Minister to review that particular aspect of it.

Mr Poots: I am happy to look at it. However, the legislation was brought out, in the first instance, to give councils the powers to deal with those issues. If there is a weakness in the legislation, that is one thing. If there is a weakness in the implementation, that is another thing. We need to identify which it is: the legislation or the implementation of it.

Environmental Protection and Governance

5. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what consideration is being given to cross-border cooperation on environmental protection and governance as new arrangements are established following the end of the transition period. (AQO 997/17-22)

Mr Poots: At the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) environment sectoral meeting on 21 October, I made a commitment to work with my counterpart, Minister Ryan, within the NSMC structures to address environmental issues to our mutual benefit. We agreed that our Departments would continue to cooperate to deliver tangible environmental improvements in Northern Ireland and Ireland, both now and after the end of the transition period.

Cross border cooperation will continue, following the end of the transition period, on a wide range of environmental issues, including water quality, international river basin management, bathing water status, blue flag beaches, marine strategy, waste crime, air quality and EU funding.

Subject to the approval of the Assembly, the environment Bill will establish the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) in Northern Ireland to perform the environmental oversight role currently undertaken by the European Commission. The OEP will be permitted to share information, where appropriate or necessary, with certain bodies outside the UK that have functions in connection with the protection of the natural environment. This will enable it to share information with, for example, the European Commission on transboundary issues. Any arrangements will take account of current North/South governance.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for the information provided on North/South cooperation. Can I ask about east-west cooperation? What action is being undertaken by the Department to ensure that Northern Ireland is included fully in UK Government consideration of post-transition period planning? I ask that because it became clear recently, as the Minister is aware, that Northern Ireland has not been included in impact assessments carried out for emissions trading schemes for the future.

Mr Poots: We are having a debate later on emissions trading schemes. I have concerns about significant issues in relation to the current emissions trading scheme. We will have two emissions trading schemes, one UK, the other EU. So, because we are still in the single electricity market, the generators, which account for 82% of carbon trading, will probably be in the European scheme, whilst other industries will be in the UK scheme.

The issue that I have is that, in 2018, Northern Ireland paid £65 million of carbon tax into the scheme. We have been paying those sorts of sums for many years but have not

been able to draw down funding from that source because only three schemes in a country can benefit. The UK had three larger schemes, which were the beneficiaries of it. We pay all this carbon tax, but we get no support from that scheme to reduce our carbon emissions. The scheme is flawed in that sense. However, I will request that Northern Ireland be deemed a country, once the UK leaves the European Union, because we are still contributing to the scheme. It may work to our advantage if we can have three significant schemes to bid for at that point.

Ms Sheerin: I thank the Minister for his answers thus far. Given that we live on an island that has its own environmental landscape and unique characteristics, none of which is affected by the boundary on the island, does the Minister agree that all-island cooperation and coordination on environmental issues is vital?

Mr Poots: I do not get too hung up on politics when it comes to these types of things. Whether as Health Minister, or previously as Environment Minister, I have always worked well with colleagues from south of the border on interests that align mutually to both parties. Other people sometimes want to play politics with the North/South stuff; I just get on with it.

Mr O'Toole: I am glad to hear that the Minister is getting on with it, and, hopefully, we can all get on with a deal and implementation of the protocol.

In relation to that, dairy producers here say that, if the UK crashes out of the transition period without a deal, we will not be able to process at least 35% — possibly more — of the milk produced in Northern Ireland. What is the Minister doing to prevent that cataclysmic set of circumstances for our dairy farmers?

2.15 pm

Mr Poots: I have been asked by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Minister to produce papers that they will take significant account of in their negotiations, and we are doing that around a potential means of dealing with the problems that have arisen from the protocol. It is incredibly important that we achieve that and that the European Union recognises that Northern Ireland could be damaged as a consequence of the protocol. There is a trading scheme that we could have for the dairy sector. Worryingly, the red meat sector imports around £250 million of beef each year for further processing. That supports around 1,000 jobs here, particularly in mid-Ulster. Because of the protocol, that business has the potential to be lost.

I have been working closely with the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA), for example, and other organisations in devising a means to overcome those issues, but we need the European Union to work with the people of Northern Ireland to ensure that Northern Ireland plc, jobs and consumers are not damaged. Nonsense such as every supermarket having to put export health certificates on each item in a lorry will lead to thousands of pounds or, in some instances, tens of thousands being added to a lorryload of goods that will end up in the like of Iceland, Asda, Sainsbury's or Tesco. The consequence of that is that we will likely lose some of those businesses from Northern Ireland, and there will be the consequent job losses and a potential loss of goods that people want to buy from the shelves. A lot of businesses in GB are talking about pulling out of the Northern Ireland market because

of the protocol. As it stands, the protocol is extremely damaging, but it can be remedied if the European Union cooperates with us to do so.

Basic Payment Scheme

6. Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the administration of the basic payment scheme. (AQO 998/17-22)

Mr Poots: Northern Ireland farmers are receiving their full direct payments in one lump sum this year. Payments began to issue on Friday, 16 October 2020, with 94% of payments totalling £265.7 million going out on the first day. By the end of the first week, payments had increased to 97% — £275.5 million. Payment letters are being issued by post but can also be viewed online at DAERA online services. My officials are continuing to verify the remaining claims and issue payments as a matter of urgency. In addition, they have developed a new online claim tracking service so that farmers can track the progress of their direct payments.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Minister for his response. Will the Minister indicate whether farmers are entitled to a reimbursement of the financial discipline deducted from the 2019 scheme? If so, when will that reimbursement be made to farmers?

Mr Poots: We can, and we will. That happened last year, and we hope to be in a position to do it by the end of this year. The reimbursement of the financial discipline deducted from the 2019 scheme year payments will be done as a separate payment. We do not know the exact date, but we managed to do it for December last year, and we hope to achieve that this year.

Mr McCrossan: What financial commitments has the Minister sought from the British Government to maintain the current level of support for farmers after the transition period?

Mr Poots: I have sought those commitments verbally and in writing, and I raised them yesterday with George Eustice at the inter-ministerial group (IMG) meeting. We will continue to argue to ensure that Northern Ireland's envelope remains the same as it has been.

Mr McAleer: I commend the Minister and the Department for getting 94% of the payments out through the door on 16 October. That is a great result. It will be welcomed by the farming and rural community. When does the Minister envisage any changes being made to the basic payment regime following the transition period?

Mr Poots: There will be modest changes next year such as the greening requirement no longer being applied. I am also looking at offering some sort of support for the growing of protein crops. Protein crops can divert the requirement to import protein from countries where environmental practice may not be quite as good as ours happens to be. Protein crops can also contribute to taking nitrogen out of the atmosphere and reduce nitrogen deposition going into our peatlands. However, I would like to do something more comprehensive in the following year. That will be based on ensuring that production is supported and that high environmental standards are applied, so that we can ensure that agriculture plays its part in reducing damage to the environment. There is work

that can be done there. That will provide support to people who are taking significant environmental steps. It will be beneficial, particularly in the hill areas. I will be interested to hear the views of the Member and colleagues on that. I have no doubt that there will be significant change, but I think that the change will be measured towards what we actually want to achieve. What we want to achieve is continued growth in agriculture and continued reduction of the impact of agriculture on the environment.

Mullaghglass Landfill Site

7. **Mr Carroll** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the action taken to address the odours emanating from the Mullaghglass landfill site. (AQO 999/17-22)

10. **Ms Flynn** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department is responsible for regulating Mullaghglass landfill site under a waste management licence. (AQO 1002/17-22)

Mr Poots: With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will take questions 7 and 10 together.

I have been advised by officials from the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) that 13 additional gas extraction wells have been installed in the active area of the landfill. The work was completed on 16 October 2020. The additional wells have now been connected to the gas extraction system. The site gas engineer is currently working on-site to optimise gas extraction from the new wells. It may take a few weeks to fully optimise the gas extraction system, as it is important to prevent the ingress of oxygen to the landfill gas management system. NIEA inspectors will continue to check the site and to monitor for odours in the Colin area regularly to assess the effectiveness of the additional gas extraction.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for his answer. I am happy to be corrected, but my understanding is that the NIEA has not been on-site to investigate concerns. I am happy for him to elaborate on that. Given that 104 concerns about the Mullaghglass site have been raised by residents this year already, which is a fivefold increase from 2018, and given the health concerns raised repeatedly by residents in Lagmore, Mount Eagles and west Belfast more generally, what assurances can the Minister give them that their health is not at risk from potential pollution or noxious gases coming from the site?

Mr Poots: The Mullaghglass landfill site is currently assessed as being non-compliant with the pollution prevention and control permit. The NIEA has directed the operator to take action and to implement new measures to address the odour nuisance. The planned installation of the additional gas extraction wells in the active area of the site was brought forward from November to September. Site works to install the new gas wells were completed on 16 October, and, as I said, it may take a few weeks for that to be optimised. On completion of the current site works, NIEA will require the landfill operator to review its odour management plan and to plan the installation of future gas wells to minimise the risk of further odour nuisance in the Colin area. Since August 2020, NIEA has conducted 14 site inspections and odour checks in the Colin area in response to the complaints from local residents.

Ms Flynn: We have held meetings with the NIEA on the issue over the past number of months, so I am aware that it has been doing work with the Mullaghglass site. I know that the site is not expected to close until December 2021. Apart from the gas wells and the work that is being done around those, are there any long-term plans in place to deal with the odours? I speak not just as the MLA for the area but as a resident of the Colin. The odours are extremely unpleasant to live with. I know that work is being done, and we are due to meet the NIEA again in December. However, aside from the gas wells, are there any plans that you can put in place?

Mr Poots: NIEA has been looking at a number of odour sources and reports of different types of smells across the Colin area, and the inspectors for the regulated sites in the area have initiated joint inspections to further establish what odours are affecting different parts of the Colin area. They have also been sharing information closely with the relevant environmental health officers in Belfast City Council and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council. I know that they met you and Councillor Magennis earlier, and they will continue to cooperate with you and with all other public representatives who have concerns about the issue.

Mr Catney: My question is to do with the Mullaghglass site, Minister. Do you have any plans to prosecute those who are responsible? There may well be historic sites there, but there must also be some dumping going on that is creating those odours.

Mr Poots: Unfortunately, fly-tipping takes place in the Belfast hills, and that is hugely unfortunate because it is a beautiful part of the world. We need to ensure that councils offer services, and it is important that council sites are open to take the materials. Ensuring that councils can collect heavy goods, such as settees and so forth, from people's houses is important, because people sometimes pay somebody else to do it, and those individuals then unscrupulously dump the materials. Some companies are not engaging correctly, and we need to ensure that we pursue those people. We will need to ensure that companies work with us to eliminate the problems, and that work is being done.

COVID-19: Fishing Industry

8. **Miss McIlveen** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how his Department has assisted the fishing industry during COVID-19. (AQO 1000/17-22)

Mr Poots: On 3 April 2020, I announced a temporary support package for the sea fisheries sector that was geared to cover 50% of a fishing vessel's costs for three months from March to May 2020, provided genuine losses had accrued as a direct result of the pandemic. The aim of the scheme was to get support on the ground as soon as possible as a result of the total loss of markets. In total, £1.32 million has been paid out through the scheme to 171 fishing vessel owners. Approximately £1.02 million has been provided to over-10-metre vessels and £300,000 to vessels of 10 metres and under.

On 26 May, I announced a support scheme for Northern Ireland aquaculture undertakings that had incurred financial losses through lost markets from March to May inclusive. Up to £360,000 was made available to the sector. In total, 19 aquaculture businesses were invited

to apply for support, the level of which was based on the income forgone as a result of COVID-19 from 1 March to 31 May. Fifteen applications were received, and 15 offers of financial assistance were made, with 14 accepted. To date, £83,600 has been paid to 13 eligible applicants, and a further £13,000 of support is being processed for the remaining two applicants. The initial level of support that was anticipated to have been required was overestimated, as the figures supplied by business owners were not, in many cases, as large as originally indicated.

More recently, on 5 October, I announced a further £1.7 million financial support package for the sea fisheries catching sector, which continues to be impacted by lost markets as a result of COVID-19. The support package is to deliver a £1.31 million temporary cessation scheme under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund for trawlers and dredgers and is currently open to applications. Invitation letters were issued to owners of 111 vessels, and, to date, 76 applications have been received to the value of £956,000. A £390,000 fixed cost scheme for static fishers will be open to applications in early November 2020. Under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund, I am also working with my officials to provide a £336,000 support package to the Lough Neagh fishermen.

Miss McIlveen: I welcome the Minister's response. We can all agree that this is a challenging time for the fishing industry. Can the Minister outline how the support compares with that in other regions, and, in addition to that, can he detail the steps that he is taking to ensure that any Brexit dividend in respect of additional landings is proportionately distributed across the United Kingdom and that the Portavogie fishermen get their fair share?

2.30 pm

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for the question. First, that was the quickest and most generous of the packages that was offered anywhere on these islands. Secondly, in thinking about how we go forward, we need to ensure that we get our share of the additional fishing. It is great that we have the opportunity to bid for it. We have been restricted for so many years in the number of fish that we can catch whilst others have utilised our waters and the fish in them, so I want to ensure that people in Portavogie, Ardglass, Kilkeel and all others in Northern Ireland get their fair crack of the whip after so many years of not having it.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move to 15 minutes of topical questions. Question 4 has been withdrawn.

Border Control Checks: Update

T1. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, following his recent answer to her question about checks at border control posts, in which he confirmed that such checks would be performed by EU Commission experts, for an update on that, given that we are only 58 days from the end of the transition period. (AQT 601/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am glad to say that the people who will check at the points of entry are vets and environmental health officers from Northern Ireland who are provided by our Department and by local authorities.

Ms Anderson: Minister, I remind you that your Department will be making arrangements to comply with official control regulations in order to ensure that controls can be performed by Commission experts in accordance with article 116 of the Irish protocol. Minister, do you not agree or even understand that some people feel that you are behaving more like a Brexiteer than a Minister?

Mr Poots: I assure the Member that I am a Brexiteer and that I am also a Minister. There are others who will oppose Brexit and will be Ministers, and they are perfectly entitled to do that. The reality for the Member is that we are leaving the European Union. That is done and dusted. On 31 December 2021, the implementation period will be over.

I oppose the points of entry. I always have. The protocol brings huge problems to us. Nonetheless, it is an imposition that has been placed upon us. We will provide the appropriate personnel and will seek to reduce any invasion whatsoever by the number of inspections that need to take place and minimise those as much as possible in order to retain normal business relations with key customers and suppliers. I see absolutely no point in creating barriers between us and our key markets and, indeed, our key suppliers. All that that will do is cause job losses in Northern Ireland and cost consumers more money. If the Member wishes to have that, stand up and say it. I do not.

Anaerobic Digester Plants: Planning Permission

T2. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after thanking him for an answer that she received to a priority question for written answer, in which he confirmed that anaerobic digester (AD) plants that treat agricultural waste must have planning permission in place before his Department will issue a waste management licence, to state whether any waste management licences have been issued retrospectively and whether any AD plants that treat agri-waste are operating without planning permission. (AQT 602/17-22)

Mr Poots: The answer to that question is quite clear. If you establish an anaerobic digester prior to having planning permission, you will not get your waste management licence. If you get your planning permission retrospectively, you can apply for your waste management licence.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for not answering the question. Further to that, we know from your stats, Minister, that in some of our special areas of conservation, ammonia levels breach our current regulations by up to 350%, year-on-year. That is exacerbated by those AD plants at times. What enforcement or regulation powers does his Department have to take action?

Mr Poots: It is interesting that the Member is against green energy from taking materials like animal waste and slurry and turning that into gas, which can then be used for electricity in people's homes and businesses. It is an interesting line that the Green Party is opposed to green energy in that instance.

We can go down blind alleys with ammonia, or we can actually tackle the problem. We have an ammonia strategy that will be ready to launch in the very near future, and we will be able to reduce ammonia levels significantly. Nobody

has done that up until now. That has not happened up to this point. However, it will happen under this Minister.

Rural Areas: Replacement Funding

T3. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given that he will be aware of recent correspondence from the Finance Minister to the Chair of the Finance Committee, which was shared with the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, that highlighted concerns with how replacement funding will be calculated, in that it could result in a cut in funding for rural communities, to state whether his Department has assessed that and the impact that it might have on local areas. (AQT 603/17-22)

Mr Poots: Yes. The Treasury has indicated that it thinks it can take £34 million that was previously identified for us. We are contesting that. The figure is slightly less in Scotland per head of population, and significantly greater in Wales. As I understand, it is happening in England as well. We all need to oppose that. Scottish and Welsh colleagues and I have written to the appropriate Ministers at Westminster. We are seeking a meeting with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to ensure that this money is actually paid.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his answer. Recently, we also learned that there has been little or no progress on the shared prosperity fund. Has the Minister any assessment of that? What is his general assessment of the British Government's commitment to replacing the EU funding that will be lost here as a result of leaving the EU?

Mr Poots: There is no indication from any other source that there is a problem. That is money that had not been spent, but would have been spent by 2023. My Department would argue that it has acted prudently in the distribution of that funding and is being punished as a consequence. As I indicated, Wales is suffering even worse as a result. We will continue to argue strongly for that particular funding. However, there is no indication of a problem elsewhere.

Farm Business Investment Scheme

T5. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how the recently announced farm business investment scheme will continue to reduce emissions and increase the nutrient uptake. (AQT 605/17-22)

Mr Poots: One element of the new farm business investment scheme is that we will give additional points to people who are covering tanks or buying equipment that has low emission spreading applied to it. That in itself will help with the ammonia problem that Ms Bailey raised earlier. We intend to run that course over the next number of years — not just that; we will add to it going forward. A consequence of that is that more nutrients will get to the area where they need to go, fewer will go into the atmosphere, and, in conjunction with a course of work on soil sampling that we intend to introduce at a later point, farmers will have a better knowledge of what exactly their fields need. That should bring about a further reduction in emissions and, indeed, savings for farmers in reducing the amount of inorganic fertilisers that they acquire to augment the nutrients that they have on farm.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his answer. He indicated that the Department intends to roll that out in future years. Does he envisage that there will be more of a financial increase per year? Obviously, a lot of the equipment on farms is tired — I will use that terminology — and not up to modern standards. Therefore, does he see that figure increasing yearly?

Mr Poots: We could always do with a bit more money, so I will be looking to colleagues in the Department of Finance to assist us. We want to make Northern Ireland carbon-neutral by 2050. Agriculture needs to make its contribution. It will therefore need support in order to arrive at that point. The agriculture industry is involved in carbon sequestration, and that is an important element of it. On the one hand, we reduce and lower emissions. On the other, we increase carbon sequestration on farms. In that way, we can make a real impact on the environment for the good.

Irish Sea Border: Infrastructure

T6. **Mr Allister** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to state whether he can yet lift the veil of secrecy and update the House on the infrastructure for an Irish Sea border that his Department is providing at our ports and to outline where and when that documentation can be inspected. (AQT 606/17-22)

Mr Poots: I believe that we have permissions back on two sites and will have the third one back this week. As soon as they receive that, I have instructed officials to make them available to any Member who may wish to have them.

Mr Allister: To date, there has been a refusal to release them at council and departmental level. It will be good to see them in due course. Can the Minister tell us, as he builds the gallows for the Union at Larne, whether he has the support of the Member of Parliament for East Antrim?

Mr Poots: The Member of Parliament for East Antrim and I take the same position. We do not want to see those facilities. We do not desire those facilities. It is an imposition that has been applied to us through a negotiation between the Prime Minister and the European Union that introduced the Northern Ireland protocol. We are totally opposed to the Northern Ireland protocol, because it has significant potential to damage Northern Ireland. The Member of Parliament for East Antrim and I share that view.

Lough Neagh Fishing Community

T7. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on what was discussed when she met with him in the summer about the situation with Lough Neagh and its fishing community and, subsequently, the response to a question for written answer that she received in September, in which he said that he was committed to providing a package of support for the Lough Neagh fishermen and fisherwomen. (AQT 607/17-22)

Mr Poots: We had to take legal advice on the distribution of funding. That advice has been received, and we are now in a position to move forward. I hope that, over the next number of weeks, we will be able to indicate to the fishermen on the ground what is available to them.

Ms Sheerin: Thank you, Minister. That is welcome news. Can you confirm what engagement you have had with the fishing community at Lough Neagh?

Mr Poots: I received a lot of communication from them, and we responded to it. I have not met them personally, but I am happy to meet people if they require it. We have the funding set aside, however, and I hope that my fisheries division, which has been engaging closely with the community, will be in a position to move forward, with my authority.

Mr Speaker: The next named Members on the list are not in their seats. That therefore concludes topical questions to the Minister. I ask Members to take their ease while we prepare the Chamber for questions to the Minister for Communities.

2.45 pm

Communities

Sports Clubs: Financial Assistance

1. **Mr McNulty** asked the Minister for Communities, given the restrictions announced by the Executive on 14 October 2020 to prohibit all indoor sport and non-elite outdoor sports, to outline any new support packages she plans to introduce to assist financially sports clubs and organisations. (AQO 1008/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): I thank the Member for his question. I recognise that the latest health regulations, which came into operation on 16 October, have had a significant impact across all sports at a time when they already face significant challenges. I understand that sports governing bodies, and their clubs, find themselves facing serious financial pressures and that they now have to contend with the latest restrictions, which have had an impact.

When I met senior representatives from the governing bodies and sporting organisations last week, I recognised the need for the new restrictions to curb the escalating transmission rates and the impact that they will have on sports. As a result, I made a bid to the Executive for a significant financial package, which was immediately supported. I was able to announce last week that the bid was approved by the Executive, as part of the October monitoring round, and that work has started on putting together a scheme to ensure that the £15 million that I have secured is distributed quickly across the sector to sustain the governing bodies and their clubs.

Mr McNulty: I thank the Minister for her answer. With regard to the financial hardship being experienced by GAA clubs across this island, does the Minister think that it is unfair and inappropriate to ask the GAA to pay more than its legal obligation of £15 million towards Casement Park and to do so on a television programme? Was that a party position, an agreed Executive position, or a solo run?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member should know that any funding arrangement with my Department and the GAA will be an ongoing discussion. It is not the first time that that has been said in public, so I am surprised that the Member is surprised. I assure him and, indeed, members across the GAA family, that Casement Park will be built. It took

an awful long time for planning to come through, and it has been awarded. I hope that it succeeds to the point where I can present a final business case to my Executive colleagues, but mainly the Minister of Finance, and that we get all the money needed to deliver Casement Park. It is unacceptable that Gaelic games do not have a home that is fit for purpose in the 21st century.

Mr Buckley: I welcome the support packages that have been provided to clubs and, now that planning permission has been approved for Casement Park, attention now rightly turns to funding. With a shortfall of £33 million, I am delighted that the Minister has accepted the reality that additional contributions must come from the GAA to fulfil that commitment. Will the Minister please outline the discussion that she has had with the GAA, and the potential funding allocation that she will require to progress the stadium?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The bulk of the money will come from the Executive; I give the Member that assurance. The GAA and the redevelopment of Casement Park were held back for a number of reasons, mainly planning. There is a massive shortfall. We do not know what that is yet, but we need to meet it. For the Executive to meet that shortfall, I need to bring proposals forward. They are being discussed, developed and worked on as we speak.

Mr Lyttle: Minister, what evidence is her Department and the Executive considering with regard to the impact of grassroots youth sports on the transmission of COVID-19?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have asked for an update from Sport NI on that. I spoke to the governing bodies last week — there were more than 70 of them. It was not a detailed discussion, as such, but it is clear that our sporting and governing bodies are doing everything that they can to ensure that young people can play and train safely. If that means that we need to bring in further supports for those bodies to allow training in a safe environment, that is what we will do. That is part of the £15 million investment into sports clubs. I have asked for something similar, but I will include the Member's question on the list to Sport NI and bring that back to him.

Welfare Mitigations: Primary Legislation

2. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister for Communities when she will introduce primary legislation on welfare mitigations. (AQO 1009/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. In line with the commitment set out in the New Decade, New Approach deal, I can confirm that I intend to introduce new primary legislation that will allow for an extension of welfare mitigation payments to those people affected by the bedroom tax. A draft Bill on the matter has been shared with Executive colleagues, and it remains my intention to secure agreement to proceed with that as soon as possible. New regulations to extend other mitigation schemes have been prepared, and I hope to bring those before the Assembly shortly after the Bill is introduced.

I would like to use this opportunity to highlight that mitigation payments continue to be made to those who are eligible under the sole authority of the Budget (No. 2) Act, as agreed with the Department of Finance. Those contingency arrangements are being kept under review, and, if required, I can extend them.

Mr Catney: Thank you for your answer, Minister. We need to try to help as best as we possibly can through our constituency offices. The Minister indicated at a hearing with the Committee for Communities on 30 September that dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic has understandably meant that other policy areas have received less attention. However, I hope that the Minister recognises that the 89,000 additional claimants for universal credit are largely related to the pandemic and that getting the new mitigations agreed and legislated for should be the Executive's priority. Hopefully, that will happen before Christmas.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. By way of an update, my Department is, as we speak, recruiting hundreds of staff to support the increase in claimants that we have already seen. That increase happened even before the furlough scheme was due to end and before it was extended. It is not that this proposal has not received the attention that it is due, but there have been other things, such as the statement on housing policy, which took us quite some time to bring forward. However, this is one of those issues that we deal with on a daily basis, and I just want to give the Member that assurance.

Mr Sheehan: Can the Minister advise the House whether the new mitigations legislation will provide much-needed protections for those who lost out as a result of moving to universal credit?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The new legislation will look at all the welfare mitigation schemes and will include changes to the so-called bedroom tax. I am looking at the benefit cap mitigation schemes that are currently available to people on universal credit. I am also looking at providing additional investment in the contingency fund. As well as that, I have added more money into the discretionary payment fund. There was a lot of talk about the British Government's COVID isolation scheme. We already have that here; Deirdre Hargey brought it in in March. Unlike the British Government's scheme, ours is not limited to £250 a week and it is not time-bound.

Ms Armstrong: I want to ask the Minister whether her mitigations will include payments or give people fast-track access to PIP in advance of DWP taking that forward at Westminster.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am currently looking at that, particularly given the debate that we had about the special rules for terminal illness (SRTI). So, I am looking at it. As you know, once you go on to SRTI, you get fast tracked anyway. Deirdre Hargey's intention was to bring PIP and Capita into DFC. The outcome of that, hopefully, will be the provision of a completely seamless process. Anybody relying on those benefits is already vulnerable and needs our support. What they do not need is us, as a Government and an Administration, making them go through additional hoops that set them back. No one wants that, so I am currently looking at what can be done.

Conversion Therapy

3. **Ms Rogan** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the abolition of conversion therapy. (AQO 1010/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you for the question. As I have said before, so-called conversion therapy is an abhorrent and inhuman practice that aims to change a person's sexual

orientation or gender identity. It is widely opposed by many, including the United Nations, human rights experts and health professionals, on the basis that it is, in their words, a form of torture.

In September this year, I met Ministers Long and Swann to share my commitment to ensuring that those harmful practices stop. As it is a cross-cutting matter, it will be taken forward in the development of the sexual orientation strategy that was outlined in NDNA. I also announced a timetable for the development of the social inclusion strategies. In support of those strategies, my officials met the Government Equalities Office in October to discuss the available data on conversion therapy, progress to date and timescales for a ban.

Ms Rogan: Will the Minister provide an update on the development of the sexual orientation strategy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The sexual orientation strategy, along with the other strategies, will be published in December 2021, subject to Executive approval. I have been really heartened and energised by the commitment of people in the sector, who are going to engage with departmental officials and others. They will bring the strategies forward, and I will consider them before presenting them to my colleagues. However, I am not waiting for the strategy to ban conversion therapy, and I will look to see what I can do in the interim. I will look to other legislators and other devolved institutions and Governments to see what they have done, and I will try to bring that forward as soon as possible.

Mr McGrath: Has the Minister had any discussions with the Charity Commission about the charitable status of certain registered charities in Northern Ireland that support and offer conversion therapy? If she has not had any such discussions with the Charity Commission, will she undertake to do so?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I have not had any discussions with the Charity Commission, but I certainly will do so. If the Member has examples of charities that do that, I would be happy to receive them because that needs to end.

COVID-19: Support for Independent Musicians

4. **Mr Butler** asked the Minister for Communities to outline the support she is providing to independent musicians during the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 1011/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. I have met people across the local music industry, and I understand the impact that the current restrictions are having on those who are trying to make their living through music. That is why I was pleased to use the first £3 million of the £29 million funding package to build up the pot for the individuals emergency resilience programme that is operated by the Arts Council on my behalf. I also want to acknowledge the financial contribution that was made to the fund by Future Screens NI. The funding meant that the programme could make grants of up to £3-85 million to 1,089 people whose creativity, effort and hard work make such a big contribution to our lives and to the economy. Nevertheless, I know that the best support for local musicians will be the return of local live music. I look forward to getting back to live gigs myself as soon as possible.

Mr Butler: I thank the Minister for her answer and for the funding scheme, which was timely. She is quite right: we all

look forward to getting back to enjoying those artists and musicians again. Will she undertake to forward-proof the scheme, so that, in the event of further lockdowns, funding will be readily available and that money will be found? In addition, with the lessons learned from other Departments, will she ensure that nobody is excluded from the scheme and, if there is, that we can find a way to fill those gaps?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member knows that a lot of the individuals who applied for the grant had no access to public funds anywhere else. The £3 million was just to cover the oversubscription to previous moneys that were announced by my Department and which were operated by the Arts Council. I am also waiting for the outcome of the latest applications so that we can see where the gaps are, if they are not already covered by that fund. I have held back a few million quid to try to help people, and I hope — as we all do — that the current restrictions will work. I also hope that, when we go back, it will be on a phased return so that we do not end up back here again and that people who make their living from music will be free to do so. They need our support, and I am committed to doing what I can.

Mr Lyttle: The Department for Communities' individuals emergency resilience programme requires musicians to use that aid on a project basis rather than as income replacement to account for all profit. The Department reserves the right to retrieve all or part of the aid on this basis. How does this approach compare with other Executive grant aid for employees? Is it fair to place those conditions on musicians who have lost all sources of income as a result of COVID-19?

3.00 pm

Ms Ní Chuilín: To be frank, other Departments are looking at their governance arrangements as we speak. I will not be in that position. Many of our musicians are working and volunteering in our communities. They are diversifying and working with schools. I want to make sure that musicians are supported and rewarded for doing that. The only criteria are that musicians must prove that they are involved in the arts and have a bank account, and the Arts Council will monitor and evaluate the grant aid. I do not want to impose any further restrictions. It is ridiculous that smaller groups that are receiving a few thousand pounds should be subject to the same regulation as larger groups that may receive millions of pounds over decades. I am not saying that that is what you mean.

Ms Mullan: Thank you, Minister, for engaging with musicians. In my area, musicians appreciate the grant funding. What will the remaining £26 million be spent on?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her supplementary question. The Arts Council is opening applications for grants. The Department is looking at some of our theatres, galleries, museums, libraries, heritage sites, languages and culture and heritage to try to make interventions, because everyone has been financially impacted by COVID and COVID restrictions. They all need our support. They are all viable businesses and products that provide viable events. Some have received public money over the years, but their ability to generate income through event ticket sales has been removed. We need to make sure that those businesses remain viable at the other end of the pandemic.

Our libraries, museums and heritage products also need support. I am very conscious of the fact that there will not be enough money for everyone. However, the Department needs to get emergency support out to ensure that those organisations are not only viable now and are able to retain their staff and skills but are viable at the other end of the pandemic.

Ms P Bradley: Minister, you will be aware that many musicians had only a short window after lockdown when they were back playing in our pubs and clubs. They were playing safely behind Perspex screens, and safety was put first and foremost. However, that was taken away very quickly. Musicians lost their income long before the hospitality industry closed. When we reopen our bars and restaurants, will you fight for musicians at the Executive to allow them to get back to work? Musicians want to get back to work rather than receive handouts from various Ministries.

Ms Ní Chuilín: The short answer is that I absolutely will. The people who entertain us when we are having a drink or enjoying a meal are also taxpayers and ratepayers. People need to remember that. More restrictions have been placed on individuals and smaller businesses than on big business. That is not fair.

I want to mention DJs, as they have felt left out. I can assure DJs that they will not be left out. This situation has demonstrated to me that not many people are aware of what is available through the Arts Council. We need to change that. I will give an assurance to DJs, because they are trying to make a living, and the public restrictions that have been placed on people are stopping them from making a living. As soon as it is safe to do so, we need to ensure that DJs, musicians and, indeed, the hospitality sector return to their livelihoods. Hopefully, people will recognise and appreciate that.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for her actions thus far. Will she detail what support is or will be available for non-musicians such as sound technicians and event organisers employed in the music industry?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that the original short grant programme that I put through the Arts Council was oversubscribed, so £3 million from the £29 million was used directly to look after the oversubscription.

The level of oversubscription was just below £3 million in order to allow a few more to try to get supported. You just heard my answer to a question from Paula Bradley. There were only 20 DJs. There are 20 DJs in the New Lodge, never mind across the North. I am very proud of our local DJs. We need to try to give those people support too, because their livelihood has been impacted.

I want to see what people have done with the latest funding application to the Arts Council. If there continue to be gaps, particularly for our freelancers, sound engineers and technicians, who rely on events, we need to look after those people. That is my commitment.

Anti-poverty Strategy

5. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister for Communities how neighbourhood renewal projects will contribute to the development of the anti-poverty strategy. (AQO 1012/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her question. I have made the commitment that citizen and community engagement, co-design and co-production will be embedded from the outset in the development of an anti-poverty strategy. I assure the Member that the anti-poverty strategy will be evidence-based, will take account of lived experience and will meaningfully tackle inequalities and obstacles that directly affect the everyday life of people as a result of living in poverty. To that end, I have appointed an expert panel to make recommendations on the key themes and priorities that the strategy should address. Those recommendations will inform the work of a co-design group that will be made up of a cross section of the community and voluntary sector, including neighbourhood renewal partnerships and others. That co-design group will be pivotal in shaping the development and content of the strategy and its supporting action plan. The publication of the strategy will, hopefully, happen by December 2021.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for her answer. The announcement of the development of an anti-poverty strategy is very welcome. I know of the great work that the neighbourhood renewal groups do. We have nine groups in my area in Newry, so it is really good to hear that they will be a key part of that.

Will the Minister provide an update on her plans to deal with the long-term future of neighbourhood renewal?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Like the Member, lots of Members have neighbourhood renewal groups or groups that work in places that are at risk right across their constituency. I put on record again that the work that those groups did at the start of the pandemic was second to none. They were the first responders. We need to ensure that that work is not only recognised but valued. Neighbourhood renewal was part of an anti-poverty strategy some 15 or 20 years ago, and we need to ensure that the work of neighbourhood renewal groups is seen in a new anti-poverty strategy so that they work towards targets that are more realistic than those that they are currently trying to work to, which are at least 15 years old.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Minister. Will you confirm that it is November 2021 by which you hope to publish the final strategy? In what way will the working poor be taken account of? I think that more and more people fall into that bracket given the lower-wage economy that we have and zero-hours contracts.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Dolores, if I said November, I was wrong; it is December 2021.

You are 100% right. You were here when we were talking about housing and the working poor. We need intermediate actions. A lot of people in our hospitality and tourism sector rely on zero-hours contracts, which I do not support at all. We need to make sure that, as part of anti-poverty, we look at where people are so that it is relative to their financial status. Low-to-medium- and low-income families have been with us for too long. They need to be reflected and included in the outcomes of the strategy.

Ms Armstrong: Minister, the work of neighbourhood renewal projects is to be celebrated, but one of the areas of the anti-poverty strategy that cannot be forgotten is rural areas that do not have neighbourhood renewal projects. You have already worked with the AERA Minister on rural projects, so is there any update on how those will be included in the anti-poverty strategy?

Ms Ní Chuilín: You will be aware of tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI), the Rural Needs Act and rural-proofing. This is not just an urban experience; it has to be for all citizens. The question was about neighbourhood renewal projects, but it goes right across the piece. If you look at the way in which people have not been able to access support, you will see that their experience of poverty and isolation would be much greater if their local community had not helped them out. We need to ensure that the strategy is rural-proofed.

Mr Frew: Following on from some of the questions that have been asked already about people just managing and people with poor incomes, there are certainly specific deprived areas within affluent areas that have not been able to avail themselves of any of this money. Is the Minister sure that the super output areas, or the geographical spread and definition of these areas, are the correct ones going forward?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will tell you what is not correct. We are not doing, "One for you and one for me", because it is in your constituency or in mine. We are not doing equity; we are doing equality. That is really important. Wherever people experience poverty and however they experience it, we need to take that into consideration. I do recognise that there are pockets of deprived communities within what is seen as an affluent area. Christopher Stalford is not here, but South Belfast is an example of that. The issue for us is that, unless we capture those people and ensure that they are part of an anti-poverty strategy, not only will they feel resentful, but their experience of poverty will increase. We need to work with people where they are at, so I think that it is important that not just neighbourhood renewal partnerships but any partnership, community structure or consortium that they are involved in respond to the strategy when it goes out for consultation. We do not want to leave anybody behind.

Right-to-buy Scheme

6. **Mr Lunn** asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the right-to-buy scheme for Housing Executive and Housing Association tenants. (AQO 1013/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing (Amendment) Act 2020 received Royal Assent on 28 August 2020. This Act will end the house sales scheme for housing association tenants after a transition period of two years. The transition period will enable current housing association tenants who meet the eligibility criteria to purchase their homes. As part of the statement that I made today, I intend to set out the matter for Housing Executive house sales schemes also, using the same lead-in period for them as well, so that people who have applications in can have those processed.

Mr Lunn: I thank the Minister for that. That question was put back from a previous Question Time, when the Minister could not attend, and she did spend an hour this morning virtually answering that question. Mr Speaker, I will give her a bye-ball and sit down again.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much, Mr Lunn.

Mr Gildernew: What other options is the Minister considering to assist tenants into home ownership?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his supplementary question. I am sure that he was in the Chamber earlier. We

are certainly looking at ways to make co-ownership more accessible, if that is someone's choice. At the minute, it is not as affordable as we all originally thought it would be. Some people are being asked to pay up to £12,000 — six months' rent — in advance to access a home for home ownership. That is not acceptable. Despite that, there have been good opportunities through co-ownership for almost 1,000 people a year to buy their own home. In my opinion, we need to look at additional options for people who cannot afford to pay that much money up front.

Miss Woods: I appreciate that the Minister answered a number of questions on her statement this morning in relation to this, so I will be cheeky and get in another one that I wanted to ask. The splitting of the landlord function of the Housing Executive will mean that it will have freedom to borrow and invest, but how will this be facilitated without raising the rents?

Ms Ní Chuilín: The rents are capped at the minute under Westminster legislation, and our Executive have agreed to that. In NDNA, we have also agreed to the way in which we need to ensure not only that the rent is affordable but that, as I outlined in my statement, the rents, particularly in the Housing Executive, are some of the lowest in these islands. It is really important that, whatever powers or designation we give, we do it on the basis of conditionality — that the Housing Executive does the right thing, that there is more of an increase in social housing and that there are better outcomes for people who are in housing stress. At the end of the day, that is at the bottom of all of this, and that is what it is about.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions. Topical question 8 has been withdrawn.

3.15 pm

Supporters at Windsor Park

T1. **Mr Buckley** asked the Minister for Communities, after welcoming her warm words of support for the Northern Ireland football team's Euro play-off final next week against Slovakia and the much-needed morale boost that it could bring to the country in bleak times, whether she will commit to working with Belfast City Council, the Irish Football Association (IFA), the supporters' association and Executive colleagues to ensure that the maximum number of fans can safely attend our national stadium at Windsor Park to cheer on our wee country. (AQT 611/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have spoken to the IFA and am waiting for Belfast City Council, which is the licensing authority. I want to make the game as stress-free as possible, not only for the team but for all their supporters. I will do what I can to ensure that the maximum number of supporters, under the current restrictions, are able to go to Windsor Park.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for her response. The stadium has a capacity of 18,000 supporters, who will be outdoors and have considerable space for social distancing. Can the Minister elaborate on what numbers are under consideration?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am well aware of what Windsor Park holds, because I built it. I do not want to get into speculation, because I want to respect the IFA and Belfast City Council and their work with Sport NI and my

Department. I assure the Member that we want the game to be as stress-free as possible and to have a number of spectators there with safe social distancing and within the guidelines. I will do what I can to make that happen for them.

Mr Speaker: Sinéad Bradley is not in her place. I move on to Gerry Kelly.

Housing Stress: North Belfast

T3. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister for Communities, after thanking her for her earlier statement, which pleased almost everybody, and in reference to the fact that, in North Belfast, housing stress is a huge problem, what interventions she will use to reduce the huge numbers in that area. (AQT 613/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for his question. He will have heard in the statement that we are going to reintroduce ring-fencing for north Belfast, west Belfast and Derry city, simply because they are the three areas with the most persistent high demand and growing numbers of families and people on the housing waiting list and living in acute housing stress. As I said this morning, my officials are working with the Housing Executive to bring forward a scheme to have ring-fencing reintroduced as soon as possible.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for her answer so far. She may have answered what I was going to ask, which is this: will the Minister and the Department lead on ring-fencing to meet objective need? I add that the Housing Executive has the power of vesting, which is seldom used. There are times when it needs to be used, especially for land banking. Will the Minister comment on that?

Ms Ní Chuilín: We are looking at everything. This morning, at least one Member asked about land availability. It has, for years, been one of the biggest obstacles if not the biggest obstacle, next to budget, for the Housing Executive and, in particular, for housing associations in building homes, as has the availability of land in the areas of highest demand. My ambition is that, in ring-fencing, we look not only at numbers but at ways in which we can deliver for the numbers of people who live in housing stress.

Irish League Football Clubs: Financial Support

T4. **Mr Robinson** asked the Minister for Communities, knowing that she will be glad to hear that it is another football question, whether she can confirm that her Department will provide financial support to Irish League football clubs, such as Coleraine and Limavady United, which, because of the pandemic, are suffering great financial hardship, with fewer supporters being allowed into their grounds. (AQT 614/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Member will be aware that the £15 million sports hardship fund is available to all the clubs in his constituency, so fair play to him. The fund will be open for applications fairly soon, and funding will be available to clubs. The Member is right: a lot of the clubs have been hit really hard since the start of the pandemic.

Mr Robinson: Does the Minister agree that, because of the present virus situation, some of those clubs could go out of existence without government support?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I agree, and I put on record my appreciation and thanks, on behalf of us all, for the work that those clubs have done on the ground from the start of the pandemic.

It is not a football club, but, in my constituency, Ardoyne GAA, along with people from a community food bank, were up to all hours of the morning delivering food parcels for kids in deprived areas, and I know that Crusaders and Cliftonville football clubs, which are also in my constituency, have done the same. I know that that is replicated right across, so I want to give clubs as much support as possible.

Sports Hardship Fund

T5. **Dr Archibald** asked the Minister for Communities, after thanking her for her earlier statement, which is the start of a really important transformation in housing, and warning that her question concerns sport as well, to clarify whether grassroots sporting clubs will be able to apply to the very welcome and recently announced hardship fund in their own right or will the applications be completed by the governing bodies. (AQT 615/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I thank the Member for her important question; I have been asked it a few times. To be fair to governing bodies, they need to apply for it in their own right, as do the grassroots groups. I do not imagine that any governing body will want to take responsibility for dealing with applications from loads of clubs in their sector. Anyone, be that a small group or a large governing body, can apply to the hardship fund in their own right.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for the response. How long will it be until the money hits the communities?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will get an update from Sport NI, but I was encouraged to hear its chief executive, Antoinette McKeown, make it clear that, because of the nature of the fund and the hardship that groups in the sporting family have endured throughout the pandemic, she wants to get the funding open and available to them as soon as possible, as do I.

Subregional Stadia Programme for Soccer

T6. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister for Communities, after welcoming her commitment to support Northern Ireland's preparations for the upcoming European Championship qualification play-off final, for an update on the subregional stadia programme for soccer. (AQT 616/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am looking at the final business case for the subregional football programme. It has been a long time in the making. There had been variations to consultations and plans. They have been reworked and amended, but, hopefully, the final business case will be completed in the coming months. I hope to announce that as soon as I get everything else sorted.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for her update. Will the Minister seek to increase the budget for the subregional football stadia fund in line with any increase to the regional stadia fund? Will she give her assurance that

the subregional football stadia funding will be allocated to clubs before the end of this mandate?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I want to make something clear: the fact that Casement Park has overrun in cost does not mean that that overrun will transfer to the subregional programme. That would be completely unrealistic. Does the subregional fund need more money? It does. When the final business case is done, I will see what money I have left to allocate from that fund, as well as any potential for additional money.

Housing Executive Maintenance Contracts

T7. **Miss Woods** asked the Minister for Communities to confirm the value of maintenance contracts that have been awarded in this financial year, given that she will be aware of the negative impact that the pandemic has had on the maintenance of social housing and the urgent need to address that, with roughly £450 million of maintenance contracts awarded by the Housing Executive and a further £90 million expected to go to tender in the next 12 months. (AQT 617/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will get the exact figure for the Member, because it has changed. It has changed because, as we mentioned earlier, there have been procurement challenges in some areas that have put back maintenance contracts. The threshold for challenging procurement contracts is so low that anyone with 250 quid can go into a court to object to millions of pounds of procurement to alleviate some of the worst conditions that people are living in. That is a disgrace. As I say, I will get the Member the exact figure.

The Housing Executive has brought forward a pilot scheme in its southern region that has brought the procurement list down by 40-odd weeks. I am willing to learn lessons from that and bring them forward. I know that the Member knows this, but the restriction to emergency repairs has created a wider gap in the maintenance programme. I will get a response to the Member, because I am also keen to find out exactly what the figure is.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for her answer. In the light of the severe levels of condensation and rising damp that pose a health risk to many Housing Executive tenants, which is an issue in my constituency, can the Minister confirm whether any contracts currently out for tender include urgent work on ventilation and the installation of replacement damp-proof courses, specifically for Northern Ireland Housing Executive tenants in North Down?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will get the Member that information and detail. Unfairly, some families are being reared in houses where they have been impacted by respiratory conditions resulting from the conditions that they live in. That is a disgrace. I know that the Housing Executive is completely uncomfortable with that as well. I will get the detail and the information that she has asked for.

Mr Speaker: The Members who were due to ask topical questions 9 and 10 are not in their seats. Therefore, that brings Question Time to an end. I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two.

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

Executive Committee Business

Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill: Second Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Second Stage of the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 10/17-22] be agreed. — [Ms Ni Chuilín (The Minister for Communities).]

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Department and the Minister for bringing the legislation before us today.

The earliest archeological evidence of beer making comes from around 8000 BC in what is now Turkey. It sometimes seems that Northern Ireland's licensing laws date from around the same period. The rules that govern how we sell alcohol are of a very old vintage. Sadly, unlike an oak cask of Bushmills laid down for decades, they have not always got better with age. Not only have they failed to keep up with modern tastes and habits, they have failed to properly support the licensed trade and, most importantly, to maximise the public good.

In supporting many of the broad intentions of the Bill, including removing the remaining restrictions on Easter opening, I want to say that the Bill is good in those respects but still falls significantly short of the reform that our licensing system needs. However, given that this is Second Stage, I hope that we can work together on the Bill to improve it and highlight the areas where there is consensus that we need further reform. That is particularly true when we consider the dire situation that our hospitality sector will face in the months to come. Our hospitality sector and our pubs, which mean so much to our way of life on this island, face perhaps their most dire situation.

I will deal first with some of the areas where the Bill introduces welcome reform. The removal of the remaining restrictions on Easter opening hours is very welcome. I will not rehearse all the arguments for why it is years, if not decades, overdue. Suffice it to say that the preferences and perspectives of some in society should not restrict the choices of other people.

It is welcome that those changes are finally being made. Likewise, it is welcome that the Bill seeks to ensure that rules on underage people in licensed premises do not penalise, for example, young people attending awards events. I also welcome the extension of late opening opportunities for pubs with entertainment licences and smaller local pubs without an entertainment licence. Those changes are very welcome.

3.30 pm

However, I am afraid that, in one area, the Bill is just not ambitious enough. As currently drafted, it may even be counterproductive. That is in the area of local producers. It is critical in the debate that we base our understanding of licensing and our broader drinks trade in the distinct history of that trade in Ireland. That relates to the production of beer and spirits and to the licensing or pub trade.

Relative to England and Scotland, the entire island of Ireland saw an enormous consolidation of our brewing and distilling businesses in the 20th century. Unlike in Scotland, Ireland lost a huge number of small local distillers, dozens of them in the North. Those distilleries included Coleraine, Comber, Dunville's — which has, wonderfully, reopened and is starting to produce whisky again in the Member for Strangford's constituency — and Watt's, which was based in Derry. My colleague the Member for Foyle and the other Member for Foyle will know about that. Derry was once one of the world's biggest centres of whisky production. All those closed during the 20th century, leading to a point at which, until a little over a decade ago, there was only one operational distillery in Northern Ireland, which was, of course, in Bushmills. Bushmills is critical to understanding some of the issues that we are discussing today. It is not just a global whisky brand. It is a high-value craft product that people want to try when they visit local pubs on holiday. It is also a tourist attraction.

In Ireland, local beer production was never as diverse as, for example, in England, where small breweries have always been a part of the scene and are completely entwined with local pubs. Purely based on anecdotal experience, those of us who have been in pubs on the island of Ireland and in England will know that. Over the decades, there have been many fewer local beer producers on this island. However, something remarkable has happened in Northern Ireland, across Ireland and beyond in recent years. Small brewers and distillers have emerged that are producing a remarkable range of local products and are creating not just terrific local produce but jobs, skills and local brands. The truth is that they have done that in spite of rather than because of our licensing rules. It is normal, in other jurisdictions, for small breweries to have taprooms, which usually open for reduced hours, often in fairly basic surroundings, to familiarise customers with the brewery's offerings. They are then able to go to pubs or off-sales to buy the products. Unfortunately, we have a broader challenge in getting those products into our pubs and off-sales.

The Bill creates a producer's licence, but it limits it to, effectively, a single drink as part of a tour. I am afraid that that is not ambitious enough. We have some wonderful small producers here, but we are doing very little via the licensing system to support them. In my constituency, there is Bullhouse Brew Co in the Boucher area; just down the road in east Belfast, there is Boundary Brewing; Derry has the Walled City Brewery; Warrenpoint has the Mourne Mountains Brewery; and there are others across Northern Ireland that are doing wonderful things and producing wonderful products. I should have declared an interest at the beginning, which is that I am a very enthusiastic purchaser of those products and would love to be able to buy them in more premises.

Some of those breweries have taprooms, but those currently apply only where a local pub is willing to extend its licence to another premises via an occasional licence for usually around a dozen occasions a year. We need proper reform of that, and it would be good to work — I am sure that the Committee will look at it — to see if we could get a producer's licence that allows people to have a proper licence for a taproom that would allow them to maximise their offering. We need to do that because, frankly, we do not know where our pub and hospitality

sector will be in a few months. We should not stand in the way of sustainable local businesses that want to create jobs —.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I am supportive of the concept that he has talked about and, in particular, the restrictions that have been placed on microbreweries etc. Is it not a sad shame — I am sure that the Member will agree with me — that some of those brands are much more popular internationally than locally given the restrictions that are in place?

Mr O'Toole: I could not agree more with the Member. The hard truth is that, for too long, in our pubs and some off-sales premises in Northern Ireland and across these islands, we have had to put up with not-very-good beer. That is changing. We are producing great beer in Northern Ireland, and we should do everything that we possibly can to get it into the hands of people who want to buy it. That is good for jobs and good for local production. It is a wonderful virtuous circle, and we should be doing everything we can to support it.

As I said, some of those breweries have taprooms, but they only have taprooms whereas a local pub or other premises are able to extend their licence on an occasional basis. I would like to see more ambition in licensing those small producers to sell their products to take away but also in taprooms, and I will support amendments to that effect. Yes, it is true that careful consideration is needed on how that works, but the broad intention should be not to limit how taprooms and local breweries operate but to be as ambitious as we possibly can.

Some Members raised the issue that local breweries might in some way be competing with more traditional licensed premises. The blunt truth is that most of those craft breweries — I have been to one, and the Member for South Down mentioned the Mourne Mountains Brewery, which is basically on an industrial estate on the edge of Warrenpoint — are not in the middle of towns or cities but on industrial or semi-industrial premises on the edge of towns and cities, so it is not as if they are in competition with more traditional pubs and licensed premises. I want to see more ambition in that area.

The core reason that we need to show that ambition is, to me, about the purpose of our licensing regime. It should be about protecting the public good, and I am strongly of the view that our amazing craft brewers and the distillers that have sprung up, particularly in the last decade, are, more often than not, creating good. The point of the licensing system should be to maximise the public good from the sale of alcohol while mitigating the real risk of harm from alcohol, and I will go on to talk about how we manage and mitigate that harm. Members, including the Chair of the Communities Committee, rightly acknowledged it, and it is critical to how the licensing system works.

That brings me on to my next thought on the licensing system. Others have talked about it today, and it is completely fundamental. It is not covered by the Bill. It may be that it is too ambitious and too big a task to endeavour to address it in the Bill, but we should look at it and I want to get the Minister's thoughts on it.

If we are serious about maximising the public good, we need to think hard about how long we can simply leave unreformed what is known as the "surrender principle" in our licensing system. When the Bill was introduced, the

Department's press release stated that Northern Ireland's liquor-licensing laws are largely based on the Licensing (Northern Ireland) Order 1996. Indeed, the Committee Chair mentioned that today. I am afraid that that is not completely true. I am not accusing the Department or the Committee Chair of misleading the House, because it is, in one sense, the case that the 1996 Licensing Order created much of our legislation, but our licensing laws are still fundamentally based on the pre-partition Licensing (Ireland) Act 1902, which, in key parts, remains on the statute book on both sides of the border. It was born out of a 19th-century belief that Ireland had far too many licensed premises for the size of its population. That may have been true in the late 19th century, and so it created a rule that still abides to this day. It is known as the surrender principle, which means that no new licences — basically, no new pub licences for either on- or off-sales — are granted.

On the face of it, the surrender principle is very hard to defend. It has led to the remarkable situation in which there is political consensus on the need to protect pubs, particularly small rural pubs, but our licensing laws incentivise the closure of those pubs. Let us all pause and think about that. We all agree, whatever our views of licensing laws — John O'Dowd put it very well earlier — that small rural pubs are at the heart of communities. They provide not only an economic function but a vital social and community function. They perform a mental health function for many isolated and often vulnerable people, but our licensing system has created this extraordinary perverse incentive that drives those rural pubs towards closure. How long can the Assembly leave that rule unchanged?

The surrender principle favours large supermarkets and convenience stores, which are buying licences to integrate off-sales into their premises. There is even an entire legal and brokerage support industry geared towards the transfer of licences. In preparation for today's debate, I found a website with case studies from a local liquor licensing broker. It reported how it helped to sell licences for two small local pubs — one was in Limavady and the other was in Cookstown — onwards to retailers. Those people are not doing anything illegal or immoral. That is the system in which they are operating, but is it really a defensible system? Those local pubs in Limavady and Cookstown are now gone. They have been lost permanently to those small towns.

While there is an iron rule that no new pub licences can ever be created in Northern Ireland, and indeed, generally speaking, across the island, there is no limit at all to the price that can be paid for a licence. That is why we see a constant exodus of pub licences to big supermarkets and convenience stores, or, in the case of Belfast, usually to the very largest hospitality businesses.

As an aside, but an important aside, that halts the development not necessarily of pubs and hospitality businesses but of retail premises, including some in my constituency. Large GB-based retailers, perhaps, acquire a site for development and then there is a halt to them getting hold of a liquor licence, so the development does not go ahead. I can think of one example in my constituency where the development simply has not gone ahead because there was a hold-up acquiring a liquor licence. There has not been a pub to buy it off, or there has been some delay or other in it going through.

If a small publican decides to retire and sell their business on, as is entirely their right, it is often the licence that is the most valuable part of that business. That is because of the scarcity created by the 1902 Act. It also means that any small operator without a great deal of financing faces a very large uphill task in acquiring a licence to simply run a local pub. That is the hard truth. If you are going to buy a local pub outside a city or town centre, in all probability you will have to secure a great deal of financing in order to buy a licence in a place where, with the greatest will in the world and with the greatest marketing effort known to mankind, there will always be a limit in the turnover that you can generate in a small rural area. I am sure that many colleagues will know pubs in rural areas that fit that bill — I used to work in one — and here is the thing: we need pubs. We need more people drinking in pubs relative to drinking in the uncontrolled environment of their own home. That is the point about harm. I speak as someone who grew up working in the pub trade and who has family still working in it. As an old boss of mine said, “There are no last orders in your own front room”. Yet, despite everything that we know about the economic and community benefits of pubs, our licensing system is slowly killing them off.

I accept that the big outstanding question here will be on the value of existing licences, which is why we cannot rush into reform. I accept that it may be too soon to do anything significant in that regard through the Bill, but let us explore it. To be clear, we need reform, so I ask the Minister today to, at a minimum, commit her Department to studying the long-term consequences of this aspect of our licensing laws — that is, the so-called surrender principle — and report back to the Assembly on possible reform. I am sure that the Committee for Communities specifically would be interested in that. That reform should also, of course, take into account the perspective and interests of the broad range of existing licensees.

Our licensing laws are archaic. The Bill takes some modest but very welcome steps forward, but we need to take more. We need to celebrate and support our amazing craft breweries rather than the global drinks brands that have dominated the policy agenda and the beer pumps in this place for far too long.

Mr Stewart: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is good to be back. I thank you and the Speaker and everyone who sent me messages over the last couple of weeks when I was off ill. It is nice to be back on my feet and in the Chamber and back to work.

I want to say at the outset that this has been a really worthwhile discussion and debate. It is nice to see us being able to debate legislation. I know that there will be many more rounds to go and that the Committee will play its role in bringing that forward.

It is also important to recognise the great role that the hospitality industry plays and the responsibility that it has, especially in the current climate, in promoting responsible drinking and providing key aspects to our tourism offering and to our communities.

I want to touch on a few aspects of the Bill and then ask a few questions. Lots of what I planned to say has been discussed, but it is important to get it on the record. It is important to end and update the archaic licensing laws

around the Easter holidays. That is long overdue and will be welcomed.

It is unfortunate. I think back to 2019, when I was coming back on a flight at Easter and there was a stag party arriving in for the weekend. Unbeknown to them, they were not going to have much fun. They were planning to go out and enjoy the sights and sounds of Belfast, not realising that the place would be locked down for most of the weekend. That is unfortunate. The Bill will bring us into line with the rest of the UK and Ireland.

3.45 pm

I will declare an interest at this stage, not only as a member of the Campaign for Real Ale, fan of real ale and former bar person who spent nine years behind a bar and collecting glasses while at university, but as a committee member of a sports and social club. Therefore, I have a fair idea about how some of this works. Many bar staff will welcome the extension of drinking-up time. Any of us who did it knows the real effort that it takes to get people to do their talking while they are walking at the end of the night. It was always a burden. That half hour usually involved people grabbing three or four pints and trying to neck them to get out within that tight time frame. A one-hour period will give flexibility and an easier offering to taxis. Anyone who has tried to get a taxi at last orders knows that you have half an hour to get one, you cannot get one, and people are standing outside and congregating. It is just a mess. That flexibility and that offering are sensible. It will provide a lot less, as I say, bingeing and a lot more ease of access to amenities at the end of the night. There will also not be that rush out the door in city centres, towns and urban locations when everybody is out at the same time. There can be a phased end to the evening. That is much more sensible and pragmatic. It looks as though the offer is there to end that if it does not seem to work out. It is unlikely that that will be the case, but there is that backup in play.

Again, the extension of late licences is good. Many nightclubs already have those in place. However, many of the social clubs and sports clubs that can avail themselves of those already use their 52 per year. Therefore, they will have that option in the bag, especially as they try to come back from the devastation of COVID. In a post-COVID society, they will have the added flexibility to try to provide as many entertainment nights and put as many more pounds in the coffers as possible. I welcome the streamlining of the process and the application process as well.

Perhaps the Minister can get back to me about an anomaly with regard to sports and social clubs. Many have massive pitches. My cricket club in Carrickfergus has a huge cricket pitch, obviously. That is hardly surprising. We want to have a real ale festival every year, and others want to do the same. However, the licence, as it currently exists, prohibits selling anything outside. You have to apply for a temporary licence, which could come in for checks and balances and a whole range of difficulties. Perhaps that can be looked into; if that facility were there, they could extend their wares outside, even temporarily. That would give much more flexibility.

I totally understand where clause 17 on loyalty schemes is coming from. I do not think that any of us would want to see a scheme whereby people were being encouraged

to binge drink or buy more. However, many sports clubs and social clubs have a card facility, whereby you join as a member and the card gets you a reduced rate or member privileges. I would not like to think that members' clubs will be hit by that rule. I do not think that anyone wants to see points schemes in which you collect points, points mean prizes and the prizes are free pints. The schemes that exist in many sports and social clubs do not encourage that. Members are able to save money on the drinks that they buy and benefit from membership. It is important that people know who is in their club, so that they can have control over their members. Therefore, I will be concerned if the clause impacts on them as well.

I will turn to an issue that has been discussed by many — Matthew O'Toole, in particular, mentioned it a great deal — which is craft brewers. We have some fantastic ones here. I am a fan. We have the Hercules Brewing Company; Farmageddon Brewing; the Hilden Brewery; McCracken's Real Ale, which stocks our local club in Carrickfergus; Boundary Brewing; the Norn Iron Brewing Company; the Whitewater Brewery; and the Mourne Mountains Brewery to name but a few. They have got to where they are despite the regulations and legislation that are in place now; against all the odds, compared with their competitors in the rest of the UK and Ireland. It is testament to the entrepreneurial spirit and determination of those companies and the people who have given up other jobs to take up positions in the microbrewing industry that they have got to where they are. Up to now, and until this has even been discussed, they have not been able to sell online, at trade fairs or markets, or when they go to the Titanic market or the Christmas market. They cannot sell the stuff to you when you go to taste it in their premises. That seems completely out of kilter with our strategy to try to encourage entrepreneurial spirit and give companies a level playing field. Many are very responsible in what they do. They have a community ethos. They sponsor local organisations and work with communities. It is so important to grow that work. It is essential that we look at offering the taprooms' offerings, as happens in England, Scotland and Wales.

A company such as BrewDog in Scotland has gone off the scale in its ability to sell worldwide. The Tiny Rebel company in Wales, where I went to university, has done the same thing. They were given support and nurtured. That is exactly what we want to do, because can you imagine where they could get to if we were to give the 10 or 12 that we already have and that I have just named that level playing field or even promote them above it? The possibilities are endless. These are responsible organisations using local products and producing stuff that, because of their offerings, could go anywhere around the world. There is potential in the growing Chinese market and in the Japanese market, and in America, where craft beer sales are going through the roof. Twenty years ago, you could not have given a gin and tonic or pint of real ale to anybody, but now everybody wants one.

This is just the beginning, and Northern Ireland could set itself up as a bastion of craft beer, craft ale, whiskey and gin. There is no reason that that cannot be the case if we give them all the support that they need. I would love to see that in the legislation. I welcome the stuff around the online aspects and the ability to offer tastings, but we really need to look at taprooms.

I get the concern from some in the sector that it might have an impact on them, but it is a completely different experience. The menu has a limited range. It is an experience that you might have before you go out. People need to understand that. As Matthew O'Toole said, a lot of the taprooms are not in the most desirable of areas. You are not going to go to an industrial estate for a night out, but you may well get a lift there with a couple of friends, where you can try a few and support the company. The company needs to get money in. That is the only way in which it is going to grow, especially in the current climate, so I would love to see that be the case. As Kellie Armstrong said, 99% of the products that we consume here are imported. If we could support our local industries, that would have such a positive impact on the community.

Again as Mr O'Toole said, we have a concern about the way in which our entire system is set up. It is not just here but across the rest of the UK and Ireland. Our community pubs are closing on a weekly basis. That was happening before COVID, and I can only imagine how many are not going to come out the other side of COVID, given its impact on them. We need to look at a different way for when they reopen. The current system, although working for some, is not working for everybody. It would be a real shame if many of those pubs close down and do not reopen. They not only are key economic drivers but are key to our tourism offering and to our community.

Many Members touched on the impact of household drinking, which, again, was rising pre-COVID and is now off the scale. You just have to look at the record figures for off-sales trade. People will say, "Fair play to them", but there is no control, no regulation and no social aspect to it, and there is no one to challenge them.

When I worked in the pub industry, I was always on the lookout. John O'Dowd touched on that. If you saw somebody come in who seemed to be a bit down or was drinking more than normal, there was that interaction. There is a danger that people lose that and disappear into the house and consume much more alcohol than they ever would, because their measures are not controlled, they are not concerned about the final bell, people are not challenging them or their friends are not saying, "Man, you've had one too many". Household drinking was growing before, and it is undoubtedly growing now. My fear is that, if we see a lack of pubs open and more pubs closing, we are going to see more and more people drinking at home. That can hopefully be addressed in the legislation, because there is no way of controlling that at present.

Those are a couple of issues that you may be able to come back to me on, Minister, although perhaps not today.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for bringing forward the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill. I seriously hope that the Bill will progress into legislation during the lifetime of this Assembly.

The legislation builds on previous legislation that was brought forward by my former Assembly colleague Judith Cochrane, when she introduced a private Member's Bill permitting the sale of alcohol in large stadia. Many of the things that you are moving on to in this Bill are things that she had hoped to incorporate in that Bill, but time was against her.

I support various parts of the Bill, and I want to ask the Minister whether she will consider amending it to

enable local producers to sell their products on their own premises. The Alliance Party is very supportive of an amendment to allow a producer's licence to be added to the legislation. Those changes would be very welcome in our towns and cities, with the addition of microbreweries and similar clear opportunities for tourism, as is the case in many parts of the rest of the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland and other parts of the world.

Allowing breweries or distilleries to sell their own products does not constitute a quasi-pub. Taprooms are the norm across the world where visitors to breweries can relax and build a connection with the brand, without having to limit their stay to a small sample after a tour. Given that local breweries only wish to sell their own products, this is not competing with the pub that can sell a wide range of products. Large breweries are, generally, located in industrial estates and are primarily manufacturing companies. That certainly is the case in Northern Ireland. The experience is completely different from sitting in the comfort of a village, town or city pub where the beer might even be brewed on the premises. That is the concept that we are trying to get over: the comfort of being able to do in-house brewing for people to sit in the premises where the beer or other products are produced.

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. I wish to touch on something that I forgot to mention in my remarks. Does the Member agree that the biggest tourist attraction, by volume and revenue, on this island is the Guinness taphouse in Dublin? Clearly, that is a very well-established brand, but that taphouse has a licence downstairs. There is a bit upstairs where you cannot buy drink, but you can buy the product downstairs. That does not jeopardise the revenue of any of the pubs around Dublin that seem to sell quite a lot of Guinness, despite the presence of the Guinness Storehouse.

Mr Dickson: I totally agree. What we are trying to achieve, Minister, is to allow publicans, other businesses and those who are dedicated just to the sale of their individual product to be able to do that and boost the tourism and business offering in our small towns and villages across Northern Ireland. Large-scale breweries require infrastructure that would make it very difficult for them to open in our towns or cities. The planning processes designed to allow them tend to be in industrial estates. What we are trying to achieve, by a change in the legislation and a change in direction of the legislation, is to allow small microbreweries to develop in their own right and, indeed, publicans to develop them inside their own businesses. The shop window might have all the stainless steel and brewing equipment and, perhaps, the smell of the product coming into the street, just like a bakery. That may very well encourage people to come inside and partake of the offer.

Alliance agrees with many pubs and clubs that the situation where taprooms can use occasional licences is not ideal, and that needs to change. That is why we believe that local producers need their own licence to ensure that all the regulations and requirements for selling alcoholic produce can be monitored and measured. We very much appreciate the need to control the sale of alcohol, but this is just doing it for another group of people who want to sell their product in a different way. There has been opposition from some in the hospitality sector, who see the legislation as promoting competition against their businesses.

Minister, I disagree with that. There is potential for us to expand the tourism sector, promote Northern Ireland as a place to visit, particularly for its microbreweries, and enhance our towns and villages. Others in the Chamber today have told us the names, and, indeed, the location, of many of those breweries, but other alcoholic beverages can equally be produced and sold at source.

The Bill will not deal with trading in public house licences, and other Members referred to that. Alliance is very clearly in favour of changing the dynamic to support pubs being retained in our communities and to stop many of those limited licences being sold on to the supermarket trade.

Others have made a very clear point that, in the atmosphere of a public house, there is substantially more control, and we should not lose sight of the health and other concerns about the consumption of alcohol.

4.00 pm

Alliance supports the increase in the number of late licences for pubs and clubs, and we are delighted to see the changes to Easter opening times, which are long overdue and which we have supported for a long time.

We also welcome the clarification on school formals. My goodness, that is stuck in the middle of all this, but it is important. Young people should be able to enjoy themselves at an event and should not be constrained by the time because the premises happen to be licensed. Where licensed goods are not to be made available on those premises, there should not be any reason why young people cannot stay after 9.00 pm for school formals and similar events.

We expect that there will be a great deal more debate about extending drinking-up time, which will mean people coming out of pubs and clubs at 3.00 am. That will change the dynamic for many, including taxi and other businesses.

The debate on the licensing and registration of clubs will continue in the Chamber and in the Committee for many months. We support your aim, Minister, to have the legislation passed in time for Easter next year.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I now call Pat Catney to speak on his specialist subject [*Laughter*]

Mr Catney: You can call time on me any time you like, Mr Deputy Speaker.

To start with, my family has been involved in the business for, as far as I can trace it back, about 100 years. We were involved with a little pub in Lisburn called the County Down Arms. In fact, that is where my mother first worked for her uncle when she came up from County Cavan. There have been many, many changes in the industry. We all know that change happens, and sometimes change is for the best. I have said before that at an early age — I was 15 — I was able to go to a great publican called Paddy Swale in Moira, where I worked in The Four Trees. It is great to see that the Hughes family, whom I went to see in Lisburn, are now manufacturing the RubyBlue spirit in Moira.

Again, there have been many changes. When I was young, every pub bottled its own Guinness. Bottled Guinness was the real ale; that which came in draught form later was not. I just want to give you the history. Pubs specialised in how they kept their Guinness at room temperature. That has all changed now, because the market, since the introduction

of pasteurised beer, deems that it must be chilled and cold. I remember draught beers coming in. I remember trying to sell the single X that was on the counter. Again, there was a specialised knack to pulling that. I was very lucky, as I say. It was all about your time served then, when I started out; it was an apprenticeship. We had to cut back our spirits, our rum and our sheries, and we did our own bottling. That has all moved on, and, hopefully, it has moved on for the best.

A family member is still involved in pubs, but I think that it is worth mentioning that my friend Terry Cross is building a state-of-the-art distillery on the outskirts of Lagan Valley. What he has brought out of the ground is an absolute credit to him. I recommend that everyone try to see that. Minister, I extend the invitation to you. It is worth seeing. He has three pot stills: the largest one is called Donard after the largest mountain in the Mourne; there is the middle one; and the little one is called Binnian. It is worth going to see. There is a gin still there as well. That is new and fresh out of the ground, and it is there on our doorstep, on the outskirts of Belfast. It involved quite a lot of money, but he would not have spent that money if there was not a market for it.

From that, I go to where I live in Hilden. Across the road from my house is the Scullion's brewery. Ann and Seamus left and went to England, but they came back with their young family and bought the manager's house, as it was then, that was part of the thread factory at Hilden, which was one of the biggest factories in the world, employing 5,000 people. They opened their brewery, and I stocked their beer from the start. They gave their different beers local names such as Hilden Halt and Hilden Ale, and they named their Belfast Bap beer Barney's Brew after the baker, Barney Hughes. That ties into all that history.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to connect his remarks to the legislation.

Mr Catney: I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. I will get to it now because it is all connected.

The Hilden brewery had great difficulty in getting its product into licensed premises. The two big brewers at that time were Guinness and Bass Charrington, which operated out of west Belfast. They had a monopoly because of the cost of licences for public houses and they bought up the franchises so that publicans could buy beer only from them. The Hilden brewery had to work as best it could with independent public houses in order to stock its product.

Nothing much has really changed. The situation is the same and is detrimental to the growth of those businesses. That little brewery in Lisburn can probably sell more beer in the South of Ireland market, but it cannot sell in the public marketplace here. You can go for a tour at Hilden and, at the end, you are allowed a small sample. The brewery should have the right to sell its products on its premises. That is what I want to say to the Minister. That would make such a great difference.

I want to turn to the growth of the real ale business and how it progressed in Belfast. I organised the first real ale that we had in the old Kitchen Bar, as John said, with CAMRA. I remember trying to find some different beers, and there was a brewery in England that named its beers after Second World War planes. One of them was called 'Spitfire', which was about 3.9% — believe me, it is all related, Mr Deputy Speaker — and it was a social drinking

beer. They had a stronger beer named 'Hercules' after the transport plane that was used in the Second World War. Their winter warmer was a special beer of 8.9%, which was called 'Over and Out'. *[Laughter.]* The point is that they tried to relate to where they are. That was my general point in that regard.

Mr Newton: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Which clause is the Member speaking to?

Mr Catney: I am coming to it now. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): He is very engaging, but I encourage the Member to relate his comments to the Bill.

Mr Catney: I welcome any movement in the licensing laws for Easter. My income went out the door when I had to close on Good Friday. That said, any such movement will not be enough without a complete change to the licensing system. There will not be many bars left to take advantage of extended opening hours. In fact, the only industry that seems to do well as a result of the surrender principle are the supermarket off-licences because they buy the bulk of those licences.

I bought two extended licences in County Tyrone and brought them to Belfast where I opened the Laurel Glen Bar and the Portside Inn with them. So, at least I bought a licence and brought it back and was able to use it again in a public house. As a bar owner once put it to me, a supermarket off-licence is a tombstone for a recently deceased, independently owned bar. COVID has hit bar owners hard. If we do not want to see more tombstones popping up, we need to change the surrender principle now.

Our licensing laws do not work for bars, but they also do very little to curb excessive drinking. In the bar, excessive drinking was bad for trade. For every one dangerously drunk person in your bar, 10 people can see that person and will not cross your door again. Bar owners do not strive for excessive drinking; the vast majority actively work to prevent excessive drinking. We have already heard recent statistics about the 65% of people who are drinking at home. Drinking occurs at home, but it is wrong to blame bar owners for that.

I spoke to someone the other day after the bars had closed, and he was an active pub drinker. He has not touched a drink since the bars closed. I believe that the public house sector can sell alcohol in a controlled atmosphere. The proposed reform will allow for off-sales and occasional licences, which is important and useful for getting access to sales. However, Hospitality Ulster's opinion that only a single pint should be allowed after a tour is outdated and fails to recognise where craft beers fit into the market. I say that as an ex-member and ex-chair of the Belfast and Ulster Licensed Vintners' Association, which became Hospitality Ulster, as was my brother.

Any kind of substantive access for Northern Ireland trade is stymied by the actions of the big multinational brewers. Hilden Brewery, our oldest independent brewery, has found that out to its cost. Craft brewers believe that their indigenous industry can grow if they are given the right tools by the Assembly. The public and, importantly, tourists must be able to drink a brewer's own beer on-site without restrictive clauses. With greater exposure, it will be harder for the big brewers to deny entry to craft brewers to the market as they do now. Small craft breweries selling their

beer on-site was never intended as a replacement for the pub, but it is something that Northern Ireland is missing that the rest of the UK has. Indeed, many countries support their small entrepreneurial craft brewers.

I have often spoken about the incredible craft distilleries and breweries that have sprung up in the last number of years. They are creating and producing a world-renowned product, and they are worldwide winners. They are also energising the industry in areas such as sustainability and are bringing back the heritage of our industry. Without the backing of the big companies that are meant to support them, pubs face an uncertain future with Brexit. However, we are attacking them with ridiculous laws that stop them from giving their products to visitors in their distilleries or breweries. That is not a health issue: no binge drinker is going to the local independent brewer to pay a premium for a local product. We love to talk about tourism opportunities in the Chamber, but here is a world-renowned industry that is capable of bringing visitors from all over the world, and we are holding it back with our odd off-days and useless laws.

Hampering local entrepreneurs does not boost the economy. Sales are an important source of revenue, which prevents them having to sell to the distributors, and that is where the problem lies. Small breweries find that they cannot go to market because the pubs have contractual clauses that mean they can buy only from the big brewers such as Guinness and Heineken. When consumers cannot get their local craft beer, they head to the supermarket or off-licence to buy a global brand with no connection to our people or economy.

As a bar owner, I have seen the devastation that alcoholism can cause. I have worked to try to help people who have been affected by alcoholism and, unfortunately, I have had to attend some of their funerals. It is right that we do all that we can to prevent alcoholism and to help those who have that terrible disease. Our current licensing laws do not give that protection: they are bad for the industry, bad for our economy and have little impact on the people whom they are supposed to protect. The licensing laws must be reformed, and we must take this opportunity to do so.

Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker, for indulging me. I wanted to go down memory lane as everyone else seemed to be taking their time.

Mr Nesbitt: Earlier, Mr Durkan seemed to invite Members to see how many beer-related puns they could slip into their remarks. I have to say to Mr Durkan that I am not rising to that challenge. I am going to bottle it.

I welcome the focus that the Minister is placing on these issues, which is not to say that I am in accord with the legislation as drafted. I will touch on that in a moment.

As this is Second Stage, I will stick to the Bill's principles. The principle through which we need to test the legislation is whether what we are doing is fair and equitable, particularly for that sector of the economy. COVID-19 has impacted very badly and harshly on the hospitality sector, as many Members have said. I am sure that we have all met owners and operators of bars who feel badly done by, having invested in recalibrating their space to ensure social distancing. There are now a lot of outdoor spaces for eating and drinking around this fine city. Is the Bill fair and equitable, and are we doing our best to protect the livelihoods of 65,000 workers and to open space to grow a key sector of the economy?

4.15 pm

I will touch briefly on three areas. Is the proposal to extend opening hours fair, and is it a reasonable rebalancing of what we currently have? The Committee, no doubt, will form a view on that. Mr Allister raised an important point when he directed us to the explanatory and financial memorandum and the fact that the Police Service of Northern Ireland had been asked to take a view on the impact of extended hours on its service. Paragraph 27 states:

"The PSNI advised that there would be an impact on its shift system and therefore expected overall a major impact on resourcing both from a financial and staffing point of view."

I declare an interest as a member of the Policing Board. Members will know that the Police Service of Northern Ireland does not have an elastic or open-ended budget. A "major impact" on resource in terms of finance and staffing is something that the Committee will have to look at seriously.

I think that we all agree that we have become something of an anomaly in western Europe where the Easter restrictions are concerned. I acknowledge Easter as a critical moment in the Christian calendar. I would not want to do anything to prevent anybody marking it, but I do not think that restricted opening hours has any impact whatever.

I have a difficulty with the legislation with regard to microbreweries. I was in Bath, in the south of England, where one of my sons was a student. He took me out one day just around the corner from his digs into an industrial estate, where he bought me a pint of beer because there was a microbrewery there. It was not the sort of place where you would want to spend an evening because it was an industrial estate, but, if I went to one of the microbreweries in my constituency and the owner tried to sell me a pint of beer, he would, under the legislation, commit a criminal offence; in fact, under article 52B of the Licensing Order, he could be punished with a four-figure fine. I just do not see the logic in that, so I encourage the Committee to look closely at what more it could do to free up those who are growing the microbrewery sector in this country.

John O'Dowd made some points about barmen knowing their regulars. I am a founder member of the Ards Suicide Awareness Group, which has civic-minded people go round schools and shops. Just before the first lockdown earlier this year, we were working with Colin Neill and Hospitality Ulster, and we talked about getting into the pubs and restaurants in Newtownards to try to train up the barmen because, as Mr O'Dowd said, they have regulars and they know when they are a bit off form and may be having some mental health issues. We can give them training not to make them counsellors but just so that they know the signs, the questions to ask and how to signpost people. I would be delighted to talk further to the Minister. If we can get that pilot scheme going in Newtownards, it is something that you could roll out across the country.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for giving way. Just for his information and that of others, a scheme has already been rolled out in communities by ASCERT, which has trained drug and alcohol responders. I have been trained

in that, and I functioned as the responder in my previous workplace.

There are schemes there, and perhaps the Committee for Communities, the Committee for Health and the wider Executive could look at rolling that out to all pubs and restaurants so that people who work on the front line with sometimes vulnerable and lonely people can facilitate meaningful conversation.

Mr Nesbitt: I thank the Member for that intervention. With mental health, we should take services out to the people rather than expecting people to come to our hospitals. We do not need to medicalise the problem.

I will finish there, except to say that the Minister made some mention of bitters. I wonder whether it was Angostura bitters that she was talking about. It seems to me that, if you are not aware of that, you have never had a highball. If you are not a teetotaler, you are missing out and denying yourself. I recommend that you get a nice whiskey and ginger ale later tonight.

Miss Woods: From the outset, I will say that I might be here a while. I cannot even begin to follow Mr Catney's discussion, but, like him, I have a lot to say. Members of the Communities Committee will probably be glad that I do not sit on it, because I would certainly like to get my teeth into this. I suppose I will use this as my response for the Committee to pick up and give you some workload.

I really welcome the opportunity to speak at Second Stage today. The Bill has been a long time coming, to say the least. I will begin by declaring a big interest as a frequent visitor to licensed premises and because, up to earlier this year, I worked in the industry in a pub in my constituency and had done so since I was 15.

On the face of it, the Green Party supports calls to create an environment that can support the responsible sale and consumption of alcohol while supporting the hospitality sector in Northern Ireland. We all know of the recent issues with and pressures on the sector because of COVID-19 and the ever-changing landscape of restrictions, which must be mentioned. We are discussing this Second Stage right in the middle of the newest bout of restrictions faced by the industry, some of which are, frankly, a bit bizarre. There are different rules around carry-outs that have apparently no evidential basis or grounding — unnecessary discrimination or a failure of common sense. The Bill will not be any form of panacea or silver bullet for where we are currently, but, if it is done right and it is passed in good time, it can make a difference on the other side of the COVID-19 crisis. I encourage that to happen.

Before I get into the commentary on some of the clauses and give the Committee some pointers to look at, it is important to reflect on the hardship currently experienced by the industry, and the Bill relates to it. The accompanying explanatory and financial memorandum puts it bluntly:

“The current economic environment is particularly challenging. The restrictions placed on the hospitality sector as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have been unprecedented. The sector was one of the first to close and amongst the last to fully re-open.”

As I said, the sector has been one of the most affected by the new restrictions. It continues:

“Government support has been provided and the sector has been working to preserve businesses, services and jobs.”

Owners and staff have gone above and beyond to adapt to the changes, creating safe environments in which they can operate and function. Businesses that had to rely on small grants to pay their bills for months had to invest heavily in screens, PPE, sanitisers and training, which, mostly, they did, only to be shut down weeks later. Many workers face a very uncertain future with reduced hours or no hours, redundancies or just being let go. It is crucial that assistance to the sector continues, and we must look to expand the support to the industry through this legislation and beyond.

I fully support the calls made last week by Unite for a hospitality and tourism rescue plan. Its opening statement makes for sobering reading:

“The hospitality [and tourism] sector is the third largest employer in the UK [and Northern Ireland], creating one in six of all jobs and employing six million people (3.2 million directly). If urgent action is not taken”,

hundreds of thousands

“of these jobs could be lost over the next”

three months, and more than half —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind the Member that this is not about the COVID crisis; this is about the licensing Bill. Please relate your comments to the Bill.

Miss Woods: Absolutely. Just to remind —.

Mr Carroll: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: I will give way.

Mr Carroll: Will the Member agree that it is important that other parties support Unite's hospitality rescue plan? It is an important mechanism to support workers in the COVID period and the looming recession round the corner.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for his intervention. Of course, I think that, and I have emailed all of the party Whips this afternoon encouraging them to sign up to the motion that Mr Carroll and I submitted today on that very rescue plan. I encourage you to engage with your parties on that.

To the Bill, Mr Deputy Speaker. We have to realise that we have a lot to do to help the hospitality industry and the workers in the short, medium and long term in general.

We are already experiencing a lot of people leaving the industry, and that also needs to be looked at by the Committee. I hope that the Communities Minister and the Economy Minister will consider this as forward work. I also encourage, as part of their scrutiny, the other relevant Committees to look at the issue with the unions, the sector representatives and those who actually work in the industry. Action is needed, with the right people around the table. We should celebrate the fantastic hospitality and tourism offering and staff that we have.

The Easter opening hours in Northern Ireland are farcical. Our opening hours have become the subject of scrutiny in recent years, notably during the Open last year, and understandably so. Restrictions on the sale and consumption of alcohol on Good Friday date back to 1833

and the current position to 1924. We are nearly 100 years on from then. All restrictions should be removed, and I am glad to see that in the legislation that has been laid.

I note that, during the time that the Assembly was down, all the parties on the Executive signed up to changing the Easter opening hours. It formed part of the NDNA agreement. I hope that, next Easter, we are not in a situation in which there are still restrictions on opening hours because of some undue delay in the Assembly. Although I respect the incredibly important Committee scrutiny process and the time that is necessary for Assembly debate at all the relevant stages, this legislation should be expedited. Easter opening hours mean not only a business and financial loss for licensed trade, estimated in 2018 as £20 million, but shorter shifts offered to staff that week, with part-time and temporary staff frequently losing out. I have personal experience of that. At Easter, members of staff will often not have the full shifts that they are used to over the weekend, whereas full-time members will have to work longer shifts in order to make up their hours. The bars and pubs are not as busy as normal. They are busier at different points, and earlier closing hours mean that normal-length shifts are cut. That affects not only the wages that come in but the tips collected, which, I am afraid to say, are a vital supplement to the low wages that our workers are paid. A similar situation is felt by those in our kitchens, with our chefs, kitchen porters, prep cooks and cleaners having their hours cut because of the licensing restrictions, not to mention businesses that rely on trade from the industry, such as other restaurants, takeaways and taxis.

As is stated in the consultation document, there has been a significant increase in the number of local producers in the past 15 years in Northern Ireland and an upturn in the market for locally made sustainable craft beer, cider, gin and whiskey. Discussion has been ongoing about the possibility of having a free tasting sample of the product versus being able to open as a taproom. I know from going to, say, the Teeling and Jameson distilleries in Dublin, that that is commonplace. You can get a selection at the end or a cocktail. Doing that could showcase our quality local producers. The restrictions in the Bill make no economic or financial sense to those who want to increase footfall and trade, especially those targeting the tourism market.

I have a few questions about clause 8, which is on the sale of producer-made products. What reason is there for the inclusion of article 52B, whereby producers can sell their product only for consumption on the premises, restricting it to samples or as part of a tour? I would welcome much more detail on that clause, which seems overly restrictive. If a tour operates from Monday to Saturday, for example, for a certain number of hours during the day, realistically how much is a producer going to sell? Does that make economic sense for investors? There is much discussion on that element of the Bill already, and a number of Members have touched on part of it. If breweries are allowed to open all the time, there are fears that they will sell not just their own product and that that will affect the traditional pub trade, which operates under different licences. I wonder whether the Department has engaged on that so far. I would like to know what other models have been looked at for local producers to sell their product. Have we looked at the English model rather than the Republic of Ireland model and considered how that could be done here?

Many Members will have been lobbied about the amount of money that bars and pubs have to pay for licences and fees, which are incredibly high. Do not get me wrong: they are extremely high. Will a brewery, able to open as a taproom to sell solely its own product, which bars and pubs perhaps do not sell, impact on their footfall, however? Will the Committee look at that? As I said before, I ask the Committee please to engage with all the sectors and listen to their concerns on fees and amounts that they have to pay to operate. Surely we can then get to a place that has a more level playing field.

Mr Catney mentioned something that I wish to touch on again, and it concerns the size of the distributors in the Northern Ireland market. He mentioned Guinness and Heineken, while I mentioned Diageo and Tennent's. It is fundamentally unfair that two, perhaps three, distributors have a monopoly on the market here.

That can be to the detriment of the small independent producers and their ability to supply local bars, even as part of a chain or as an independent pub. Monopolies also put pub owners in a position in which they have to sign up to agreements with the big suppliers because of the financial situation that they find themselves in and the incentives that they can offer. That must be looked at.

4.30 pm

In clause 4, paragraph 1(b) of article 52C, which relates to the local producers' licence and sale on other licensed premises, it states that liquor produced in the production premises can be sold if it:

"is ancillary to an event which is held wholly or mainly to promote food, drink or craftwork produced in Northern Ireland or relates to agriculture in Northern Ireland."

What does that mean? I hope that the Minister can tell me and provide a few examples. Who decides on the nature of the event? Is it the Department? What is it based on? That question applies equally to the designation of a major event, as addressed in clauses 6 and 25.

Liability must also be addressed. If, for instance, a producer sells an unopened product that contains alcohol at an event, and the purchaser opens it, who is liable? Is the seller liable? Surely not. It must, therefore, be the purchaser. However, one does not hold off-licences responsible for anyone opening a bottle on the street or away from their premises — not that anybody would. That is the responsibility of the opener.

If we try to think back to before COVID-19 and the lockdown, we will remember that people were going out later. In my experience, people were heading out for food later, rather than going to get something to eat or drink straight after work at 6.00 pm, which is commonplace in London. Booking time in some places was extended to 10.00 pm and beyond. Many people ate at home but came out later to experience the great live music and local talent that was being hosted in our bars and clubs — another industry that we need to do more to support. As people were going out later, there should have been an allowance to increase the permitted hours currently granted for those places, where suitable.

I welcome the inclusion of the extended opening hours in the Bill. Those changes would also support the much-

needed growth in the night-time economy, as well as the tourist industry, across Northern Ireland. The increase of late licences from 20 nights a year to 104 is good for small pubs. It is a measure to support their sustainability, as they often form an integral part of the community. For the same reasons, and in the interests of parity, I welcome the proposals to include registered clubs, as they are crucial parts of our local community. However, any extension of hours should be considered alongside the impact on residents who live around public houses and licensed premises so that there is no additional adverse impact to their neighbourhood environment, especially with noise.

It should also be made clear that there is no pressure on any business to stay open for longer. The choice will lie with the business and be suitable for its environment.

We should also look at having staggered opening hours for different types of licensed premises, particularly in urban areas. Concerns are often raised about increases in antisocial behaviour in the period after bars and clubs close. The impact that the proposed changes might have on the PSNI's costs and resources were mentioned in the explanatory and financial memorandum (EFM), as Mr Allister also raised. I also noted that there had not been a response by the date on which the Bill was printed. I hope that the Minister can address that in her summing up.

We all know that people struggle to find suitable transport home after being out for the night. Many Members may know of the queues in which people have to wait at kicking-out time. They are all looking for a way home in a taxi, lift or via the very limited public transport available after closing time. A few years ago, I waited, on my own, outside a well-known premises in Belfast, after a gig, for three and a half hours before getting home. I would love to have got the bus.

A staggering of hours could see a reduction on the pressures of managing large numbers of people. Will the Minister comment on that? Was staggering or sequential closing time part of the consideration in the development of the Bill?

Any extension of hours should also be considered alongside the impact on staff and working hours. A premises that opens for an additional permitted hour will mean one extra hour of work for staff, at a minimum, for drinking-up time allocation, the clean-up and locking up of the business. It should also be considered alongside the impact on residents around licensed premises and public houses so that there are no adverse consequences. Business owners should adhere to the legislation and regulations on the working time directive, be mindful of busy and stressful shift patterns, ensure that enough quality breaks are given, and that rotas conform to the working time directive and agreed contracts.

Members should note that staff do not get any premiums for working into the wee hours. There is no double time, time and a half or Brucie bonuses for working into the next day, or double time on a Sunday. They are long, hard shifts in which staff often have to deal with difficult people in difficult circumstances. Perhaps it is a conversation for another time, but why are we not giving our, often, lowest-paid staff an extra few quid for working late? Is there any way of putting that into statute? Could Ministers think about bringing that forward? I would support any moves that would mean staff being safely transported home without

being further out of pocket for the hours that they will have to work, given the additional time in this Bill. Perhaps we have some learning to do from Scotland in that regard.

The drinking-up time is currently 30 minutes from last orders. This is, apparently, to allow for a more controlled consumption of the last drinks served. Clauses 5 and 24 change the allocation from 30 minutes to one hour, if there is a late licence in place, to discourage the overconsumption of alcoholic drinks, according to the EFM. As we know, at times, large numbers of drinks are bought in rounds, which are consumed during this short drinking-up time. Once last orders are called, someone can go to the bar and order two pints to finish in half an hour — or three pints or four pints; you get the idea. However, without having a limit on the amount and the type of drinks served during this time or closing some sections of the premises before other sections — a route I am sure that nobody wants to take — it is very difficult for staff to manage that rate of drinking, as those drinks have been legally served during permitted hours. That is regardless of whether it is 30 minutes or one hour; it is the same system.

There are also issues where larger premises with multiple bars have the same drinking-up time. If you are full — not full-full — as in, there are lots of people around, *[Laughter]* and, if you have a situation where potentially hundreds of people will be piling out onto the street just an hour later — I touched upon that previously when I mentioned staggered closing times — the extension of drinking-up time in clauses 5 and 24 could allow for better management of people. It might not lead to further purchasing of drinks during this time, but a longer period in which people can finish up or choose to leave it and to go home, but only if it is managed properly. That is surely down to the individual business to put in.

I ask the Minister, and I encourage the Committee, to investigate this thoroughly. What evidence is there to show that extending drinking-up time leads to the claims that are made, especially that it would discourage overconsumption? How can that be put into practice effectively if it is actually about the way in which drinking-up time is managed by the premises itself?

I encourage the Committee to speak to the workers in this industry, who have direct experience of drinking-up time, and to ask them what happens, how it impacts on staff safety, how to minimise the abuse that is directed towards them and what the potential impacts of this legislation are. I am more than happy to help in any way with such discussions or to bring in some people who might want to talk to you — there are plenty of them.

On another point, consideration would have to be given to premises that remove people from inside the building to outside after the drinking-up time is over, as perhaps drinks can only be consumed in that outside area; as well as the impact that noise would have on residents, if applicable. I encourage the Committee to consider this in all of its deliberations.

Clause 13 provides for further regulations on the delivery of alcohol. Online sales for deliveries to households have increased, as we know, from shops, supermarkets and e-commerce platforms. Shopping online has become the norm. Notably, many people relied on online shopping and deliveries during the first COVID-19 lockdown.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member giving way, and I thank her for her remarks. The Member will be aware that this Bill is from the Department for Communities, but the Department of Health should be working in conjunction with that Department. We were informed some time ago that there was to be a public consultation on minimum unit pricing for alcohol. Does she agree that it is disappointing that that conversation has not started yet?

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for his intervention. I will come to that later, as I have quite a lot here. I note that the consultation that was put out by the Department when the Assembly was down did discuss minimum unit pricing, but that is not in the Bill. Perhaps that is something that the Committee could bring forward. With regard to Departments working together, all Departments should be working together on all legislation because we have a lot of things here that I might mention, and that others have mentioned, that are outside the scope of one Department. It is really important that we do it all together.

To go back to the delivery of alcohol, a lot of people had deliveries to their houses from the big supermarkets or their local shops. For those who were shielding or self-isolating that was often the only way of getting groceries and essentials. Perhaps the Minister can address any discussions that she has had or any consideration that has been given to incidences where someone under the age of 18 may have to accept a grocery delivery and how that can be done under this legislation.

For example, someone at the residence has to sign for the delivery of shopping that includes a bottle of wine. That might be a young person who is the carer for adults. In light of COVID, a member of the household who is under 18 might have to open the door to a delivery because the adult who ordered it is isolating. We have to think about the more nuanced issues that are coming up this year. Restrictions should be mindful of and consider other circumstances. I note that this would require a change in the way that online shopping is conducted and managed. However, we did that earlier this year, for example, when priority slots were given to those who were shielding. Regulation can be done better. There should be consultation with online platform operators to ensure that this is rolled out and that, if it is, it is done practically and any unforeseen consequences are considered. I hope that the Minister and Committee will be mindful of this.

Furthermore, clause 13 makes reference to the need to record details in the delivery book or on an invoice of any proof-of-age document that they had requested. That also applies to places that are not licensed but where there is entertainment being held or that are used as a club. I have a number of practical questions about this. What happens if nobody has a proof-of-age document to hand? What happens if there is no ID available? Will that bottle of wine or case of beer be returned? We may need a wee bit more detail on that. As regards those people who are in charge of accepting deliveries in a workplace, the responsibility should be on the owner or manager to ensure that the appropriate staff are on duty at the time, that there is adequate training in place and that everyone is familiar with what the age-verification processes are.

Clause 16 imposes restrictions on off-sales drink promotions in supermarkets, meaning that they can advertise offers on drinks only in the designated off-sales bit. Much research has been done globally on the effects of advertising on

consumer behaviour and, in particular, the effects of the advertising of alcohol on children and young people. From a public health perspective, the level of advertising of harmful products should be limited. While there are no real issues with this, I would like to know what, if any, research has been conducted on the restrictions being in place in supermarkets only. What about social media? What about television and radio? Is there work ongoing that shows that reducing advertising in this manner actually leads to the intended outcomes? Will the Committee engage on this change with those who sell alcohol?

Clause 17 prohibits loyalty schemes involving intoxicating liquor in all licensed premises. Like Mr Stewart, I have some concerns about how this would work out from the clubs' perspective. Whilst I understand that, in theory, loyalty schemes could encourage excessive drinking, I would like to ask the Minister and, in turn, the Committee to look at the provision of loyalty schemes in Northern Ireland. Do loyalty schemes actually encourage irresponsible drinking? How are they operating currently? What is the baseline? Where is the empirical evidence for this? Have studies been done on how common these schemes are, how they contribute to overconsumption and how the removal of this type of scheme actually reduces the amount that people drink? Are there any unintended consequences?

Clause 19, "Code of practice", stipulates that a new code could be approved by the Department that was produced by a person or relevant group of persons who have a relevant interest in matters around liquor. Whilst it is my understanding that the codes of practice and conduct have been useful in tackling specific issues around antisocial behaviour in England, I do wonder what this code of practice relates to. I hope that the Minister will address this. What is the code of practice for? Who are the people or persons who would produce this? Is this a sector code that already exists and is voluntary? Would this not be better off being within guidance? What is the purpose of having it written into the legislation? There is much more information needed here.

On a wider but related note — you will be glad to know that I have only got another half page to go — we need to have in place a strategy and stronger support mechanisms to help those who misuse alcohol and drink to excess and to recognise that overconsumption can be a sign of mental health distress or other health issues.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Miss Woods: I will.

Mr O'Toole: I am glad that she has given way, and I have come in on this point before. Given that she is now talking about alcohol misuse, does she agree with me on the basic point that one of the things that, if not driving, is certainly helping to further and prop up that misuse is the enormous push of licences towards big supermarkets and the tendency for purchasing to happen there, which is having the effect of people doing less drinking in small local pubs, and that one way of addressing that is to reform the surrender principle?

4.45 pm

Miss Woods: Absolutely. You have my support there, and we also need to look at minimum unit pricing as a next step.

People of all ages should be properly educated on the risks and health effects of drinking, as well as encouraging a healthy, active lifestyle. We know that alcohol misuse has been identified as a significant public health and social issue in Northern Ireland over many years, and we have to take greater steps to deal with it. The EFM states that the number of alcohol-related deaths in 2018 was 16·9% more than what was recorded a decade ago, but recorded figures are only the tip of the iceberg because they are only the deaths that can be directly attributed to alcohol. We must do all that we can to address that and provide adequate resources and support to people. Perhaps, as part of its deliberations, the Committee could look at that alongside the Committee for Health.

Stronger measures need to be in place to examine the root causes of excessive and harmful drinking. One example, as I said when I intervened on Mr Nesbitt, would be training hospitality staff in signposting services for those who present with alcohol consumption addiction, such as the drug and alcohol responder training provided by ASCERT. It is for people who frequently work directly with potentially vulnerable people in their communities. Support systems also need to be in place for staff in the industry. Alcohol abuse in the hospitality industry may not be something that is frequently talked about or that forms part of the Government's strategy, but it needs to be. I encourage the Executive to research that as part of any strategies coming forward on harmful drinking, taking into account the nuances that many people who work in the industry face.

I will finish, Mr Deputy Speaker, you will be glad to know, with a quotation from a famous chef and advocate for the hospitality industry — the late Mr Anthony Bourdain — from one of his best books:

"You can always tell when a person has worked in a restaurant. There's an empathy that can only be cultivated by those who've stood between a hungry mouth and a \$28 pork chop, a special understanding of the way a bunch of motley misfits can be a family. Service industry work develops the 'soft skills' recruiters talk about on LinkedIn — discipline, promptness, the ability to absorb criticism, and most important, how to read people like a book. The work is thankless and fun and messy, and the world would be a kinder place if more people tried it. With all due respect to my former professors, I've long believed I gained more knowledge in kitchens, bars, and dining rooms than any college could even hold."

I could not agree more. The point is that we have much to do to help the industry post COVID, as well as with previous problems, and support the fantastic people who work in and run our hospitality businesses here showcasing the best of Northern Ireland.

Mr Allister: I will strive to be shorter than Ms Woods. I hope that I do not drive some of you to drink with some of the things that I might have to say, but here goes.

I cannot support the two landmark components of the Bill, which are extended opening hours and the assault on Easter. There are elements of the Bill in the subsidiary matters that are deserving of support. The clauses dealing with vending machines are worthwhile. Tidying up the issue of sixth-form formals is a necessary move. The alignment of the ending of entertainment with the ending of

sales is important. The delivery of alcohol to minors is an important issue, although I noted Ms Woods's interesting point about how that can be enforced. The measures on off-sales advertising are right and necessary. I also have a lot of sympathy with the campaign of the local breweries, which are undoubtedly being squeezed by the monopoly in the mainstream liquor industry, and I can well understand their resentment and desire for change in that regard.

Fundamentally, when we come to the issue of extending drinking hours, we are talking about every pub and club in Northern Ireland having the right to be open every weekend — that is when it is most likely to be; certainly 104 times a year — until 3.00 am. Then we tell ourselves that we are in the business of dealing with alcohol abuse and that the Bill will help to tackle alcohol abuse. Really?

Let us consider the impact of alcohol in our society. Of course, anyone and everyone has the absolute right to indulge in alcohol. I am not a prohibitionist or anything like it, but we need to deal with the realities. I do not know how many of those who have taken part in the debate took time over the summer to read the Northern Ireland Audit Office report 'Addiction Services in Northern Ireland'. I do not know if the Minister has read it, but it is a chilling read. There is a page in it that sets out the key facts. It is worth reminding ourselves of some of the key facts about alcohol addiction in Northern Ireland. The estimated cost, according to the Comptroller and Auditor General, of alcohol misuse every year in Northern Ireland is up to £900 million. Almost £1 billion. That is much more than the budget of many Departments, much more than the budget of many arm's-length bodies and much more than the budget of many agencies. Almost £1 billion.

The report also tells us that, every day — not occasionally — 200 hospital beds on average are occupied by those getting treatment for substance abuse. Other figures show that alcohol is the biggest component, being involved for generally two thirds of those receiving treatment for substance abuse. Two hundred beds. We have heard, during the COVID crisis, about the great pressure on our beds and on our hospital system, and now we discover that 200 of those diminishing beds are necessary for addiction and abuse treatments. I simply want to ask this question: by extending liquor hours until 3.00 am, do we think that we are helping that? I do not.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Just let me finish this point.

Let me remind the House of this: the report shows that, in 2018, there were 284 deaths because of alcohol misuse, which is many, many times more than road traffic deaths. There were almost 300 deaths because of alcohol abuse, and then the House thinks that it is right and appropriate — nay, necessary — to extend the facilitation of alcohol consumption by extending the hours to 3.00 am.

I will give way.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the Member for giving way. He is right that alcohol misuse is an extraordinarily important issue and one that afflicts this society and many others. Will he accept that, in relation to extended opening hours, people who have problems with chronic alcoholism are more likely to go home, if they are even drinking in pubs in the first place, which is questionable? The NIAO report does not talk about it in detail and does not specifically link it to

pub opening hours, but those people are not likely to be stopped by a pub opening until 3.00 am. Unfortunately, the tragic truth is that pub opening hours will not stop them. They will go home and drink until 4.00 am, 5.00 am or God knows what hour in the morning in their own house, facilitated, I am afraid, by the extremely cheap cost of drink in supermarkets.

Mr Allister: The Member's point is not devoid of truth, but the logic of his point is that you should not have any closing times. If people are going to go home to drink, why not 4.00 am, why not 5.00 am, why not 24 hours? It is an absurd proposition that we weaken our licensing hours because people would still drink at home nonetheless, an utterly absurd proposition.

It does not just impact on health; it impacts on crime. There was an interesting study by Stockholm University that I recommend to the Committee. The Norwegian Institute of Public Health conducted a survey across the experience of 18 cities in Norway of the impact of extending opening hours, and it found that, for every hour by which you extend the opening hours, you increase by 16% the number of assaults: 16% for every hour. If that study is right, what the House is being invited to do is to create the circumstances where, in drink, we will increase the number of assaults by 16%. That is why the question that was posed and unanswered in the explanatory document is so important. The PSNI is very clear. We do not know if it has yet given the figures because the Minister would not take an intervention. I will take one now if she wants to tell us if the PSNI has given us the figures.

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): Maybe, when I give you the figures, we can go back to the Bill. The PSNI has not given figures, and I would expect it to give figures. As soon as I get any of those figures, I will share them with you and the rest of the Assembly because it is an important point.

Mr Allister: The obvious riposte to that is, "Why we are having the debate today, if we do not have those figures?". The PSNI is saying to the Northern Ireland Assembly at paragraph 27:

"The PSNI advised that there would be an impact on its shift system and therefore expected overall a major impact on resourcing both from a financial and staffing point of view."

However, it cannot yet give the figures. Why are we debating this before we have those figures? Where is the sincerity in taking those figures on board if we are already going to have agreed in principle to the very Bill that gives rise to that financial bill? It was a gross dereliction of duty to bring this Second Stage debate before we knew the costs to the public purse through the PSNI. As the PSNI has pointed out, it is the extra administration costs, the extra overtime costs and the extra costs of needing additional personnel to deal with people spilling onto the streets at 3.00 am. Yet, here we are, about to endorse that very proposition of allowing people to drink in every club and pub up and down the country every weekend until 3.00 am, knowing that it will impose extra costs but seemingly not caring enough about those costs to even delay this debate until we know what they are. We are rushing our fences on this without those figures.

5.00 pm

Of course, as the Norwegian study shows, it is not just the impact of violence. I can tell you that I spent a career at the other Bar. I represented many young men who did some very foolish things who would never have done those foolish things, who would never have done those violent things and who would never have done those shameful things but for the fact that they were under the influence of alcohol. Many times, the offences were committed as they poured out of public houses at the end of an extended licence, with many lives wrecked, not just by the over-imbibing of alcohol but by the behaviour that came from it. We know from a Northern Ireland statistical survey that 53% of domestic abuse assaults come from individuals under the influence of alcohol. It is not just the rough and tumble out in the street, where people with too much drink in them just want to fight. It is the hapless wife, the hapless partner and, yes, perhaps even the hapless kids at home who bear the brunt. When we come to the issue of extending licensing hours, I say to the House that we need to stop, pause and ask ourselves whether we care about those people. Do we care enough about them to ponder whether it is right to increase the facilitation of the availability of alcohol through our clubs and pubs?

Mr Catney: Thank you for giving way. I operated a bar —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Will the Member address his remarks through the Chair?

Mr Catney: Mr Deputy Speaker, I operated a bar in Belfast city centre. I can go back to the police, for the records are there. I never saw violence in that bar, because the establishment was strict and well-run. There are publicans out there who run their establishments with an iron fist, believe me, and do not allow people to move.

We can take the blame for all these misdemeanours and blame them on alcohol, but you cannot blame them on alcohol consumed in a public house operating under a very strict family tradition of how to run a bar. I have to say to you that in a lot of public houses there is zero tolerance: zero. I could be corrected, but I promise you that I cannot remember the police coming to me once to say that someone had left my pub and started a row outside in the street. Not once.

Mr Allister: I do not dispute for one moment that there are some very well run public houses and some very committed publicans. I am sure that Mr Catney fits exactly into that category, but that is not replicated in every case, because the publican, when someone leaves his premises, cannot be responsible for him. The number of criminal convictions that arise most often arise out in the street. There are fights in pubs, but they are not the generality of what gives rise to prosecutions. Once the inebriated individual leaves the premises, he is no longer the responsibility, in any legal sense, of the publican. The publican has no control over him. It is out there in our streets. We have all seen some television footage of the sort of loutish and thuggish behaviour that sadly takes place when people are in those circumstances. You cannot simply say that the Assembly can utterly wash its hands of that and say that it legislates only for good publicans and good drinkers. No: we legislate for everyone. We are legislating in the context where we know that 53% of those who attack their wives and partners do so when under the influence of drink; where alcohol is a causal factor in more

than 60 medical conditions; where it crowds hospital beds; where it costs the public purse almost £1 billion a year; and where alcohol abuse costs almost 300 lives a year. We cannot divorce ourselves from that. We cannot wish that away.

The question is this: knowing that, do we then, deliberately and consciously, decide to extend opening hours and give people another hour — way beyond the normal closing time, of course — to 3.00 am and then stand back and say that we did not intend there to be an upsurge in violence or, as the Norwegian study shows, a 16% increase in assaults, and for wives and children to pay the price? Sorry: we are legislators. The laws that we make affect ordinary lives. Therefore, we have to, with great caution, decide whether the steps proposed are the right ones.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for giving way. I want to clarify, and, hopefully, get some agreement, that domestic abuse behaviour is not caused by drinking alcohol and that the perpetrator alone is responsible for their actions.

Mr Allister: Absolutely. Of course, being drunk is not a defence to any criminal offence. That is undoubtedly so. However, it is still a fact that the statistical survey for Northern Ireland shows that 53% of assailants carried out their abuse under the influence of drink. That is a reality. We cannot duck and dive away from it.

Therefore, I say to the House that, for those reasons, it is foolhardy and wrong to embrace an extension beyond 2.00 am to 3.00 am. If we do that, let us do it with our eyes wide open. I hope that I have put before the House some of what might come into our vision if we do that. That is why I believe that pillar of the Bill to be ill conceived.

I must also say to the House that I do not support the assault on Easter. To many people, Easter is important because without what happened at the first Easter, there is no Christian faith and no Christianity. The death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ is celebrated at Easter. Without the first Easter, there is no Christian faith. Is it beyond this society to show some deference to those of Christian faith, to whom Easter Sunday is one of the most important days in the Christian calendar? Is it really beyond this House to say, “No, we can show no deference to that. We can show no respect for that because we’re a secular society”? Yes, that may well be, but we are still a society where, at least in a token fashion and to many much more than that, we aspire to be a Christian society. So, why is it that we have to liquidate that last vestige of respect for that?

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes.

Mr Catney: It is important that we know that pubs only close at 5.00 pm on Good Friday until 11.00 pm. They are open on Saturday and on Holy Sunday, so it is just a brief closure. I do not know what the new legislation says, but at the moment, they close from 5.00 pm to 11.00 pm. They are open on Saturday and Sunday at the moment.

Mr Allister: Pubs are currently open from 5.00 pm to 11.00 pm etc. They open at 5.00 pm on Good Friday. They are totally closed on Easter Sunday.

Mr Catney: No, they close early.

Mr Allister: Sorry, they close early on Easter Sunday. You are right. Originally, they were totally closed.

Ms Ennis: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I fail to see how Mr Allister’s personal religious beliefs have any relevance whatsoever to this debate.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The legislation is discussing opening hours, and Members are entitled to put their views on record when they are allocated a time to speak. I call Mr Allister.

Mr Allister: Clause 1 could not be clearer. It touches directly. The very first thing it does is to assault the sanctity of Easter. That is the very first thing that it does.

It is not a matter of what my religious beliefs are. It is the fact that, historically, this society has respected Easter for the reasons that I articulated. If you respect the holiday that is Easter, you should respect the cause. I do not hear anyone saying, “We don’t want to have an Easter holiday. We don’t want to have a Christmas holiday.” Both are rooted in matters pertinent, in the most dramatic fashion, to Christianity: the birth, death and resurrection of Christ. That is why we have Christmas and Easter holidays. If you expect Christmas and Easter holidays, why can you not respect the cause of those holidays? We still do that in our licensing in respect of Christmas Day, but there is this great surge and urge to disrespect matters in respect of Easter Sunday. That is wholly retrograde.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for giving way again. Does he not agree that if people do not want to have a drink on Good Friday at lunchtime, they do not have to have one, and there is nothing in this legislation that removes anyone’s Christian beliefs from being adhered to and respected over the Easter weekend by those who want and need to?

Mr Allister: I am not disputing that. I am not saying there is any compulsion. I am simply pointing out that, for historical reasons, Easter, like Christmas, has been respected in our Christian society as days apart for the reasons that I explained. What this legislation wants to do is liquidate any respect of that sort. That is why I regard it as an assault on something that is dear and precious, Easter Day, to many Christians.

Of course, people can live and will live, as they please. Why is it that you cannot, for one day, give a token of respect to the cause and the reason that gives rise to the holiday that is called Easter? That is the point; and that is the point that the Bill disrespects. That is why, both for the extension of hours and the assault on Easter, I do not find those two essential pillars of the Bill acceptable. If there are others to aid me, I will divide the House on this issue, because it is important, in principle. I wait to see if there are others. If there are not, I cannot, but I am giving notice that, if I can, I will, because it is important that that stand is taken.

5.15 pm

Miss Woods: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Yes. I am about to finish.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member regard bars opening on Christmas Day, which currently happens, as an assault on the Christmas holidays? That forms a huge part of Christmas celebrations for communities.

Mr Allister: All those things amount to that. My goodness, there are 363 other days of the year to do whatever one wants to do. It comes back to this: if we are a society that respects our Christian heritage and history and the continuing presence, within our midst, of many who call themselves Christian, is it really too much to ask that you should leave some vestige of respect for the key days? If it is too much, pass the Bill. I suspect that that is what the House will do.

Mr Carroll: Many will share my feeling that it is strange to debate the normality of the hospitality sector at this time when the majority of workers in the industry — a large percentage of our overall workforce — are dealing with uncertainty and deep financial concerns. The industry is on the brink of collapse, as some Members alluded to. During the first wave of coronavirus and lockdown, venues shut their doors for good, and workers are unsure about when they will find work again and, worse, when they will receive proper financial security.

Those fears and concerns have been addressed particularly well by Unite the Union's hospitality branch, as Miss Woods mentioned. They have developed a hospitality and tourism rescue plan that seeks to address those concerns through a sector-specific job retention scheme, adequate sick pay, routine testing, a proper plan to retain workers and the establishment of a hospitality commission working between employer, union and government.

It would be remiss of me not to use this opportunity to urge the Minister to engage with the union and its plan and to support a package for the sector that ensures that it is bailed out of the situation that it has been left in. This sector is relied upon week in, week out in normal times to keep the tourism industry, which the Executive so cherishes, ticking over. They were asked to get back and do that, a few months before they should have been, in my opinion. They put their shoulder to the wheel, and it is totally unsurprising in such a situation that cases in the hospitality sector shot up and soon represented one of the highest areas of spread of coronavirus cases across the North. Anyone could have predicted it.

We must guarantee that this does not become the reality again, as there appears to be some enthusiasm, from some Ministers in the Executive, to lift restrictions rapidly again, before it is safe to do so. It is imperative that the Minister implements Unite's strategy before then, which would guarantee testing, trade union representation and a bailout package that seeks to financially support those workers until it is safe for them to return to work and the virus has reached elimination levels. With a proper test-and-trace system functioning —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind the Member that this is a Licensing Bill. It is not about reacting to COVID. I ask you to address your remarks to the Bill, please.

Mr Carroll: Thanks, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I remind the Deputy Speaker that a Member talked about his personal religious views for quite a long time, which he has the right to do.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order, Member.

Mr Carroll: That is all right.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): One of the aspects for discussion in the Bill is opening hours, so, in that context,

it was relevant to the Bill. In my role as Deputy Speaker, I will endeavour to act fairly to all. I encourage the Member to address his remarks to the Bill, and I will endeavour to facilitate him.

Mr Carroll: Thank you. You will be glad to hear that I am coming on to the Bill specifically. A bit of leeway should be applied to all, in my view, but anyway.

I am sure that many will welcome some of the changes in the Bill. In some cases, they are long overdue. I have a concern, however, about the fact that the Bill obviously seeks to extend opening hours without reflecting or addressing the impact that working unsociable hours will have on hospitality workers who are often underpaid as it is. We would prefer to see a clause inserted that mandates employers to provide extra pay for those extra early morning hours, which, if the Bill is passed, workers will have to work. Can the Minister come back to say whether she has considered that point? If she has done so, why has she decided not to put in a clause to address that?

Moreover, we are concerned that there is no clause that mandates employers to assist workers to get home at unsociable hours, as has been referred to already. As the Minister will be aware, our public transport does not run into the wee hours of the morning, and employees will now be more likely to have to fork out extra for private taxi fares to get home or to walk home at a time when it is unsafe to do so, as many may feel. I am aware that Unite Hospitality is calling for the Bill, which deals with additional permitted opening hours, to be passed with those clauses inserted. It would be helpful to learn whether the Minister has engaged with workers or unions on the issue, because it appears that a divergent position has been reached.

Workers have been clear that their job can become increasingly difficult and more dangerous during drinking-up time, when they are more likely to be subjected to abuse and violence. The Bill solidifies drinking-up time by providing an extension. The explanatory memorandum goes some way to stress that a balance needs to be struck between restricting opening hours and addressing the dangers of alcohol, but it does so without recognising or addressing the unique dangers faced by staff in particular in the industry. I hope that the Minister can provide some evidence and rationale to back up the need for extra drinking-up time, because I have struggled to find any that takes on board the issues expressed by workers. Given the testimony of workers with whom I have engaged, it is important that evidence is there to back that up and that support for workers is in place.

I have been contacted, as, I am sure, have other MLAs — some referred to this already — not just by workers and unions but by those who work in and run local breweries. Without dissecting everything that was mentioned, there are issues with hegemony and the tight grip that major international alcohol-producing companies are allowed to hold over the sale of alcohol here. I want to speak to the fact that local breweries have made the case that they should at least be able to offer the sale of their local and unique produce on their premises, beyond the odd taster sample. Local brewery workers, just as with hospitality workers, are rolled out by the Executive for the pleasure of tourists in order to encourage them to spend, spend, spend. Now they are asking for help, and they are struggling to find answers as to why they cannot sell their product on their premises. I ask the Minister to address

that issue in particular so that those who are affected can get the answers that they need.

Finally, I want the Minister to explain and expand on the decision not to remove the surrender principle, which means that licences cannot be obtained if similar facilities exist locally without the surrender of another licence. I do not claim to be an expert, but it seems to me to be pretty out of date and archaic, and it needs to be looked at and addressed. I will leave my comments there.

Mr Lunn: I welcome the Bill. I think that the Minister is having quite a good day today, except that she is starting to look a bit tired. This is another step forward, in that we are now dealing with another contentious issue. I want to say straight off that there is very little in the Bill with which I do not find favour. It is moving everything in the right direction. I will mention a couple of points, but I am conscious that we have been here for a long time, so I will not take much of your time.

I thought that the removal of the Easter restrictions would be a headline issue in the Bill, that the country would be up in arms and that we would be under pressure not to proceed with it. In fact, I think that I am right in saying that Mr Allister was the first person to mention it.

I do not want to be too personal, but I grew up in a religious, Christian family environment. I learned to respect Easter, particularly Good Friday and Easter Day, and I still go to church every week, in part because I play the organ there. It seems to me that, now that we have been confronted with this at last, the sky is not going to fall in. There is nothing in the Bill, as Rachel Woods rightly said, that forces anybody who takes a Christian outlook, as Mr Allister does, to change their habits in any way. The rest of us can make our own decision about it. I have a feeling that we will perhaps come under pressure from some quarters outside, but it seems to me that the feeling of the House is that this is a good move.

The surrender principle has been much debated today. I marvel that we have been held to ransom until now by an Act that was passed in 1902, which, for the record, 118 years ago, was the last time that a new liquor licence was issued in Northern Ireland.

Mr O'Toole: Anywhere in Ireland.

Mr Lunn: Yes. When I think back to other contentious issues, such as that involving the Offences against the Person Act 1861, which we had to deal with last year, I think that we really cannot be bound in that way. The way that this has evolved makes no sense at all. First, you had licences that probably cost only a few quid that are now going for £75,000 or £100,000 and, on the odd occasion, many multiples of that. The only reason that they have such a value is because there is competition for them. That leads me to this question: why is there competition in this particular industry for people to be allowed to obtain a licence to run a perfectly legitimate business?

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Lunn: I will, yes.

Mr Catney: Just on that point, when those licences are surrendered —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to correct his microphone and speak to the front, otherwise Hansard will not pick up what he is saying.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank Trevor for giving way. Whenever those licences are surrendered, they go to supermarkets. It is very rare now —

A Member: *[Interruption.]*

Mr Catney: Yes, I know. The licence is on/off the premises. I agree with you; it is antiquated and needs to be looked at. The other important point is that, in order to operate their business, if it has not been passed down from generation to generation, most publicans have to pay for a licence when they buy their premises, and that creates a monopoly. I agree that a mechanism will have to be found to compensate publicans if there are changes.

Mr Lunn: You are a great *[Inaudible.]* That is by the way. You have had a good day.

What was the population of Northern Ireland — there was not one — in 1902? That would have had some bearing, I think, on the number of licences that were allowable. Was there such a thing as a supermarket in 1902? No, there was not. Was there such a thing as a separate off-sales outside a pub? No, there was not. Everything has changed, except for this archaic regulation that says that we cannot issue any more licences. I implore the Minister to think about that as she and the Committee proceed with the Bill's Consideration Stage.

The best that I can do on the breweries and distilleries is to agree with everybody who has supported the plea of those organisations to extend, beyond what is already on offer, their ability to market their products. It is a no-brainer, and I am pleasantly surprised that there has been no opposition to that either.

We have some fantastic breweries and distilleries in this country. One has just opened on the outskirts of our constituency, Pat, selling — if I can give it a plug — Hinch whiskey and Ninth Wave gin. They are excellent, but cannot currently be sold from the distillery's own premises. It will be glad of this.

5.30 pm

Sinéad mentioned the Whitewater Brewery. I am familiar with Whitewater beers; very familiar. I recommend Hen, Cock and Pigeon Rock if you want a nice beer. If you want to go to sleep very quickly, try the Ewe Rebel, which is very apt. *[Laughter.]* It is marvellously named. Whitewater and other breweries have been in touch with me. There was an event in Parliament Buildings a few months ago involving CAMRA. I went, and — I see John nodding his head — others took the opportunity to attend as well. I spoke to a brewery operator — I will just say they were from County Down. I think it was Mr Buckley, who has now left the Chamber, who mentioned the international aspect. This man told me that he sold virtually no beer in Northern Ireland. If it was not for the fact that the Scots love his beer, ales and cask beer, he would go out of business. It all just goes straight on a boat and across to Scotland. That cannot be right either.

I absolutely support what has already been said, and I am not going to stand here and prolong this. It is a good debate, and I look forward to the next stage of the Bill. In closing, I will just say that clause 16 is about advertising in supermarkets. As a warning, I have to say that my favourite wine is called "25% off six bottles" *[Laughter]*, and I would not like to see that disappear.

Ms Sugden: I am often critical of this Administration, but I have to say that this is probably one of the most positive pieces of legislation to come to the House in a number of years. Despite the three years of nothingness, the Bill is indicative of how far we have come and progressed on this issue, and it did happen with a five-party Executive. That is the only compliment that the Executive are going to hear from me for the rest of the mandate.

I want to make a note about the consultation. The consultation was made public in, I believe, October last year. No proposals were put to the public, but a general opinion was sought, and that has led to a more comprehensive review of what we have now. It has built on the work of Ms Ní Chuilín's predecessor, Paul Givan, who did, ironically, start this piece of legislation back in 2016. As a general point, maybe more consultation processes need to take a wider approach so that we can encapsulate what the public think and what is right for the people outside this Building, rather than it being fed by public opinion.

I do generally support the principles of the Bill. However, there are some elements that I have concerns about, and I will come to that later. Specifically on tourism, the Bill not only supports the hospitality industry that already exists in the form of hotels, restaurants and pubs, but creates its own tourism product in itself. I went to Boston on a business trip, and there is a great brewery there called the Harpoon Brewery. It has created a tourism product from the factory and its ability to brew on-site. Alongside that production, it is able to sell its product in a beer hall, and it was selling the beer and using the byproduct. Earlier, Stewart Dickson talked about bread as a byproduct of beer, and the Harpoon Brewery was using the byproduct and marketing it, not just for its own business but for local tourism, and it did bring people to the area. Mike Nesbitt talked about being in an industrial park, and that is exactly where this was, yet thousands of people descended on it every Saturday to enjoy the beer and the community of being within that space.

That is the opportunity that exists here in Northern Ireland. There is a booming food and drink industry coming across in Northern Ireland that really celebrates Northern Ireland's food and produce. Causeway Coast Foodie Tours, for example, deliberately takes people around all the various food production sites and restaurants. We could add another element to this in the microbreweries — taking people to those to show them what local people are producing and what is the best of Northern Ireland. I really think there is an opportunity here for tourism.

We on the north coast really do celebrate microbreweries. Their ask is to be able to sell their own product from their own premises.

Every year, although sadly not this year, we have the Portrush Beer and Food Festival. I do not know whether anyone here has gone to it. It attracts people from all sides of the community and from different backgrounds. It is a real celebration of local produce and people coming together as a community. That is the type of positive that we need to focus on when we look at the new licensing laws and the opportunities around them.

Lacada is a microbrewery in my constituency. I am sure that Members have tried its beer. I am not a beer person, although one is often pushed into my hand. It is a really great product, but it is not just about what it is producing

but about the organisation that it has created. It is a community-owned cooperative that encourages local people to buy into it. It is not necessarily about making profit, because it is not doing that. Rather, it is about coming together to celebrate what is local produce and to celebrate the talents of local people.

Interestingly, microbreweries, in and of themselves, are not binge-drinking operations. Their very nature means that they do not benefit from economies of scale. Their products therefore tend to be slightly more expensive. People do not buy them to chug them. They buy them to enjoy them. That is where the legislation misses the point. I struggle to understand this: why were microbreweries' suggestions left out of the legislation? This is a direct question to the Minister. A lot of the significant responses that the consultation received last year came from microbreweries and local producers. They advocated that we could have something like what they suggested, but it is not in the Bill. I would be interested to hear the rationale from the Minister for why it was left out. There certainly seems to be an awful lot of support around the House for the inclusion of that provision. I will quite happily, perhaps with Mr O'Toole and other Members, table an amendment to ensure that it finds its way in to the Bill, because I think that it has broad support.

Another point that I will make is about facilitating licensing for major events. We saw the challenges that that created with the Open, and we anticipate more big events like that coming to Northern Ireland. It builds on the work of former Member Judith Cochrane around licensing in stadia, and that is really important. It feels as though we are bringing Northern Ireland to where the rest of the world was 20 or 30 years ago. The legislation is really important for progressing where we are at.

I support extended Easter opening. I understand why people, particularly those with a faith-based perspective, may be concerned or feel that extending Easter opening will disrespect what they are doing. I must admit that I do not accept the arguments put forward by Mr Allister. If it is about disrespect, we should close supermarkets and other places on a Sunday. This is about bringing opening hours into line with what already exists. People can still respect the holiday and the faith-based element of it. Perhaps Mr Allister will intervene to help me understand why it is disrespectful to have an alcohol beverage in a public house but not disrespectful to have one at home. Where is the disrespect in that regard? To me, it is the same difference. People in those pubs would certainly be respecting the individuals who choose not to do that.

Mr Allister: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. The difference is that one is a state-sanctioned operation in a state that historically has a Christian heritage. By the sanctioning of the dispensing with any respect for anything special about that day, the state is, in effect, disrespecting the ethos that lay behind the original inclusion of the provisions in our legislation.

Ms Sugden: I cannot find a reason to agree. If that is the argument that potentially obstructs this provision, we will have to look at everything else that has been disrespected up to this point. We are at a point now at which it is about consistency, not just in Northern Ireland but across the UK. We need to look at the wider economic reality and the effect that not opening on those hours has.

I come back to the point about supporting the hospitality sector. People come to Northern Ireland during their Easter holidays and want to enjoy the scenery and the food and drink, as we have talked about. They would like an opportunity to be able to do that in our businesses. We should seize that opportunity and support the local economy to bring that business to Northern Ireland. I respect your point, because I understand your deep Christian faith, but it is about achieving consistency with other areas. The law now needs to be brought into line. I therefore do not accept the Member for North Antrim's point.

Where I do agree with him is on the extension of opening hours from 1.00 am to 2.00 am and then from 2.00 am to 3.00 am. I am not necessarily against it, but I am keen to understand the rationale for that additional hour because that additional hour brings additional consumption, and that additional consumption potentially gives rise to issues of violence and of spilling out onto the street.

Mr Catney made the valid point that there are responsible publicans who ensure that that does not happen on their premises, but they do not have jurisdiction beyond the door of that premises. Sadly, I have experience of alcohol-fuelled violence, where someone very close to me was taken due to alcoholism after closing time. It still has an impact on me, so, if we are going to do this, I am concerned about what we are doing to safeguard against potential violence. What are we doing to support the police to mitigate it? The police are the after-hours service. When every other public service goes home at 5.00 pm on a Friday, it is the police that pick up the bill, and their resources are already stretched. If we are going to do this, we need to proceed with caution and be cognisant of the issues that could arise from it.

For people who are drinking beyond 2.00 and 3.00 am, it is entirely their choice, and I am happy to support the choices that people make and the responsibilities that they need to take upon themselves. However, if it leads to harming others, which, in my experience, sadly, it did, we need to be very careful in how we proceed with extending opening hours. Are we hearing from businesses that that is when additional money is coming in because people are drinking more because they are not in control? That gives rise to other concerns for me. As I said, I am not particularly against it. However, I think that we need to proceed with caution, and I am keen to hear the rationale for it and what safeguards the Minister would be prepared to put in place.

Ms Woods rightly said that any ministerial decision should be cross-community. Where is our outcomes-based accountability? I am looking forward to hearing that the Minister has had conversations with the Minister of Justice on this; I am looking forward to hearing that she has had conversations with the Minister for the Economy, because we have heard that this legislation impacts on other Departments. I appreciate that any piece of legislation that makes it to the Floor of the House has to have Executive approval, but those Ministers will have an input to any of this moving forward, so it would be nice, for the responsibility that we have as a legislature, to ensure that we are thinking about this in the round and about all the impacts that it will have.

I want to delve a little deeper, as Ms Woods did, into the issue of online sales. I am not sure what the Bill provides for in respect of that. Perhaps I have overlooked it. We

all know now that we can go onto apps on our phones and purchase six at 25% off from a supermarket and it gets delivered to our home. In my experience, there are no safeguards around that. There is no checking to see whether I am under 18, as, clearly, I look under 18. There is nothing to ask. On the other hand, I have purchased alcohol from Amazon, and I had a guy asking me for my date of birth. Is that enough? Should there be more? I think that we need to look at that.

COVID-19 has given rise to issues in relation to the Licensing Bill. We are seeing a lot of businesses, particularly those in the hospitality industry that have had to close, selling a dine-at-home box. I had a fantastic experience at the weekend where a local restaurant gave me a three-course meal that I had to finish cooking at home. Some restaurants are also offering opportunities to provide wine with that. Is that legal? Should they be doing that? Where are the safeguards with that? If food and alcohol are being brought to our homes, how do we safeguard against possible abuses? It is not just about bringing alcohol into our homes. There is the prevalence of violence and the issues around alcohol addiction and mental health. That happens in our homes. Therefore, if we are facilitating that, we need to look at what we do to ensure that it does not give rise to unintended consequences. I add to that the likes of Uber Eats and all the new technologies that people can use. Will people under 18 be able to open the door and be given alcohol without any checks and balances? All those things are really important in the world that we now live in.

Members talked about the legislation being balanced, and the Minister talked about it being a balance in the world that we now live in. I agree. I think that addiction is a symptom of other issues and that people have mental health issues and addictions because of traumas that they have suffered previously in their life.

We have to look genuinely at the root causes of that before blaming alcohol. However, I understand Mr Allister's point that we, as a legislature for the people of Northern Ireland, must understand our responsibilities. Are we facilitating that?

5.45 pm

Ms Woods suggested having organisations like ASCERT go into pubs and clubs to advise people on addiction issues and being more responsible. What are our Government doing by way of a public awareness campaign to ensure that we act responsibly? Now, every advert for a spirit or a pub has a little message at the bottom saying, "Drink responsibly". However, if we enact legislation that facilitates drinking, maybe there is something that we can do by way of a public awareness campaign to ensure that, if we are going to drink, we do it responsibly. It is about education.

This is welcome legislation, but there are areas that need to be interrogated further. We need to give more support to the microbreweries. We are micro-region, so we lend ourselves to a lot of small businesses in Northern Ireland, and that feeds into everything else, such as tourism.

I support the Bill and wish it success through its various stages. I look forward to it coming to the House a bit sooner than 2022. We hope to have some sort of recovery

next year. I am not sure that it is possible, Minister, but, if you can expedite the Bill, it would be most welcome.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Members will be delighted that I will not go through every point. For the questions that some Members asked, I will need to look at Hansard and get back to them. I also want to say that the Bill has not been through the Committee yet. All these great ideas should go in front of the Committee for the Bill to be amended. That is what the Committee is for.

Frankly, I need a drink after listening to half of you. I am of the opinion that, if some of you were pints of Guinness, you would drink yourselves [*Laughter.*] I will say no more than that.

I also need to go to the bathroom. I have been sitting here from 2.45 pm, and I ask that we look at the facility for a break. I notice that the top Table has changed and rightly so. However, I am afraid to drink water. I want you to look at that as well.

Mr O'Dowd: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Can we suspend for 10 minutes to allow the Minister a rest?

Ms Ní Chuilín: No, I do not need it. I am only going to be 10 minutes. Thank you anyway. I will just stand here and not move.

Many good suggestions have been made. Liquor licensing modernisation has been a long time coming. I make it clear that this is about pub opening hours, not Christianity. I believe in complete separation of church and state: end of. We make laws for everyone, not just Christians.

I remind Members that minimum alcohol unit pricing is the responsibility of Health, and I have spoken to Minister Swann about that. I will also speak to Minister Long and anybody else who will look after workers, tackle zero-hours contracts and look at the issues. I have listed the surrender issue quite a lot. My colleagues in the Department have taken notes, and I will read Hansard. I counted about 64 questions. By bringing together some of the commonality, we can bring that down to a few, and I will share them with the Committee.

Ms P Bradley: I will not prolong this any longer than I have to, and thank you, Minister, for giving way.

I want to tidy up an issue that several Members brought up about Easter 2022. The Committee should not be put under any pressure when it comes to the Bill. Issues galore have come up. I would like to think that we will have the Bill through by Easter 2021; that is the date that we are looking to. I want to see that happen, but I want to say on the record that hundreds of issues have been brought up. At the beginning, I said that none of us should take a point of view until we hear the evidence. That includes evidence from people with a vast gamut of opinions. It includes people of faith, and I have respect for them also. I just want to put that on the record, Minister: the Committee will not be rushed in getting the Bill through, albeit that we want to do our best to support the hospitality industry.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I agree. I think that it was Mark who raised the issue of the BBC saying that it was 2022: it is 2021. Perish the thought that the BBC is wrong.

I understand that this is an opportunity for some of the smaller parties and the independents to have longer speaking time. I respect that. I also respect the fact that that is what legislation looks like. I have no issue with that.

I do not want to be disrespectful to Members, but I cannot answer some of the questions individually. I will endeavour, through the passage of time, to get you responses. I ask the Assembly to approve the Bill's Second Stage.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill [NIA Bill 10/17-22] be agreed.

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

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

Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme Order 2020

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): I beg to move

That the draft Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme Order 2020 be approved.

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

Mr Poots: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for the opportunity to move the motion. The Order in Council was laid in draft in the Assembly on 15 July 2020 under the Climate Change Act 2008. It requires that the Order be laid in draft and debated in each of the four UK legislatures. So far, the Order has been approved by the Scottish and English Parliaments. The Order establishes a UK-wide greenhouse gas emissions trading scheme (ETS). The UK ETS replaces our participation in the EU emissions trading scheme. The UK will cease to participate in the EU ETS at the end of the year as a consequence of our withdrawal from the EU.

In the Northern Ireland context, there is an important exclusion from the scope of the UK ETS. It arises as a result of article 9 and annex 4 of the Northern Ireland protocol, which requires Northern Ireland electricity generators to remain in the EU ETS. That is to preserve the functioning of the single electricity market on the island of Ireland. If generators, North and South, were in different emissions trading schemes, there would be a carbon price divergence that could distort the operation of the single electricity market. To avoid that, Northern Ireland's five electricity-generating installations will remain in the EU ETS. Further legislation will be brought forward at Westminster later in the year to do that under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

I will give some background. The UK has participated in the EU scheme since its inception in 2005. There are around 1,000 UK participants in the scheme, with 21 of those in Northern Ireland. Those 21 installations account for approximately 18% of greenhouse gas emissions in Northern Ireland. An emissions trading scheme works using the "cap and trade" principle by requiring participants to purchase a carbon allowance for each ton of carbon dioxide that they emit. The more carbon dioxide emitted, the more allowances required. There are penalties for failure to obtain the requisite number of allowances. A cap is set on the total number of allowances available under the scheme, and it is gradually reduced over time. The aim is to encourage reductions in emissions. Scheme participants, with the exception of electricity generators, receive free allowances that cover a proportion of their emissions. That is to prevent carbon leakage: industries moving away to relocate to other parts of the world that either do not have costs for carbon emissions or costs that are lower. The allowances can be traded, hence "emissions trading scheme". Those that make the biggest reductions may have surplus allowances that can be banked or sold to those that need to purchase more allowances. This is the most efficient way to achieve reductions in emissions. The scheme promotes carbon

emissions reduction and investment in clean, low-carbon technologies.

The UK ETS has been agreed by the four Governments of the UK nations, and the policy positions are set out in the Governments' response to the future of carbon pricing consultation, for which I obtained Executive agreement on 21 May and which was subsequently published on 1 June. The draft Order in Council establishes a UK ETS that will be operational from 1 January 2021. It establishes the scope of the UK ETS, which includes energy-intensive industries, power generation and aviation. Although there are no registered aviation operators in Northern Ireland, the current scope of the UK ETS is identical to the EU ETS and establishes a cap on allowances each year.

6.00 pm

The initial level of the cap will be 5% below that which would be the case had we stayed in the EU ETS. That means that the standard that we are establishing is more stringent for carbon emissions reduction than would be the case had we stayed in the EU ETS. There is a more stringent cap in the UK scheme, but free allowances are maintained at EU scheme levels. Therefore, there is sufficient headroom in the scheme in terms of available allowances to mitigate any adverse impact.

On climate change ambition, there is a commitment to review the UK ETS in light of forthcoming advice from the Climate Change Committee on achieving the net-zero target. The Order in Council also allows for scheme monitoring, reporting and verification requirements. The UK ETS offers participants a robust and proportionate enforcement system that will also establish and define the roles of national regulators in monitoring and enforcing the system. In Northern Ireland, the regulator will be the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). Further secondary legislation will be introduced by negative resolution later this year, and that will introduce additional elements to the UK ETS such as provision for free allowances, auctioning and registries. Further instruments will be reserved to deal with the financial matters that are concerned with the operation of the market on auctioning, and those will be handled by Treasury. Those are the four main elements of the order.

I will touch briefly on a few issues that have been raised about the UK ETS. First, there has been some interest in the impact in Northern Ireland of setting a cap that is 5% lower than the EU ETS levels. The short answer is that the impact will be minimal. Of the greenhouse gas emissions that are produced by Northern Ireland installations currently in the EU ETS, around 82% come from power generators, so the majority of emissions from that sector are made by generators. Only a minority, around 18%, come from installations other than generators, and those will be part of the UK ETS.

An impact assessment of the transition from the EU ETS to the UK ETS was published alongside the Government response to the consultation on the future of carbon pricing back in June. That concluded that the overall impact on costs would be negligible and that the scheme could encourage greater savings by encouraging investment in emissions-saving technology. A local assessment of impact paper has drawn the same conclusion. The impact made by the order is very small for two reasons. First, the vast majority of our emissions and ETS costs arise from

generators, which, as I mentioned, are staying in the EU ETS, so there is no impact there. Secondly, the policy approach taken in establishing the UK ETS is to make the transition from the EU to the UK schemes as smooth as possible for operators, with similar arrangements under both.

The second issue is linking. In developing proposals, the UK Government and devolved Administrations agreed that the desirable outcome is a UK ETS that is linked to the EU ETS. That is because, the larger the market for trading carbon allowances, the better the chance of the market being effective and the less chance there is of carbon leakage. It would mean that we could avoid needing a dual system of having generators in the UK ETS and non-generators in the UK ETS. The UK Government's position is to develop a UK system that is ready to be linked to an EU scheme. The uncertainty around the negotiations with the EU on future relations means that a definitive commitment cannot be given.

Thirdly, the UK Government have introduced a fallback alternative option of a carbon tax set by the Treasury that could be used instead of the UK emissions trading scheme. Treasury consulted on proposals for a carbon emissions tax earlier this autumn. A UK Government decision on whether a UK ETS or a carbon tax will be implemented as a post-transition carbon-pricing policy is expected shortly. I have pressed the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) Ministers to clarify the position.

In conclusion, we want to encourage the best means of reducing carbon emissions in order to achieve the UK's net-zero target while ensuring that we do not put burdens on industry that cause it to move elsewhere; that would simply move the problem from one place to another. The order that we are considering establishes a UK ETS to replace our current membership of the EU ETS in order to achieve that goal. Accordingly, I commend the order to the House.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): As the Assembly is aware, the transition period for EU exit ends on 1 January 2021. By that time, alternative arrangements and systems for a wide range of matters have to be either in place or nearing completion. One of those is a replacement for the EU emissions trading scheme, which will form one of the new common frameworks that we have been hearing about.

The EU emissions trading scheme is the method used across the EU to control and regulate the emission of greenhouse gases by power generators, the aviation sector and industry. As carbon is the predominant greenhouse gas emitted by those sectors, the emissions are largely measured in carbon tonnage. Participants in the scheme must buy allowances to cover the amount of carbon that they emit. If they emit less carbon and do not need the allowances, they can sell them on the market. If they emit more carbon than anticipated, they must buy allowances on the market. A free allowance is available to help to prevent carbon leakage.

The order establishes a UK-wide ETS to replace the current EU ETS and will provide a system for permitting, reporting, monitoring and validation of emissions, as well as a system of penalties and appeals. The UK ETS has been designed to mirror the EU scheme. We understand

from DAERA officials that the EU scheme is a robust system that has been tested and refined over many years by the EU. No Committee members raised any major concerns about that aspect of the order. The order also establishes a system for emissions from the aviation sector. However, as none of the local participants in the current EU scheme is in the aviation sector, the Committee did not focus on those provisions.

The Committee also considered the scope of the order, and I note that some Committee members were keen for the scope to be widened to include other sectors, such as agriculture. We recognise that the scope of the order has, in the first instance, been designed to mirror what currently happens in the EU scheme and to therefore smooth the transition for current participants. The EU ETS will be a common framework that is legislative and non-legislative in nature.

The debate today is on one aspect of the proposed common framework, namely the Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme Order. The order is a major element of the framework and worthy of a debate in its own right, although it is only one aspect.

Further regulations are to come, some of which will be made under the Climate Change Act 2008, as is the case with the order. Some will come under the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020, such as the implementation of the protocol that allows our power generators to remain in the EU ETS to protect the single electricity market. Still further aspects will be fiscal regulations made under the Finance Act 2020. Hopefully, we will soon be provided with the framework agreement and concordat. Both are non-legislative aspects of the framework that mostly focus on governance and administrative arrangements, including dispute resolution between the four jurisdictions. There is a little unease in the Committee about having to debate and approve or not approve the order without having seen all elements of the framework within which the order will sit.

Another issue that I want to draw attention to is the impact assessment that accompanies the order. This is at a UK-wide level, and the data cannot be disaggregated for here. Separately, the deputy First Minister has asked that a local assessment be carried out. DAERA officials have been working on that, and the Committee was promised sight of it before the debate, but it was not received in time for the Committee to consider it. Therefore, I cannot provide a Committee view on it, but I can point out why a local assessment is important. The current EU ETS regulates greenhouse gas emissions from the power generators, heavy industry and aviation. Locally, it regulates some 33% of those emissions. There are currently 21 local participants in the EU ETS, of which five are power generators. They account for 82% of the emissions that are regulated under the ETS. Under the terms of the protocol, the power generators will remain in the EU ETS. Regulation of the vast majority of emissions in this jurisdiction will continue to be regulated by the EU. The impact of that is not addressed in the UK-wide impact assessment.

The ETS common framework and this order regulate the remaining 16 participants, which account for 18% of the 33% of the emissions that fall under the order. Five of those 16 have what is known as an opt-out. That is a feature of the EU ETS that is replicated in the order.

Essentially, it provides for lighter-touch regulation. Those with an opt-out still have a target to achieve in reducing their emissions, but they do not have to buy and trade allowances, so avoid the costs associated with that. Three of the five participants with an opt-out are hospitals. Of the companies that will be subject to the provisions in the order, many are in the agri-food sector, and some are major employers. That is another reason why a local assessment is so important.

The next issue that I will deal with is the cap on emissions that is provided for in the order. The Committee noted that the cap is set at 5%, and DAERA officials stated that this would be more stringent than under the EU ETS.

DAERA officials, however, also provided information to the Committee that indicated that emissions from the ETS industries will be between 126 and 131 million tons of carbon dioxide and that the 5% cap equates to 156 million tons. That is for across the UK, so there is significant headroom. The Committee has concerns that there may in fact be too much headroom. DAERA officials have told the Committee that having a cap higher than the projected emissions will allow companies to meet their obligations as well as providing them with an easy transition to the UK scheme, thus minimising any differences for them.

I will go back to the issue of a local assessment. We know what the UK-wide carbon emissions are for the sectors covered by the order. We know that it covers only 16 participants locally and that five of those have an opt-out. What we cannot get information on is the amount of emissions from the 16 participants that we are responsible for and thus the size of the local market covered by the order. It is therefore difficult to decide whether the order and the framework are appropriate and proportionate for our jurisdiction and for our unique circumstances under the protocol.

The next issue that I want to draw attention to is that of the link between the EU ETS and the UK ETS. Officials from the four jurisdictions have been working on the replacement for the EU ETS since the decision was made to leave the EU. It was always envisaged that the replacement scheme would be a UK ETS and that it would be able to link with the EU ETS. That is the stated desire of the Scottish and Welsh Governments, and it is also a desirable outcome for this jurisdiction, as it would remove any question of differences between North and South. A UK ETS would provide access to the larger carbon-trading market for participants and help avoid what are known as carbon leakages, which the Minister referred to previously. To enable that link, the order is therefore largely a mirror of the EU ETS.

Linkage between the two schemes would be largely dependent on both having similar standards and regulatory frameworks. Ultimately, that linkage will depend on what type of deal is done between the UK and the EU. In the summer of 2020, however, the UK issued a consultation on an alternative to the proposed UK ETS that is known as the carbon emissions tax. That has caused some concern and speculation that the UK may decide to move forward with the carbon tax instead of with a UK ETS. That could be because no deal has been reached or because the UK has decided that a carbon tax is a better way forward. The problem that the Committee has with the carbon tax is that it effectively un-devolves that area. Greenhouse gas emissions and their regulation are devolved matters,

but a carbon tax would be an excepted matter, and if we need a local assessment to be able to judge the impact of the order on our local participants, we also need some assessment of the impact of the carbon tax on them.

We are all aware of the renewable heat incentive (RHI) inquiry and the cash-for-ash scandal, and all in the Chamber are committed to making sure that we do our best to avoid another such scheme. Emissions trading schemes operate across the world, not just in Europe. Carbon is treated as a commodity and traded. The carbon market is worth vast amounts of money. In taking evidence from DAERA officials, we asked what checks and balances were built into the scheme to avoid financial abuse of it. Officials told us that the fiscal management of the trading aspect of the scheme will be done largely through two finance regulations that will cover the auction of the allowance and the role of the national conduct authority and that there are checks and balances through the Treasury to avoid abuse of the system. They did not have a lot of information on that aspect. It is not in the scope of the order, but it is something to draw Members' attention to.

The Committee explored a number of other matters with DAERA officials, such as carbon leakage and free allowances; divergence of regulatory systems between the EU and the UK as time goes on and what impact that might have here; ongoing consultation with local participants on the governance and administration arrangements; and the opt-out system available to our smaller emitters.

I hope that that has given the Assembly a taste of the work of the Committee in this area and that it helps to inform the debate and the vote on whether this jurisdiction should be included in the order.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call the next Member on the list, I will read out who is on it, because I see others in the Chamber, and I do not know whether they wish to participate. The Members on the list at present are Mr William Irwin, Mr Matthew O'Toole, Mr Harry Harvey, Mr Philip McGuigan, Ms Clare Bailey and Mr Gerry Carroll. I see that Mrs Rosemary Barton and Mr John Blair also wish to contribute.

Mr Irwin: I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate. This is one of many special instruments that have been discussed in the Committee in recent weeks and months.

There is a significant importance attached to this particular SI to ensure that, post transition, a trading scheme is retained outside the EU but with the possibility of further collaboration on the issues of cleaner emissions if agreement exists to do so.

6.15 pm

This statutory instrument is essentially a replacement policy for the UK, including the devolved regions of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, where participation in the trading scheme will come into effect at the end of the transition period on 31 December. Having a continuation of policy and a rollover of regulation will ensure that the UK on the whole retains monitoring powers and the determination of our ability to continue to meet greenhouse gas emission targets.

As we know, these are very ambitious targets. Our UK targets are more ambitious than those of the EU. Therefore, in order to meet the target of net zero by 2050, the industry will have to continue to make strides on cleaner air from industrial and electrical generating installations. That will require the trading scheme, as tabled, to be enacted. The method behind ensuring that we have an unbroken continuation of legislation is the fact that putting a cost on carbon means that an incentive exists to drive emissions down in a way that represents value for money and, critically, gives important stimulus to the private sector to invest in emissions-reduction technology and practices.

The scope of the legislation will account for 33% of the UK's emissions outputs. Indeed, it was the UK that first piloted an emissions trading scheme in 2002. That was the blueprint for the current EU trading scheme. With that in mind, it is fair to say that, from 1 January, the United Kingdom will be more than capable of operating a scheme independently, given its track record of innovation in that regard.

The cap-and-trade system is important for the working of the scheme, as it incentivises the pursuit of reductions and has an important facility whereby companies can purchase allowances to assist their operations over time towards the lowering of greenhouse gas emissions.

I have a concern about competitiveness. As I understand it, the target set will be about 5% lower than the equivalent European scheme. It is therefore important that we are watchful of our competitiveness compared with the rest of the EU and what, if any, impact a lower or more ambitious target will have on our industries here.

As with much of the transitional legislation, time is of the essence. Since the UK was a forerunner in the trading scheme, I believe that it can continue to lead the way. With an important eye on competitiveness, therefore, I support the motion.

Mr O'Toole: Here we are again debating a fairly rushed but extremely important and consequential piece of legislation in relation to Brexit before the end of the transition period, albeit I accept that, as is usual, a lot of that is because of Boris Johnson's Government and their desire, or inability, to bring these two devolved Administrations together in a timely way.

First, it is worth saying that the EU emissions trading scheme, flawed though it is, has been an important part of emissions reduction across the continent over the past 20 years. It is important that we have a replacement. It is, however, suboptimal that there is still lack of clarity at UK Government level about whether they are committed in the long term to a UK emissions trading scheme or a carbon tax.

There are legitimate arguments in favour of both models. As Declan McAleer from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs said, there is a specific concern about the application of a carbon tax and what that would mean, in the sense that it would be a tax applied from the Treasury. That would have a profound impact on the principle of devolved responsibility for emissions reduction, albeit a realist would say, and I am sure that Ms Bailey might agree, that we have not always done as well as we should at a devolved level on emissions reduction,

so perhaps we should not pat ourselves on the backs about that.

To come specifically to the points in the order, we have some indication of what the costs will be in relation to it for Northern Ireland's current participants in the EU ETS, but, unfortunately, we do not have a detailed understanding of what it will mean for the different sectors. There are still unanswered questions. I appreciate that the Minister addressed some of them in his opening remarks, but there are still many more.

It is clear that the vast majority of emissions that are covered by the EU ETS will continue to be covered by it, in the sense that a small number of power generators that are participants in the all-Ireland electricity market, will, because of the single electricity market, continue to be part of the EU ETS. It is worth saying that that is necessary and welcome.

The protection of the single electricity market was one of the most important early parts of the discussions around the UK's withdrawal. I am glad that it is being legally protected and is enshrined in this order. However, there are still significant questions about those parts of our economy that will still be covered by the UK ETS and also, as the Committee Chair said, the linkage between the UK and EU ETS. It is really important that we understand that; it is important for our economy, going forward, how we interact with that new UK ETS.

Pardon me, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. I am —

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: If the Member wants to nip out and get a glass of water, I am happy to move on. I will call you again, or are you —?

Mr O'Toole: That is fine. I will make my remarks very brief. The Minister will be glad that I have had an opportunity to curtail my remarks.

As I said, about 80% of our emissions will continue to be covered by the EU ETS, but significant parts of our economy will still be under the UK ETS. It is really important that we understand what the linkage between the two schemes will be. It is better for our economy and industry that we understand exactly what that linkage will be and how it is going to work.

It is also important, as part of that understanding, that we look at our emissions more broadly. As we know, agriculture, which is one of the biggest emitters in Northern Ireland, has consistently been excluded from the EU ETS. It begs the question about the holistic look that we must take at our emissions reduction. As we have said repeatedly in this Chamber, we are the only part of these islands without a stand-alone and robust regulator. We need that and stand-alone climate change legislation.

This order is, I am afraid, fairly last-minute, rushed legislation, all of which, I accept, is not the responsibility of the devolved Department. It is extremely frustrating that the UK Government have been unable to offer clarity to industry and the devolved Administration about exactly what the emissions trading regime will be for the UK in the long term. However, we are, as it were, where we are, where we are. To the extent that this order provides a little clarity — but not nearly enough — it is welcome.

It is also, I say as an aside, a shame that the UK has decided on — or is still debating — completely breaking

away from the EU emissions trading scheme. It is worth saying that London has been a centre for carbon trading, and that has had an economic benefit too. There would also be a concern for Northern Ireland if the carbon trading market in London were to be reduced and become less of a significant player. That should matter to all of us across these islands.

In conclusion, we are deeply troubled that we are having to debate this in a very rushed manner. There is still huge lack of clarity about precisely how the new UK emissions trading scheme will interact with the EU emissions trading scheme, going forward, and exactly how that will affect areas of industry in Northern Ireland, both those that will still be covered by the EU emissions trading scheme and those who will enter into the, as yet, unconfirmed in the long term, UK emissions trading scheme.

Mrs Barton: Like many other aspects of the United Kingdom withdrawal from the EU, this lengthy Westminster secondary legislation seems to complicate what should be a relatively simple process.

This legislation regarding withdrawal from the EU has been foisted upon us without any real opportunity to gather evidence or information or for the Committee to carry out the scrutiny that it is expected to do. While an impact assessment has been carried out across the UK, it did not drill down into Northern Ireland. The Committee was informed that a local assessment was being undertaken. Officials indicated that the local assessment would be provided to the Committee before the debate, subject to the Minister's agreement. It was not, however, made available to us before that was laid.

The legislation has relevance for 21 installations that are currently in the European Union emissions trading scheme. However, five of those installations will remain in the EU ETS, with those five generators being responsible for 82% of emissions. Therefore, it has a real-time relevance only to the 16 installations that produce 18% of emissions. One should wonder whether its overall relevance is significant to Northern Ireland.

I understand that an emissions trading scheme is a devolved matter. Therefore, Northern Ireland could adopt different targets and mechanisms to meet those targets. That is why a framework agreement is being developed with a standardised process for how the UK ETS will be governed, including how to manage and resolve disputes. While it may not appear to be a vital piece of legislation at present given that a sizeable proportion of those participants will remain in the EU scheme, maybe it will lead to Northern Ireland's developing its own targets, but as part of the United Kingdom framework. My party supports the motion.

Mr Blair: I will start with the statement that it is predicted that, in 2021, emissions from ETS industries will be between 126 million and 131 million tons of carbon dioxide equivalent. It hardly needs to be said that we are at a crucial juncture in efforts to mitigate the impacts of global warming. The decisions that we make today and the actions that we take will determine whether we succeed or fail at preventing the worst consequences of climate change and the further devastation that it brings.

However, I rise on behalf of Alliance to accept the need for the emissions trading scheme in Northern Ireland, which will include the draft Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading

Scheme Order, a framework that will apply to energy-intensive industries and which also, of course, allows for opt-out; a framework that also needs to be built on policies that are bespoke to Northern Ireland's industries and need.

As a member of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, I was deeply troubled to learn at a Committee briefing that the UK Government did not include Northern Ireland when assessing a framework to combat the effects of climate change. We are the only region of the UK that was not included in the impact assessment for the system that is the cornerstone of Government policy to combat climate change and to limit greenhouse gas emissions across the power, industrial and aviation sectors. That is especially concerning when considering the fact that, at the end of the Brexit transition period, we will be the only devolved nation to share a land border with the EU. The Minister will be aware that I raised issues around that at today's Question Time. I should, at this point, express my gratitude to DAERA officials and the Assembly Committee officials for the information that they brought to us on the issue on that occasion.

It is, nevertheless, important that the Order, which establishes a scheme for monitoring, reporting and verification requirements, is implemented in Northern Ireland. There has to be an opportunity for major ETS providers to exceed limitations if required, but those matters will require ongoing analysis and review going forward. I suggest that clarification is also required on the carbon tax. If there is no deal, there might be no chance to negotiate a linked scheme between the UK ETS and EU ETS. In that circumstance, the UK Government might also put an option on the table for a UK carbon tax. However, they have not said that they will definitely introduce a carbon tax or a stand-alone UK ETS. Clarification on those matters is most definitely required. Perhaps, the Minister would reflect on that when he makes his winding-up speech.

The UK Government's language on that linkage has simply become less committed given the uncertainties around the negotiations. A carbon tax could be an alternative method of controlling those emissions. We are the only region in the UK and Ireland without a specific net zero emissions target. Despite laudable attempts, we have not reduced our greenhouse gas emissions in line with scientific advice.

6.30 pm

Since the introduction of the UK Climate Change Act, greenhouse gas emissions have fallen by 27% across the UK, but, for Northern Ireland, emissions have fallen by 9%. It is imperative that we introduce legislation to protect our environment and halt the climate crisis. I am glad that progress is being made in that regard through other means.

With reservations about UK Government actions as expressed, I am happy, in the context of this jurisdiction, to support the order.

Mr Harvey: As was outlined, the draft order establishes a workable emissions trading scheme for the UK that will replace the current EU ETS. I welcome the fact that it has already been agreed by the devolved Governments of Scotland and Wales, working alongside Westminster, and

following an extensive consultation on the future of UK carbon pricing.

The purpose of the order is to tackle climate change and drive down greenhouse gases by gradually encouraging the reduction of emissions. While the UK ETS will be a key tool in the armoury to combat emissions, it is not the only tool. It is imperative that we consider this matter in the context of what complementary schemes and systems are operational across commerce, industry and agriculture in order to safeguard our environment and aid our net zero commitment. The green growth strategy and tangible projects such as Forests for our Future are key to achieving that goal.

The Economy Minister told the House that clean energy is one of her Department's highest priorities. I welcome her Department's commitment that the new 2030 renewable electricity target will be at least 70%. That is significant, given that it is estimated that the electricity market currently accounts for 80% of Northern Ireland's ETS. It is worth bearing in mind that only 20% will move to the UK ETS when it commences, unlike the rest of the UK.

It is, therefore, vital that, if we are to remain within the EU ETS for electricity because of the all-island nature of supply, there is meaningful cooperation between both jurisdictions. There must be an acknowledgement by the EU and the Irish Government that any decisions made to alter the trading system will directly affect Northern Ireland, which in turn must afford the Assembly a role and a say on that. It is expected that the EU ETS and the UK ETS will be closely aligned, which will be of benefit.

As we work to reduce emissions, we must also work to increase renewable energy forms, thus providing viable alternatives. I welcome the fact that interest in the hydrogen economy is accelerating locally. Northern Ireland has the potential to lead the way on hydrogen technology and fuel clean, cutting-edge economic growth. If we cannot realise green alternatives such as hydrogen, the likes of the ETS will fail to achieve its long-term aim. We must not only incentivise reduced emissions but provide sustainable alternatives to greenhouse gases in the longer term.

The UK has been successful for many years in balancing those factors. Over the past 30 years, our emissions have gone down by 45%, while the UK economy has grown by 75%. It is absolutely the case that reducing carbon emissions is not the enemy of economic development but, rather, can work well with it. We must ensure that that is maintained and the economy is supported in tackling emissions.

Reducing emissions while supporting UK businesses must be our priority. Certainty is needed across the UK in respect of whether the UK ETS will be the preferred option or whether the Government's fallback option of a carbon emissions tax will have a role.

Whilst I appreciate that that will be a factor in ongoing negotiations, the sooner those involved are aware of which option is to be used, the better. There is also a balance to be struck between climate change ambition and the cost and danger of carbon leakage.

The draft Order draws on the best of the current system, which the UK was instrumental in developing, and adds improvements that, it is hoped, will ensure greater flexibility

to work in the interests of the UK and fight against climate change. I support the motion.

Mr McGuigan: Climate change and global warming are happening, and dealing with them, as I have said in the Chamber on many occasions, is the greatest issue facing this generation. Climate change is occurring due to greenhouse gas emissions from human activity. It is having and will continue to have a devastating impact on our environment and our population through fires, floods, storms and other forms of extreme weather. Adhering to the Paris agreement of 2015, which set the target of keeping average temperature increases to below 2°C compared with pre-industrial levels, is vital. That is the context of why we are discussing the carbon trading scheme.

The schemes are about reducing greenhouse gas emissions and working to reduce the impact of climate change — “polluter pays”, as it were. This proposal is a cap-and-trade scheme based on the design of the EU emission trading scheme to encourage cost-effective greenhouse gas emission reduction from within the traded sector. The carbon price should be high enough to encourage investment in low-carbon alternatives where the cost of investment is lower than the carbon price. The scheme covers heavy industry, power generators, aviation and similar installations. Those installations are the biggest emitters of carbon dioxide. The current EU ETS, which governs the North, works by making participants purchase an allowance for each ton of carbon dioxide that they emit. The more they emit, the more allowances they need to purchase. There are penalties for failure to obtain the requisite number of allowances. A cap is set on the total number of allowances, and it is gradually reduced over time. The aim is to encourage reductions in emissions.

In general, emissions trading schemes can and should be supported, but, as with most of the proposed legislation that we discuss in the North as a result of the Tory Brexit, there are many unanswered questions and a certain degree of uncertainty and unease. To this point, we were part of the EU trading scheme, and the proposed scheme, we are told, mirrors the EU ETS. Given that we live on an island, it is vital that that remains the case. The scheme must be closely linked, as others have said, to the current EU trading scheme. That is something that is not only needed here but that the Scottish and Welsh Governments have asked for certainty on.

The impact on the North is somewhat negated by the protocol, in that our power stations will remain in the EU trading scheme. They make up the bulk of the North's regulated emissions. As others have said, with the ability for our hospitals and others to opt out, there are likely to be 11 local participants in the new scheme. That is a small number, but it is still a concern, as other Committee members have mentioned, that the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs did not receive the local assessment of the impact in the North that we asked for, despite officials telling us that we would have it before today's debate. That causes me unease. Given my well-placed distrust of the British Government, I also have unease that we have not seen all the framework legislation into which the Order will fit. There is always the fear that the British Government say one thing on Brexit legislation and then proceed to do something completely different. Last week, for example, concerns were raised

about an amendment to the Westminster Environment Bill that seems to signify that British Ministers are intent on granting themselves the power to interfere with the proposed Office for Environmental Protection. That office was set up because of Brexit to protect environmental legislation and is supposed to be independent. Another worry that has been raised by Members in the debate is that, even though we are debating the emissions trading scheme, we know that, in the background, the British Government may ignore our thoughts on it and those of the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments and instead introduce a carbon tax scheme that they have consulted on this year. That is not devolved to the Assembly, so we would have no say in it. I repeat that we should support the proposal for a trading scheme. In this case, it needs to mirror that which is currently in place with the EU. I say that with all the caveats that I and others have pointed out during the debate.

Given the subject matter of our discussion, I conclude by mentioning the cross-party-supported private Member's Bill in Clare Bailey's name that was recently introduced to the Speaker's Office and that will, at long last, give the North a climate Act with sectoral targets for reducing emissions. I look forward to that Bill progressing speedily through the Chamber and becoming law so that the House can take greater responsibility for the issues affecting our environment, our economy and, ultimately, the livelihood of our citizens.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That was a nice intro for Ms Clare Bailey.

Ms Bailey: Thank you, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker. First, kudos to the Members who have spoken so far for having so much to say in the debate. The reality is that what we are debating is the UK Government doing a copy-and-paste of EU law into domestic law and calling it "taking back control". We are passing this legislation in order to allow us to have a functioning rule book by 1 January. It is a wee bit depressing to know that all the devolved Administrations are working flat out just to achieve a functioning rule book in less than eight weeks. Four and a half years on from the frenzied drive to take back control, this is where we find ourselves with Boris's oven-ready deal: still copying and pasting EU law into unambitious domestic law. We have, however, the promised potential for the UK Government to take back control of devolved powers, if they go ahead with the carbon tax and replace the ETS. I have to say "might", because that is as far as we have got in the decision-making process so far: mights, maybes, don't-knows, still-to-be-decideds. That is what we face today.

This has been criticised for lacking ambition, but so was the EU scheme. It lacked ambition, but it is an incredibly lucrative scheme. It is estimated to have produced £163 billion in global trade in 2019 alone. It is almost as if there is a magic carbon money tree somewhere. It is exactly the same; it is the same old unambitious way forward. We know that, to allow the seamless transition, we will cover in the legislation the same greenhouse gases and the same sectors applying to the current scheme under the same initiatives and that the main means of introducing the allowance into the UK market will continue to be the auctioning process that created £163 billion in global trade last year alone. The review mechanisms in this have been confirmed as a mirror image of what we currently have

under EU law. The UK Government are taking back control — it is great to see — four and a half years later.

The real debate will come when we have some sort of proposal from the UK Government on what they want to do to move forward. Will it be a carbon tax? Will they have ambition? Will they be leaders in tackling carbon emissions? As Philip McGuigan has already said, we have plans. We have laid a Bill in the House, and we hope that, as it progresses through the House, we can have the really ambitious debate about what we can do, how we can play our part and how we can tackle carbon emissions, because that will not happen with the unambitious move to have a functioning rule book in eight weeks.

6.45 pm

Mr Carroll: We are discussing legislation that was developed in Westminster by Boris Johnson and the Tories. It is worth saying that Mr Johnson wants to appear to be a leader on global environmental policy, but he and his Government are anything but leaders. They are masters of greenwashing and have already broken many of their own environmental promises. Everyone is right to be concerned about how Johnson and his mates may use Brexit to destroy environmental regulations.

We should not follow the Tories in developing our climate emergency response, but, just like with our shambolic approach to COVID and welfare reform, it appears that we are. Just like Johnson, Minister Poots wants us to believe that he takes environmental issues seriously, but he does not want anyone to mention that we are in a climate emergency, and he may not believe that himself. If he were serious about tackling climate change, he would not be blocking the demand for an independent environmental protection agency, nor would he be holding up the demand for an inquiry into the illegal Mobyuoy dump.

What goes for Minister Poots goes for the entire Executive, because a decision by the Infrastructure Minister to allow continued industrial dredging of Lough Neagh amounts to an assault on our ecology and a ripping up of the declared climate emergency. It means that any climate Bill that I have signed up to and support will likely be hollow and false from the beginning. Not only that but environmental campaigners are right to be worried that the Executive may try to ram through fracking proposals again in Fermanagh. Added to that, the fact that two green energy schemes — RHI and anaerobic digesters — have hit the news, not because of their success in reducing CO2 emissions but because they were rackets that were used to enrich a golden circle of associates and corporations, really speaks to the failure of the Executive to take climate change seriously.

That having been said, emissions trading schemes have been doing the rounds for a while now, and I am very concerned that this is another way in which to profit from the climate crisis and to avoid taking radical action to reduce carbon emissions. The EU ETS was a failure, and the UK ETS will likely fail as well. Emissions trading schemes have been part and parcel of the political and corporate establishment's do-nothing strategy on climate change. They have sat on their hands, allowing the continued destruction of ecosystems and the continued heating up of the planet. The failure of carbon trading is one of the reasons that millions of people joined the

student-led climate strikes and walked out of schools and workplaces last year.

An ETS is effectively a permit to pollute. Loophole after loophole, including overseas offsets, free permits and more, allows polluters to keep on polluting, especially if they have a lot in their bank accounts. It is a scam that gives polluters the right to keep on emitting more and more poison into our air and water systems with, I repeat, overseas offsets and free permits. The solution does not lie with emissions trading schemes but with energy efficiency targets, with a focus on the use of reusable energy; keeping fossil fuels in the ground; forcing polluters to pay for pollution; the expansion of our public transport networks; the ending of the destructive Going for Growth — addiction to growth — agribusiness strategy; and many more actions that the Executive could take but are not taking.

In conclusion, without the 1,000 days of resistance by the Greencastle People's Office and everyone else involved in the Save Our Sperrins campaign, it is likely that the Sperrins would have been destroyed already.

Instead of blindly following the Tories on environmental policy, the Executive should start listening to what campaigners have been saying for decades and follow their leadership. The hope for arresting the assault on our ecosystems and reversing the climate crisis will come not from the establishment but from all those who joined the climate emergency strikes and all the campaigns that already exist across the North.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: No other Members have indicated that they wish to speak. I call the Minister, Mr Edwin Poots, to conclude and make his winding-up speech on the debate.

Mr Poots: I have some comments to make on some of the issues that have been raised by Members. A number of Members seem to be reluctant to move away from the EU scheme to the UK scheme, even though it accounts for around only 18% of emissions.

Ms Bailey commented that it was very much like the EU scheme. The scheme actually introduces more stringent measures, and I thought that she might welcome that. However, she did not bring herself to do that.

Ms Bailey: Will the Member give way?

Mr Poots: Yes, certainly.

Ms Bailey: We are setting a cap at 5% less. I have been led to believe that this scheme actually allows more carbon emissions, and I will back that up with a quotation:

“The UK currently does not exceed the 156 million tonne cap, but with this current rate that is set to rise.”

Is that right, Minister?

Mr Poots: No. The cap is set to reduce by 5%, as you, and others, have indicated. That is clear. However, if you do not wish to welcome that, that is fine.

Mr Carroll is calling for carbon reduction. He is against bioenergy. He is against wind energy. So, I am not sure what people are going to use to provide energy for their homes or how it will be produced. Mr Carroll is good at being against everything, but he does not identify what he is actually for.

A number of Members talked about the importance of the EU scheme, and what a wonderful scheme it was. A wonderful scheme, yes. We reckon that just short of 3,200 tonnes of carbon allowances had to be purchased by Northern Ireland businesses in 2018, costing £64.5 million. That cost happens year on year. Over the years, hundreds of millions of pounds have been spent, and the cost has been passed on to the people who consume the electricity, as it is mainly electricity that we are talking about. The hundreds of millions of pounds that the scheme has cost has been passed on to every household in Northern Ireland.

That is all wonderful as it is to reduce carbon; that is great. It is a bit like the aviation tax on flights. However, Northern Ireland has got nothing back. For example, Sweden got £203 million for a bioenergy scheme. Ms Bailey does not like bioenergy, but the EU seems to like it as it gave Sweden £203 million. Germany got £112 million for a wind energy project, which Mr Carroll is opposed to. Spain got £70 million for solar energy. The Netherlands got £199 million for a bioenergy project. France got £170 million for a biofuel project. Finland got £88.5 million for a biofuel project. Northern Ireland has paid hundreds and hundreds of millions of pounds and has got zero back.

As we are staying in the scheme, and the innovation grant is replacing the old NER, I am pressing very hard to draw something down from that scheme. For example, hydrogen has been mentioned. Hydrogen offers Northern Ireland a great opportunity to be leaders in tomorrow's fuel. Northern Ireland has already achieved much in the field of renewable energy. How much more could have been achieved if Northern Ireland had been the beneficiary of some of the hundreds of millions of pounds that it has put into Europe or if it had been able to get some of it back again?

Mr O'Toole: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Further to what he has just said about getting money back, I agree with him if he is being positive about the benefits of full participation in aspects of these schemes. Will he reach out to his counterparts in London, Brussels, Dublin and elsewhere to explore how Northern Ireland, given its partial participation in the EU emissions trading scheme, can benefit from the very ambitious European green deal that has been announced by the European Commission? If there are ways that our industry can benefit from that innovation, will the Minister be open to it?

Mr Poots: Absolutely. One of the problems was that, under the previous scheme, a country could only have three grant-aided schemes. Northern Ireland did not get any of the three schemes; they are all based in England. The consequence of being part of a larger nation is that we had less chance of succeeding than a country with a relatively small population, such as Latvia or Finland.

As we go forward, if Northern Ireland is part of the EU ETS but the UK is not, will we be able to draw down funding? That is the question that I am asking. My Executive colleagues need to support me in that regard. If we are to contribute large amounts of money to the EU innovation fund, we need to get something back. It is the old problem of taxation without representation. As I said, it will be good for carbon reduction because, if we draw money back to carry out carbon reduction, as opposed to just paying into the scheme, that will enable us to drive down our carbon footprint quicker.

Mr O'Toole mentioned that agriculture was not included. I am glad that it is not because it would impose a further burden on Northern Ireland taxpayers on top of what we already pay. It would, probably, add another £20 million or £25 million from the Northern Ireland economy into an area that we do not draw anything back from. I am not enthused about adding to it. I wish to bring forward proposals that will better identify agriculture's real carbon contribution. That will include what is happening in sequestration and will properly identify the sequestration that takes place so that we do not have the situation where we identify emissions but not sequestration. One without the other is meaningless. We need to cover that and identify it.

This is slightly off topic, but the EU scheme is something that we are in and will remain in. The UK scheme that is being proposed to replace it for non-energy businesses will create a better opportunity for us to get something bespoke for Northern Ireland plc. I have made the case repeatedly with Kwasi Kwarteng, with whom we have had lots of meetings, that we in Northern Ireland need to get something back from the money that is ploughed into the carbon emissions trading scheme. I do not have that opportunity with European Ministers, frankly. We can continue to beat the drum here to reduce carbon in a greater way in Northern Ireland through being part of the UK scheme than we could do through the EU scheme. However, as a consequence of the protocol, we will end up in both, and we need to fight our corner in both places to ensure that that is the case.

In any event, I commend the order to the House. It is the only way forward that we have at this time and is thus the direction in which we need to head.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the draft Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme Order 2020 be approved.

Adjourned at 6.59 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 9 November 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Resignation of Member: Ms Catherine Kelly

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that I have received a letter of resignation from Ms Catherine Kelly as a Member for the West Tyrone constituency. Her resignation took effect from 3 November 2020. I have notified the Chief Electoral Officer in accordance with section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Matter of the Day

US Presidential Election

Mr Speaker: Mrs Michelle O'Neill has been given leave to make a statement on the US presidential election that fulfils the criteria set out in Standing Order 24. If other Members wish to be called, they should indicate that by rising in their place and continuing to do so. All Members will have up to three minutes to speak on the subject. I remind Members that I will not take points of order on this or any other matter until this item of business has finished.

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this Matter of the Day. There are very few of us who were not witness to the unfolding presidential race across the Atlantic last week and its culmination at the weekend when Joe R Biden was formally announced as the forty-sixth president of the United States of America. I extend my warm congratulations to the president-elect and to the history-making vice president-elect, Kamala Harris, as they prepare to take up their office on 20 January 2021.

We are inextricably linked with the US through our history and by family and economic links. We are connected by our transatlantic relationships in the field of trade, investment and technological development and in our enjoyment of cultural, educational and other opportunities. Indeed, the oldest US consulate in the world is located in Belfast.

The president-elect is no stranger to this island — quite the opposite. He is a friend to Ireland and proudly celebrates his Irish-American roots, both North and South. Joe Biden is a key supporter of our precious peace process and has shown ongoing commitment, in particular, to the institutions established here in the North under the Good Friday Agreement. He comes into office at a time of great threat from the British Government with Brexit and the refusal to honour agreements that are looming large. The draft Internal Market Bill has been opposed by the majority of Assembly Members, who voted to reject it on the basis that it constitutes a serious violation of the protocol, which is specifically designed to protect the agreement and the achievements of the peace process, including avoiding a hard border on the island of Ireland.

In addressing the grievous threat that we face from a looming Brexit, Joe Biden has signalled his intent to defend the interests of Ireland and to ensure that the progress made under the Good Friday Agreement is not undermined. Indeed, Joe Biden is on record as saying:

“any trade deal between the US and UK must be contingent upon respect for the agreement and preventing the return of a hard border”.

Sinn Féin will continue to defend the foundation stones of the peace process, including the Good Friday Agreement, and will work with all those who share that priority wherever they may be — in this case, the White House. I look forward to working with the new president and his Administration to ensure that the Good Friday Agreement is protected and that its transformative potential is fully realised.

Our focus will also be on international collaboration as we deal with a global pandemic that has caused untold loss and pain right across the world. I look forward to the possibility of welcoming Joe Biden to the North in the future, as the president of the US, where we can assure him of the warmest of welcomes.

It would be remiss of me not to make specific mention of the historic achievement of the vice president-elect, Kamala Harris. She is breaking new ground not only as the first female to take up the second-highest office in the United States but as the first black woman and, indeed, the first Asian American to take this office. Her achievements will act as a catalyst to inspire many women, not only in the US but closer to home, with their ambitions and dreams of joining us in public life. Ádh mór ar Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. Thank you for allowing this Matter of the Day.

Mr Stalford: It was encouraging to hear the deputy First Minister say that she will extend an invitation and looks forward to welcoming the new president. I can recall an occasion when a previous president, George W Bush, visited Northern Ireland, and, as her predecessor was welcoming him to Stormont Castle, Sinn Féin activists were protesting on the streets about his presence on this estate, such is the double-faced standard that exists.

Regardless of who holds the office of president of the United States, relations between Northern Ireland and the United States of America are important. Unlike other Members, I do not stand on platforms and denounce America as a force for evil in the world, because I do not believe that it is. I believe that America is a force for good in the world. It is important that we recognise that this is an internal matter for the people of the United States of America. While it is true that they have made their choice, it is our responsibility to work closely with whoever is in office because Northern Ireland benefits from our relationship with the United States. Indeed, a quarter of the people who have held the office of president can trace their family directly back to Ulster and this part of the island. That relationship is welcome because it allows us, a country of a mere 1.8 million people, to punch way above our weight with regard to influence on Capitol Hill.

President-elect Biden secured the greatest number of votes cast for any candidate in history. The candidate whom he defeated, outgoing President Trump, secured the second-greatest number of votes cast for any candidate in US history. Traditional barriers have been broken down in the election, and it is a welcome development that someone of Indian and African heritage is to be elected vice president of the United States. The cruel racism of the 1950s and 1960s that was apparent on the streets, particularly on the streets of southern America, is slowly but surely being confined to the past, and that is a

welcome development. I welcome the progress that the world's strongest democracy is making, as we all should.

I have said that good relations are important. We have special linkages, and this has been an immense democratic exercise in terms of turnout and the levels of support that both main candidates, from the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, have secured. We have always had influence and relations, and it is important to build on that. That will be achieved if we all work to adopt a positive working relationship, regardless of who holds the office of president. It is no good being pro-American simply because your favourite candidate has prevailed.

Ms Mallon: On behalf of the SDLP, I offer warm congratulations to President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris. Our party, perhaps more than most, nailed its colours to the mast over the last four years in calling out what it saw as an interminable march towards politics that was defined by division, fear and resentment and which led to children being separated from their families, travel bans on religious minorities and an emboldened racist movement. It is not difficult, therefore, to empathise with the people of the United States and across the world who feel like the cloud is starting to break. This was a historic event, for a number of reasons: the nature of the campaign, the volume of votes and the election of a woman of colour to the office of vice president for the first time.

Today, we stand with a friend of Ireland and Northern Ireland who is preparing to enter the White House. This president-elect does not just understand the complexities of this place but is invested in our progress. President-elect Biden once wrote:

*“Northeast Pennsylvania will be written on my heart.
But Ireland will be written on my soul.”*

This should, therefore, be a moment of relief, but it should also be a moment of reflection. It should be a moment for Prime Minister Boris Johnson and others to reflect on a strategy that has brought them to the brink of breaking international law in the pursuit of a narrow, hard Brexit. President-elect Biden, Speaker Nancy Pelosi and senior figures from across the aisle in Congress have made clear that any arrangement that harms our agreement will jeopardise a trade deal with the United States. That is avoidable, and I am sure that every Member will use their influence to maximise the outcome for all our people. We also need to reflect on an environment, not restricted to the United States, where people feel so marginalised, left behind and left out that they are taken in by the politics of resentment and fear. We all have a job of work to dispel that.

I wish the president-elect and vice president-elect the very best as they begin to bring in and bring together a new Administration. We will all work with them on issues of mutual concern in the weeks and months ahead.

Dr Aiken: The Ulster Unionist Party welcomes the election of President-elect Biden and Kamala Harris. I need to start with a declaration of interest: 50% of my family are particularly happy that this result has come to the fore after three or four quite nervous days leading up to it.

This is a significant time for us in the Assembly as we look to a change of Administration in the United States. One thing that we know about the new president-elect is that he has at least read the Belfast Agreement. One of the most

appropriate things is that he understands that not only do we not want a North/South border but we do not want an east-west border, which would undermine the Belfast Agreement just as much.

When Joe Biden takes over the presidency in January, he will have to lead a deeply divided nation. The United States has much to do to restore the faith of the international system in where it is coming from. He has significant challenges, and he needs friends in the international system to do that. Given the issues in Turkey, Armenia, Iran, Somalia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Venezuela and Cuba, one of the most significant issues that he will have to deal with is that of security — even before he has to deal with Russia and China. He needs friends in the international system. He needs friends who bring real, hard power to the equation. We have to realise that the United States has a massive security challenge. What we, particularly in the United Kingdom, want to see is the United States renewing its commitment to NATO and renewing its commitment to security across the international system.

We welcome the fact that, when the president-elect takes up his position, the United States will sign up to the Paris Accord again. Dealing with climate change is significant.

We also believe that he needs to take strong leadership on COVID. Getting to the point where we are able to deal with COVID from an international perspective is one of the massive challenges and problems that the president-elect will have to deal with.

Finally, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party and, I hope, all Members, we wish the new president-elect the best. We are very pleased to see the new vice president-elect coming into position. Hopefully, she truly has managed to break through the glass ceiling, because it is well beyond time that that happened in the United States.

12.15 pm

Mr Lyttle: The United States and Northern Ireland have close ties that bind our people together. The US has been a close friend to the peace process and to the social and economic well-being of our region. Alliance Party members have played key roles in developing and maintaining that special relationship, so we congratulate President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, who, as the first woman and first woman of colour to be elected vice president in the history of the United States, will inspire people across the world.

President-elect Joe Biden quoted Ecclesiastes 3 in recognising the work that he and the vice president-elect have to do to unite the United States of America. He said that it was “a time to heal”. I believe that the Alliance Party and the people of Northern Ireland will get fully behind that task and will continue to work closely with the people of the United States to ensure that it is a time for healing, a time for peace and a time for progress for both our peoples.

Mr Allister: There is a supreme irony that the House this afternoon is celebrating the fact that the people of the United States, by a democratic process, are changing their Government. The irony is that this House is the epitome of the very opposite. This House stands for the principle that you cannot change your Government and you cannot vote a party out of government. What we witnessed in the United States was the people of the United States deciding, in their democratic fashion and as is their right, to

change their Government. What a contrast with this place, where, because of the iniquity of mandatory coalition, you can never change your Government. You can never vote a party out of government so long as that party holds on to a handful of MLAs. It is a supreme irony that, without the least blush of embarrassment, the House rises to celebrate the fact that others can do what those who have spoken to date determine we should never be able to do, namely change our Government.

The absurdity of our system of Government is further illustrated by the fact that, if the United States of America had the system that we have, we would have joint Presidents Joe Biden and Donald Trump. How absurd would that be? How dysfunctional would that be? As dysfunctional as Stormont, of course. Yet that is the system —.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member resume his seat for a moment? I remind the Member that the Matter of the Day was agreed to address the US presidential election. Could you stick to the subject, please?

Mr Allister: I thought that I was. I was drawing the contrast between the people of the United States being given the fundamental democratic right to change their Government while we are denied it. I was pointing out that the people of the United States will have a new powerful president rather than a joint president. We are denied that. The point is exactly on point that the democratic exercise that many are celebrating in the House is the very thing that is denied to the House and to the people of Northern Ireland.

As for Joe Biden, I hope that he will come to the realisation that he needs to temper his overt nationalist empathy if he ever hopes to have any positive influence in Northern Ireland, and he needs to recognise and accept that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom because of the will of its people. The American people have expressed their will. Now it is time for their president —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr Allister: — to acknowledge our rights in that matter.

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up. Thank you.

Mr Carroll: I congratulate the working class and all minorities in the US on their sacking of the racist, bigoted, homophobic champion of the rich and wealthy, Donald Trump. Trump embodies everything that is wrong with modern capitalism. He is oppressive, reactionary and corrupt and fully committed to increasing the riches of the wealthy, against the interests of ordinary people. He has, for the past four years, encouraged and emboldened a dangerous rise of the far right in the US and across the world. This election was, in my opinion, about giving Trump the boot. We should celebrate that, and democracy must be upheld against Trump's attempts to overturn it. I call on the Executive to immediately demand that the current president cease his efforts to overturn the democratic process. If he refuses to do this, we should break all diplomatic ties. Trump is acting like a spoilt child, throwing his toys out of the pram. So many millions rejected him, and he should do what is expected of him and step aside. Trump claimed to stand up for working-class Americans but did nothing to improve their lives. He actually made them far worse.

As I have said, the election was all about putting Trump out. For me, it was never about putting Biden in. There

is not much good to be said about Biden, except for the fact that he is not Donald Trump. He is, in my opinion, an uninspiring champion of the status quo. The fact that he only just ousted a president whose coronavirus policy resulted in over 200,000 deaths speaks volumes to the limitations of the unimaginative, uninspiring, centrist approach of the Democratic establishment. Joe Biden has been part of the US establishment for years. That establishment has eviscerated working-class communities across the US. Biden has cheered on the US war machine in the Middle East for decades, time and again. He has declared himself an opponent of the Black Lives Matter movement, and he was the candidate wheeled out to stop the progressive radical Bernie Sanders from breaking with the big-business interests of billionaires in the US. Those who think that Biden is a progressive or a friend of working-class people in Ireland are, frankly, living in fantasy land.

I hope for real change in the US, and real change in the US lives of those who are celebrating and demonstrating on the streets: those who have demanded that Black Lives Matter, healthcare for all and raising taxes for the super-rich. There is hope in those who voted for socialist candidates like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others in the US, the rest of her squad and Bernie Sanders. Let us enjoy Trump's demise and double down on our efforts for international solidarity and fundamental change in America, in Ireland and across the world.

Mr O'Toole: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for taking this Matter of the Day, and thank you to the deputy First Minister for requesting it.

Lots of people who heard the Member from North Antrim excoriate people here for welcoming the defeat of Donald Trump will be astonished. It is the case that there is hope and delight, frankly, around the world that someone who has been an appalling influence on democratic norms, the civilised world and how we go about politics across the world has been removed from office.

Let us focus on the positives. Joe Biden cares about Northern Ireland; he cares about the entire island of Ireland. I would go so far as to say that he cares about stability and good government across these islands and across the continent of Europe. He is, in that sense, good news for everyone across these islands. It has been said that Joe Biden is a friend to Ireland, and particularly to this part of Ireland. That is correct. His great-great-grandfather left the Cooley peninsula to travel to Newry to get the boat to North America about 150 years ago. It would be great if President-elect Biden were able to return to see what we hope to be the developing Narrow Water bridge at some point in the future.

However, let us be absolutely clear. We have had a horrible few years of coarsening discourse and increased divisiveness, not just in North America but around the world. Anybody who thinks, as some have reflected, that who leads the United States is not our concern but an internal matter for them has not been paying attention to the awful increase in divisiveness and horrible rhetoric that has gone along with the Trump presidency. That is why people across the world are pleased and relieved to see Joe Biden take office. They are also pleased to see the transformational and historic election of Kamala Harris to the vice presidency. She is the first woman, and the first woman of colour, to be elected to that office.

Thomas Jefferson said that every man — sadly, he was saying “men” in those days — had two countries; their own and France.

These days, many of us have two countries: our own and the United States. The United States inspires and sometimes depresses us all, but the weekend was inspiring for those of us who look to the United States. What the United States has done in relation to Northern Ireland has been critical. Let us hope that the influence of the new president will be felt not just on this island but across these islands in the months and years to come.

Mr McCrossan: I echo the words of Members across the House in congratulating President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris. This is a great moment of hope in dark times. Across the world, we have seen how Trump's influence has caused considerable issues, particularly for the Irish-American relationships that exist. He was a reckless leader in a challenging time.

In listening to contributions in the House, I find interesting the remarks by Sinn Féin and the DUP. It was the one campaign that I have seen them united on, when you consider that President Trump attended Sinn Féin fundraising dinners in America and you see the pictures of DUP MPs holding Trump's flag. They are on the one page on that issue.

I am delighted to see Trump vacate the presidency. It will be an interesting few months ahead to see how this all works out, but one thing is clear: it is the right time for the leadership of Kamala Harris and Joe Biden. Joe Biden sends out a powerful message: “Never give up”. He has stood for election as president three times and, on the third occasion, has managed to succeed. All of us were glued to our screens the past number of days. I know that I certainly was. I found it fascinating to see how the vote evolved across the states. America is a deeply divided country, but I believe that President-elect Biden and Vice President-elect Harris will do all that they can to unite it. They will send out that powerful message.

It also heartened me very much to hear President-elect Biden cite the words of Seamus Heaney. He has put it on record on many occasions that, if elected president, he will do everything that he can to protect the Good Friday Agreement and to prevent, as Colum Eastwood said,

“violence to the Good Friday agreement”.

It is clear that the DUP were supporting Trump to use him as a vehicle to get the outcome that they as Brexiteers so desire.

I am very happy and hopeful for the future with a president and vice president of the calibre, standard and discipline of Biden and Harris. I congratulate both and look forward to them visiting the island of Ireland, North and South.

Mr McNulty: Congratulations, President-elect Joe Biden. His election is a victory for persistence, inclusiveness, enduring decency, democracy and, most importantly, hope in these dark times. In Ireland, we are all excited about the implications for our island, for the Good Friday Agreement, for Ballina and for the Cooley peninsula. When we get through the pandemic, there will be some craic in Lily Finnegans on the opening night, celebrating the success of President-elect Joe Biden: a Cooley man and a Ballina man. My father is especially thrilled that Philadelphia got

him over the line. My grandfather met my grandmother in Philadelphia, so, on a personal note, my family is thrilled. Congratulations, President-elect Joe Biden.

Mr Speaker: Members, that concludes the item of business. I ask you to take your ease for a moment or two. I remind Members that asking you to take your ease between each item of business is not just about preparing the Chamber but about making sure that Members can enter and exit the Chamber within the social-distancing regulations.

12.30 pm

Mr Givan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have learnt from reports on Twitter that the Justice Minister is having to self-isolate because she has a tickly cough. Of course, I wish her a speedy recovery. Hopefully, it is not the second time that the Minister has had the virus. Our thoughts and prayers are with her at this time.

With regard to Assembly business, I still have not been notified formally, as Chair of the Justice Committee, of the Minister's decision to self-isolate. We are due to have the Consideration Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill tomorrow and, indeed, the Second Stage of the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill next week. What are the implications for those items of business proceeding through the Assembly? Is there any provision whereby one of the Minister's very capable Executive colleagues could represent the Department of Justice's position in order to ensure that we do not have slippage on that critical legislation?

Mr Speaker: First, I want to echo the Member's remarks and wish the Minister well. I received a letter from the Minister not long before I came into the Chamber and have not had time to consult others on it. The Member heard about it on Twitter: I had not heard about it on Twitter, so I was not following it this morning. As I said, I received a letter from the Minister shortly before I came into the Chamber. The Minister outlines in her letter that she has symptoms. As I said, we wish her well and a speedy return to good health and safety.

There will be implications for both those Bills, according to the Minister, because, at this moment in time, she has been unable to get another Minister to take the domestic abuse legislation through the House tomorrow. Having had to consider that Bill recently, I have to say that it is complex and complicated, and the Member is well aware of that. I do not think that it would be that easy to expect another Minister to have enough command of the Bill to take it through the House tomorrow at such short notice. We will have to take it to the Business Committee, which will decide how to proceed in the next week or two, during which time Minister Long has to self-isolate. Again, the Business Committee will address that tomorrow afternoon.

Mr Givan: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, I appreciate your explanation, but can you advise whether, if one of the Minister's Executive colleagues were in a position to take on that role tomorrow, business would proceed?

Mr Speaker: I think that, in the first instance, you would have to expect the Minister to address that with her Executive colleagues. At the moment, all that I am aware of is that, as the Minister has advised me and, therefore,

the House, she has been unable to get a colleague at this point. We will have to see whether that changes.

I have received — they are not here yet. I am getting ahead of myself.

Ministerial Statement

North/South Ministerial Council: Education Sectoral Format

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Education that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members 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, of course, been relaxed. Members still have to make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called but can do that by rising in their place. I remind Members to be concise in asking their question — this is not an opportunity for debate per se — and not to engage in long introductions.

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): Thank you, Mr Speaker. In compliance with section 52 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on behalf of Minister Ní Chuilín and me on the meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in education sectoral format that was held on Friday 6 November 2020. Due to the current COVID-19 restrictions, the meeting was conducted via videoconference. I attended the meeting with Minister Foley TD, Minister for Education, and Minister Ní Chuilín as accompanying Minister.

The meeting was cordial and productive. Progress was made on a number of key issues, including the implications of UK withdrawal from the EU; the response to COVID-19; the review of the work programme; the update on EU funding; educational underachievement; special educational needs; school, youth and teacher exchanges; teacher qualifications; and cooperation between the inspectorates.

I will address each of those items in turn.

The Council noted the current assessment of the likely implications for the education sector of the UK's withdrawal from the EU and welcomed the commitments made to take all necessary measures to ensure that the agreed common travel area rights and privileges were protected. Ministers also welcomed the commitments made to the future PEACE PLUS programme and the work that is under way to develop that programme. Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to continued cooperation on education issues following the conclusion of the transition period.

On COVID-19, Ministers welcomed the commitment of all teaching staff in both jurisdictions to deliver remote learning to pupils. They noted the importance and context of the successful reopening of schools — a core policy objective in both jurisdictions — in accordance with hygiene and public health protocols. The Council noted the heightened concern of Education Ministers for pupils with complex and additional learning needs and acknowledged the efforts of teachers and other critical support staff to maintain students' relationships and connections with schools. The agreement of the Education Ministers and their officials to continue sharing information and advance notice of key decisions, where practicable, was also welcomed. The Council expressed its appreciation to all staff engaged in the delivery of education in these exceptional times. It also welcomed the fact that Education Ministers will convene a meeting of senior departmental officials, along with agencies and bodies that have

responsibility in vital support areas, and report findings to the next NSMC meeting in the sector.

The NSMC noted the commitment to review the work programme and the plan to convene a meeting of senior officials from relevant Departments, co-chaired by the secretary general and the permanent secretary of the Education Departments, to make recommendations for the future work programme. That meeting will be co-chaired by the secretary general and the permanent secretary of the Education Departments.

Ministers noted the impact that COVID-19 has had on Peace IV-funded shared education projects. They also noted that, to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the use of online technologies to promote the objectives of shared education was being explored. The high-level engagement that has taken place between Departments on PEACE PLUS, the draft proposals for PEACE PLUS in relation to the theme of youth and the potential for ambitious and innovative proposals under PEACE PLUS to promote respect and understanding on a cross-border and cross-community basis were noted by the Council.

The NSMC noted the lessons learned and the recommendations from the final evaluation report on the North/South underachievement practitioners' engagement project, which was published by Co-operation Ireland in July 2017. The NSMC noted the appointment by me of the expert panel, under the New Decade, New Approach agreement, to examine the links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background and to draw up an action plan for change that will ensure that all children and young people, regardless of background, are given the best start in life. That was noted by Ministers.

Research on the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme has been provided as part of the evidence base to the panel. The panel will produce an interim report and draft action plan by 31 March 2021 and a final action plan including implementation costs and timescales by 31 May 2020.

On special educational needs, the Ministers welcomed the progress being made by the two Education Departments and Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) to facilitate and maintain the delivery of the centre's range of services since the previous meeting in 2016. The Council welcomed the efforts of Middletown Centre for Autism management and staff to remain operational and the continued delivery of elements of their service throughout the COVID-19 restrictions. The proposed delivery plan for the centre, which takes account of the impacts of COVID-19 and the delay in making board appointments, was noted. The NSMC noted that MCA has been considering the potential implications of the UK withdrawal from the EU. The Council also noted recent developments in the delivery of special educational needs programmes in both jurisdictions.

On school, youth and teacher exchanges, the Council noted North/South exchanges in the area of youth work practices and the ongoing activities of the North/South education and training standards committee for youth work.

On teacher qualifications, the NSMC noted the procedures being explored to facilitate the reciprocal recognition of teacher qualifications in the context of the UK's withdrawal from the EU. It also noted the update on the agreement between the Marino Institute of Education and St Mary's University College regarding the delivery of the SCG.

The Council was advised that the eighteenth annual conference of the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS) on the theme of "Teacher Education in the COVID Moment" took place online on 21 October 2020.

Ministers welcomed the continuing collaboration of the education inspectorates, which covers capacity-building for the Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) inspection of new Irish-medium education; the ongoing programme of inspection exchanges and joint working on inspections; the collaborative support in carrying out independent evaluations on projects; and the cooperation between the management of both inspectorates.

My officials and I look forward to working with Minister Foley and her Department as we meet the challenges of responding to the current health crisis and the future challenges and opportunities that will be presented as the UK leaves the European Union.

Mr Lyttle (The Chairperson of the Committee for Education): I note the concern for pupils with complex needs that the Education Minister has expressed in the statement. However, the families of children with complex needs in Northern Ireland, who feel abandoned by him during COVID-19, need action, leadership and support rather than concern. I ask the Education Minister this: why did the £11.3 million Engage programme funding for school restart not include special schools when it was launched in September?

Mr Speaker: Sorry, Minister. I suggest that the Member's question does not entirely relate to the statement. I will leave the matter of whether he wishes to answer to the Minister's discretion.

Mr Weir: Well, just —.

Mr Speaker: Sorry, Minister. I make the point and remind the Minister that, if Members ask questions that are not relevant to the statement, it is entirely down the Minister whether to accept the question.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that it does not directly relate to the statement. However, we have given instructions to the Education Authority (EA) to work in the area of special educational needs. First, we should remember that the Engage programme runs across schools. Therefore, for the vast majority of children who are statemented, for instance, they will be operating through mainstream schools, which will enable that.

On the issue of direct intervention for children who are in special schools, there is a need for something that is more bespoke and individually exercised. We have asked the EA, which has overall responsibility for special educational needs, to work with those schools and the individuals in them to make sure that any level of academic catch-up takes place for them.

Mr Newton: I will go to the same item, Minister, on special educational needs. In the discussions, have you noted any radical differences between the approach being used in Northern Ireland, on the basis of addressing the needs of our young pupils, and the approach being used by the Minister in the Republic of Ireland?

Mr Weir: I think that there was a realisation in the discussion on special educational needs that took place during the NSMC meeting. That discussion principally

focused on the Middletown Centre for Autism, which is obviously the one area that is of direct common concern. However, I think that there has been an acceptance that there is a need and, indeed, that there was probably a limited level of supply of supports in terms of schools being open during the early parts of the pandemic across the board. There was, in particular, probably limited support for special educational needs. There is a strong imperative, particularly on special schools, to be open. Last week, I was able to visit Arvalee in Omagh. It provides a considerable service that goes beyond simply the educational provision there. It is critical from the point of view of the development of children and from a social point of view. I think that, North/South, there is a common determination to see that schools are kept open as much as possible and prioritised. There is nowhere that that is more important than for children with special educational needs.

Ms Mullan: I thank the Minister for his statement. In relation to ongoing and future cooperation, what is the Minister's assessment of the impact that COVID has had on cross-border shared education projects? Minister, I ask that you restore the funding to ScoTens and that your officials meet the Committee to discuss that.

12.45 pm

Mr Weir: I will take those in reverse order. I am due to meet representatives from SCoTENS at, I think, the end of this month, so we will be able to discuss that level of support then. Obviously, I cannot prejudge the outcome until I have the meeting.

On shared education, last week, I think, Mr Murphy gave a report on the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), which leads to some of the Peace funding. It is the case that all projects have been able to move ahead. However, the projects, particularly those on shared education, have been reoriented. It has therefore been about shared learning at this stage, and a lot of that has been done online.

One of the many difficulties that has arisen from COVID is with the provision of shared education, which everyone would manifestly accept is of benefit. The overriding driver in shared education is the direct shared experience of people meeting face to face. We are trying to ensure that, in terms of health protections, there is as little mixing between schools as possible and as little mixing within schools, so quite often classes have to form a bubble. That creates a direct face-to-face barrier, which then acts in a counter-intuitive way to what we want to happen with shared education. However, shared education is being taken forward, and the projects have been able to continue. From that point of view, nothing has been abandoned, but a lot of the sharing has had to shift much more to an online experience. There was a shared indication from everyone that the sooner we can move back to a point at which it is safe to have direct interaction, between students in particular and teachers, on a shared education basis, the better we can get the richest harvest from that investment.

Mr McCrossan: Minister, thank you for visiting Arvalee school in Omagh, which is in my constituency. It is a fantastic school, and I am sure that your visit was very much welcomed.

I commend you — both Ministers, in fact — for your commitment to collaborate and cooperate on the range of matters outlined in the statement. I am alarmed, however, to note that those conversations are at such an early stage, given that we are so far on in the transition period, which is due to end in January. You said that procedures are:

“being explored to facilitate reciprocal recognition of teacher qualifications”

North/South in light of Brexit. Should that not have been completed sooner, Minister? How advanced are those explorations? Can you give a date or a time? Furthermore, is there an issue with the ETI in relation to the Irish-medium sector?

Mr Weir: I am not aware of any particular problems that the ETI has with the Irish-medium sector directly. Obviously, the ETI has been restricted in what it has been able to do throughout the pandemic. Indeed, like others, the ETI has, at least on a temporary basis, had to reorient itself. The work that the ETI and the EA have done in providing link officers for schools has been very useful, but, on the level of inspection and input — there is a strong case that inspections should operate on a more thematic basis anyway — there has clearly been some change.

We are giving a report on where we are at present. We had an opportunity to discuss the issues when the NSMC met at Dublin Castle during the summer, although the meeting was not formally in education sectoral format. Arising out of that, Minister Foley — at that stage, she was relatively new in post — and I had a direct informal one-to-one meeting that touched on a number of those issues.

As regards mutual recognition, the position is that that has previously been facilitated through the EU. Good work is being done on that. It may well be that, as part of the overall settlement that arises — if it arises — between the UK and the EU, there is a level of acceptance on the mutual recognition of qualifications. As I said, work is ongoing to see what can be done on a bilateral basis. It is noticeable — this fits in neatly with that level of recognition — that, in the Internal Market Bill that is passing through the UK Parliament, there are those mutual recognitions between the various jurisdictions in the United Kingdom. As the Member will be aware, teaching councils, for instance, operate in different formats in different parts of not just the United Kingdom but the Republic of Ireland. One of the things that the pandemic has shown is that there is a need for mutual recognition of qualifications, because, particularly with teaching, we do not know at what stage in different jurisdictions people will seek to go beyond their own boundaries — this is not just in regard to education — to be able to draw and seek, if you like, experience and help from outside their jurisdiction. There is a broader critical element in dealing with the mutual recognition of qualifications. That is ongoing in an attempt to create, at least, a bilateral arrangement between the UK and the Republic of Ireland on teaching qualifications.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far.

I want to probe a little more into teaching qualifications. As you know, in Northern Ireland, teachers go through Stranmillis or St Mary's, and we also have teachers with postgraduate qualifications. First, what work is being done to look at those qualifications on both sides of the border?

Secondly, what talks have been going on with the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) and its equivalent in the Republic of Ireland to make sure that qualifications are recognised on either side of the border?

Mr Weir: I thank the Member for her questions. She will be aware that the GTCNI will look after it from a Northern Ireland perspective; the Teaching Council of Ireland (TCI), the equivalent registration body in the South, will look after it there. Then, it is about ensuring that those who have, for instance, a UK BEd or PGCE qualification are able to obtain registration with the TCI and, similarly, that TCI-registered teachers can be recognised by the GTCNI.

Elements of the current mutual recognition arrangements are based on the EU mutual recognition of professional qualifications directive. That will cease at the end of the EU period. Applicants from outside that will also need to be assessed. The UK Government, which will handle some of the qualifications, are keen to have professional mobility and keen to see that reflected in the common travel area. We were aiming for a seamless internal UK labour market for professionals, with a bilateral agreement that could comprehensively address and sort out any future teacher recognition arrangements.

Mr M Bradley: The Minister's statement noted that both Education Ministers had considerable concern for pupils with complex and special educational needs. Does he agree that the benefit that those children get from being able to attend school is significant and that that is a further reason to ensure that schools remain open as we face the challenges that lie ahead in dealing with COVID-19?

Mr Weir: That is similar to a previous question. Ensuring that schools remain open is paramount for all pupils, but the particular focus on those with special educational needs is shared on both sides of the border. It is noticeable that the Republic of Ireland, which has different levels of COVID restrictions, when moving to level 5, did so on the basis of protecting educational institutions, particularly schools.

Any experience of meeting children with special educational needs indicates the particular importance of keeping those schools open, not only to allow face-to-face learning but from a broader social point of view. In sending out any signal, there has to be recognition of every child across the system.

While the principal focus in special educational needs was on the specifics of Middletown, in my discussions with Minister Foley, the importance of schools being open, particularly for special educational needs pupils, was recognised on both sides of the border and, indeed, beyond. What has happened in Great Britain has shown that the desire to ensure that schools are kept open is a priority, and the Executive share that desire.

Ms Dolan: I thank the Minister for his statement. Is the proposed review of the forward work programme due to the consequences of COVID? Will he comment on the extent of the impact that COVID has had on the work programme?

Mr Weir: There is a good opportunity, with the Executive having resumed this year and with a new Government in the Republic, for a stocktake and to see what can happen in the forward work programme.

At a certain level, all these things are work in progress. There is no doubt that COVID has had an impact across a number of sectors in education, here and in other jurisdictions. To some extent, in the Department of Education here and in that in the Republic of Ireland, there has been a shift to fight the immediate issues of COVID with whatever staff are available. That happens on a range of issues; for example, there has been a shift away from area planning to what has to happen immediately.

Similarly, in any engagement on future work programmes, there is no doubt that some time delay has been created. However, if we can take some positive element from COVID, it is how we apply some of the lessons of COVID to see whether there are better ways. A lot of that will be on sharing information, sharing best practice and sharing knowledge. Are there ways that we can learn from COVID to provide better ways for our young people and capture some of the accidental successes that have occurred because of it and apply them across the education system?

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his statement and his answers so far. You mentioned the expert panel to examine educational underachievement. I understand that that panel is to report in the spring of next year. That is a hugely significant issue in north Belfast and greater Shankill. Can the Minister update the House on the progress that the panel has made to date?

Mr Weir: There are a couple of aspects to that. There has been engagement prior to the NSMC meeting with experts sharing their experience of underachievement. That will be fed in. The work of the delivering equality of opportunity in schools system can also feed into that. The panel started in September, and it is my understanding that, up until the middle of October, there were 401 direct responses to the online consultation. I understand that, over the period up to January 2021, at least 20 oral sessions will be established by the education panel, with, as indicated, the aim of having a completed report by May 2021.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle, agus cuirim fáilte roimh ráiteas an Aire. Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I welcome the Minister's statement. Following on from the point about educational underachievement, could you expand on similar initiatives, what we have learnt and the opportunities to enhance cooperation with your Southern counterparts? You mentioned the final evaluation report. What lessons have you learnt from that?

Mr Weir: The information from the evaluation report has been fed into the expert panel and has been provided to it along with a wide range of other pieces of evidence. One of the advantages for the expert panel is that there is a bank of knowledge on and good experience of underachievement. Whether it is happening in the Republic of Ireland, in parts of Northern Ireland, or indeed, England, Scotland, Wales or internationally, that information can feed into it.

None of us should be conceited enough to believe that we always have all the answers. We can learn from experience, and how things are tackled across the board will be fed into the expert panel. That is not simply about copying things that have worked successfully; at times, it may also be about people saying, "Here is something that was tried but did not work so should be avoided". It is

about getting all that rich experience and having it feeding in from different points to the panel.

Mr McNulty: Minister, a young woman is fighting for her life in a hospital not far from here after a domestic violence issue at the weekend. I am sure that the Minister will join me in wishing her well and will recognise the important role that education has in teaching our young people about respect. I know that that is not connected to the statement.

I commend those who have continued to work throughout the pandemic in order to provide support for children. I want to focus on special educational needs and the Middletown Centre for Autism, which is in my constituency. We are all too aware of the constant battles being fought by parents of children with additional needs. Does the Minister agree that there needs to be a significant focus on policy and resources in order to tackle the lag in providing support and services once a diagnosis has been confirmed from the statement of need to the provision of therapies? Furthermore, should there be a focus on the sudden drop-off of services when a child hits his or her nineteenth birthday? Will the Minister undertake to ask the Middletown Centre for Autism to carry out an urgent review of those two areas of work and to make recommendations for action and change across this island?

1.00 pm

Mr Weir: First, while it is not part of the statement, I join the Member in wishing a speedy recovery to the lady that he mentioned. I am not aware of the individual case, but domestic abuse is always completely wrong, and it is right that there is legislative focus on it in the Assembly.

COVID has caused some level of disruption to the Middletown Centre, but its work has been able to continue. It has been able, particularly in its online work, to provide a level of support to parents. I am sure that the Member has been down — I would recommend to any Member that they go down — to Middletown to see the good work that is being done there. Interestingly, what probably was plan A for the centre going back six, seven, eight years or however long it was actually was not realised, but plan B turned out to be a better vehicle.

In the context of support for facilities, obviously part of the idea of the SEN regulations which are out to consultation is to have earlier interventions that can feed through to better solutions at a later stage. Ultimately, as regards the precise operational detail of what Middletown does, it has to have some room for manoeuvre. I do not particularly want to direct the centre towards that, but I will be keen to work with it. While this has not really stopped the operational side of things, as a consequence of the election in the Republic and the period before the Government was formed there are a number of vacancies at management level that need to be filled on the Republic side. The Minister gave an assurance that that will happen fairly rapidly. That will give additional opportunity to have strategic governance within the Middletown Centre. I look forward to its continuing to deliver for parents and young people with autism. I look forward to the centre using its expert skills and, as the Member suggests, considering whatever future direction of travel it needs to take to be able to enhance those services.

Mr Butler: We will stay on the topic of special educational needs and the Middletown Centre, if that is OK, Minister.

I echo your call for any Member who has not been to Middletown to take a trip down there to see the wonderful work that the centre does. Minister, you will be aware that there are around 40,000 pupils in Northern Ireland who have ADHD. It is one of those things that is not often talked about and is sometimes overlooked. Will you make a commitment to bring it up as a topic? Will you also update the House on any work that is being done in that area, please?

Mr Weir: We want to make sure that there is provision for special educational needs across the board. Some areas of training have been held up by COVID. We need to see what is the best way to deliver that. The Member mentions bringing it up as a topic at NSMC, which obviously tends to focus on cross-border jurisdictional aspects. I am not sure whether there is a very specific cross-border element to this. However, if the Member has any further information, I will be happy to explore that.

Ms Ennis: There has been considerable focus today on the Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA), and rightly so. Can the Minister advise on the extent of cross-border movement of children and young people with special educational needs accessing services like those at Middletown Centre for Autism? What, if any, impact will the onset of Brexit have on those young people's accessing those services?

Mr Weir: The Member will be aware that, at a broader level, with the common travel area, there should not be any particular obstruction to children moving North/South or South/North. While there will be a need for Middletown to fit into whatever overall jigsaw is there in terms of the EU situation, I do not think that that should lead to particular disruption. I am confident that that will be the case for the Middletown Centre.

As regards COVID very specifically, yes, lockdown has changed what the Middletown Centre has been able to provide for children with complex needs. It is part of a wider problem for shared education in the short term. Unfortunately, we have had to insulate against physically bringing children long distances to mix with children from completely different areas and schools. I know that in the Republic of Ireland, for instance, there has also been specific guidance, if not regulation, on how far any individual can move on that basis.

There has been a continuation of services, however. Even between March and June of this year, the MCA ran a range of webinars via Zoom for pupils. There has also been online support, and events are now beginning that will directly involve schools and the MCA. It is about trying to balance the health considerations while providing that service. I am confident that the MCA has adapted and will continue to adapt, but all of us will hope for a situation in the relatively near future in which any level of restriction on mixing can be lifted and we can resume living as close to normal as possible.

Mr Gildernew: I, too, acknowledge the brilliant work done by Middletown. I have had the opportunity to visit it and meet the people involved.

Minister, there have been significant failings in special educational needs provision here in recent years, and, as a consequence, thousands of our young people have been seriously let down. Given that SEN provision was discussed at the North/South Ministerial Council meeting,

can the Minister tell us what difficulties exist in that area in the South and what can be learned from its response to those difficulties?

Mr Weir: I will be honest with the Member: although SEN was discussed, the principal area of detail was Middletown, so there was not too much detail on issues that have happened down South. No jurisdiction has got this entirely correct. Arising out of a number of the reports undertaken, the Department has established a wider governance group with the EA to make sure that issues are all drawn together and that we are not pulling in different directions. It is also the case, certainly here, that there is a level of importance attached to the SEN regulations and code of practice. Comparing precisely what has happened in the North with what has happened in the South was not gone into in great detail at the NSMC meeting, but we may touch on that at a later stage.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for his statement. It refers to draft proposals for PEACE PLUS on the theme of youth and also states that you:

"noted North/South exchanges in the area of youth work practices".

Was there any sense that initiatives or plans might be developed to enhance North/South exchanges for young people, especially in youth services, in a post-COVID world? Preparations that are made in the coming period will help to deliver those, perhaps from next summertime onwards. Will Brexit have an impact on any initiatives that might take place?

Mr Weir: Again, that common-sense cooperation should not be impacted on adversely by Brexit. There is a direct working relationship on the youth side between the Education Authority and the National Youth Council of Ireland. There is therefore that ongoing dialogue. Direct exchanges among young people, either on the youth side or the school side, have been, on a personal basis and at least in the short term, impacted on in an educational sense by COVID.

As the Member will be aware, although there have been some adjustments made to the Peace IV programme, there is support within it to scope out a range of proposals for PEACE PLUS, and those proposals would look towards continuation. At this stage, an ambitious set of proposals has been sent to DOF and the SEUPB for consideration. The four aspects that have been identified are continuation of shared education; the North/South school exchange programme, focusing particularly on 15- and 16-year-olds; educational underachievement; and supporting learning through technology in education. A fifth proposal on integrated education is being finalised. As indicated, specific work will be done that will focus on the youth sector side. The detail of that will come from the National Youth Council and the Education Authority.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister's statement referred to Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, an initiative in the Republic that began in 2005. I would be grateful if the Minister would list his sense of the achievements of DEIS over the last 15 years.

Mr Weir: I will not comment on the individual elements, because that report has gone to the educational underachievement group. It will work through it and take advice.

As I said, it is about learning. It is also the case that, while good work has been done through DEIS, from a practical point of view, we have to ask whether there are still problems with educational underachievement in any jurisdiction. The answer is yes, there are, and it is about the mutual learning that can take place.

Mr Speaker: Matthew O'Toole is not in his seat.

Mr Allister: On the matter of teacher qualifications, in Northern Ireland, of course, the most appalling issue is the discrimination that arises from the Catholic certificate. Has that been addressed yet? Is there a cross-border element to that, in respect of teachers from here who want to teach in the Republic?

Mr Weir: It is about the mutual recognition of qualifications, and I want to see that addressed. As that particularly relates to Northern Ireland, it is an internal matter for Northern Ireland. Consequently, we have to be very careful that we do not bring into a cross-jurisdictional basis something that should be in the purview of Northern Ireland.

Mr Carroll: Minister, was there any discussion at the meeting about the Association of Secondary Teachers in Ireland's (ASTI) recent vote for strike action over safety concerns in education in the South? There is concern among teaching staff about schools and the spread of the virus in them. People want to know what both jurisdictions and Ministers are doing to tackle those concerns.

Mr Weir: From the point of view of respecting the individual position of jurisdictions, the potential strike action is being taken by a union that does not operate in Northern Ireland. Consequently, any strike action would be a matter for the Republic of Ireland. It is not my role to interfere in the internal affairs of the Republic of Ireland.

A range of mitigations has been put in place. Indeed, a recent report by the Office for National Statistics suggests that the incidence of COVID-19 among education staff is no different from the population as a whole. There is no reason to suggest that there is any particular driver in schools that, in any way, places them at a higher level than anywhere else. That has not just been the experience of the Office for National Statistics in the United Kingdom. Similar studies conducted by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control indicate that the levels of COVID among education staff are no different from the rest of the population.

A union, even if it is in another jurisdiction, will want to look after its members; that is the role of a trade union. My role is somewhat wider: to ensure that the education of our young people, in particular, is protected. Undoubtedly, the best place for the future of our young children, for their education, their mental health and socialisation is to be directly in schools. I will fight to defend schools remaining open while always examining and taking public health advice so that mitigating measures to protect everyone in schools can be taken.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, at the end of your statement, you said that you had discussed with Minister Foley:

“the ... challenges and opportunities that will be presented as the UK leaves the EU.”

Given what you have said about the difficulties with mutual recognition of teaching qualifications and various North/

South exchange projects being prevented by Brexit, will you please enlighten us as to what the opportunities are for young people?

Mr Weir: On the wider point of Brexit, my point was that we are working through any issues on mutual recognition, which has to be done on UK-wide and bilateral bases. It is also the case that steps have been taken on reaching an early agreement on some issues.

One of the false concerns raised by some early on — I appreciate that Member did not raise it — was that Brexit would prevent cross-border access. At a very early stage, the common travel area was recognised and accepted by all. On the practical implications, a number of children and staff here work on one side of the border and live on the other. As a result of the recognition of the common travel area, that issue was, largely speaking, sorted out quite a long time ago. Similarly, the positive advantages of PEACE PLUS have been recognised.

Some of the positive aspects of Brexit are having a sovereign nation again and ensuring that, as a country, we can establish our own laws. Children here can also grow up with the confidence of knowing that they live in a sovereign nation and not one that will be dictated to by bureaucrats in Brussels.

1.15 pm

Mr Speaker: I ask Members to take their ease for a moment or two. Please do so while maintaining full compliance with the social-distancing regulations.

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

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 3) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Agus anois iarraim ar Chonchúr Ó Murchú, Aire Airgeadais, an Bille a chur chun tosaigh. I call the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, to move the Further Consideration Stage of the Bill.

Moved. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): As no amendments have been tabled, there is no opportunity to discuss the Budget (No. 3) Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Bill is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Members should take their ease for a moment.

Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The next item of business is motions to approve four statutory rules (SRs), all of which relate to the health protection regulations. As before, there will be a single debate on all four motions. I will call on the Minister to move the first motion. The Minister will then commence the debate on all of the motions as listed on the Order Paper. When all who wish to speak have done so, I will put the Question on the first motion. The second motion will then be read into the record, and I will call the Minister to move it. The Question will then be put on that motion. That process will be continued and repeated for each of the remaining statutory rules. If that is clear, we will proceed.

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

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

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

Mr Lyons: This afternoon, I ask the Assembly to confirm four sets of regulations that have been made in recent weeks.

The amendment (No. 8) regulations were made on 5 October and came into force at midnight that night. They placed a number of restrictions on the Londonderry city and Strabane district in an effort to slow a significant rise in cases in the area that led to its having one of the highest levels of infection in Europe. Specifically, the regulations placed restrictions on indoor gatherings of more than one household, except in specified instances. The regulations also placed restrictions on the hospitality industry so that only deliveries, takeaways, drive-throughs and outdoor service would be permitted. There were restrictions on hotels and guest houses so that they could serve food and drink only to residents and at wedding receptions and wakes. The regulations closed specified indoor facilities, including libraries where there is provision for the library to operate an order-and-collect service. Finally, there is a general restriction on outdoor gatherings of over 15 people, with exceptions for sports events without spectators and for emergencies. The restrictions were in

place from 5 October and have been repealed by the next set of regulations before the Chamber today.

I note the context in which the restrictions were put in place. Levels of coronavirus in that district at the time were such that they had reached an incidence of 635 new cases per 100,000 population by 5 October. If allowed to continue, that would inevitably have led to an increase in hospital admissions and deaths that, the Executive knew, they had to try to minimise. The Executive's decision to introduce restrictions in the area was also informed by the proximity to Donegal, where additional restrictions had been in place since 28 September. The effectiveness of the restrictions may be seen in the most recent report that the district has seen a fall to an incidence of 300 per 100,000 population.

The amendment (No. 9) regulations were made on 16 October. They introduced restrictions across Northern Ireland for a four-week period and are substantially the restrictions under which we currently live. The regulations replaced both the Londonderry and Strabane restrictions and those put in place by the amendment (No. 4) regulations, which were determined by postcode, initially in Belfast and then parts of Lisburn and Ballymena and subsequently across Northern Ireland. Three subsequent amendment regulations have been made to address points of detail in the amendment (No. 9) regulations. The amendment (No. 10) regulations are before the Chamber today, and I will address those together with the amendment (No. 9) regulations.

The regulations place restrictions in a number of areas. They restrict overnight stays anywhere other than at home or in the home of a linked household; that is to say, in their bubble. An individual may be able to give a reasonable excuse for an overnight stay in other circumstances. The regulations restrict gatherings in the home or in a private garden. There are to be no indoor gatherings involving members of more than one household and no outdoor gatherings of more than six, not including children under 12, from no more than two households. It is worth noting that the definition of "home" in this case is not just a private dwelling but includes self-contained holiday accommodation, including caravans and self-catering cottages.

The regulations place restrictions on sporting events so that there are to be no sporting events except elite events, indoor one-to-one coaching without contact and outdoor non-contact sport with 15 or fewer participants. The amendment (No. 10) regulations additionally ensure that dance is included in the definition of sport for the purpose of the regulations.

The regulations close a number of specific businesses and services, including close-contact services such as hairdressing and driving instructing; campsites and caravan parks for touring caravans; museums and galleries; and a wide range of indoor leisure and entertainment facilities. Hotels and other serviced accommodations were closed, except for specific categories of resident: those already resident, those resident for work purposes, vulnerable people and anyone not able to return to their own home due to an emergency.

The regulations place restrictions on the hospitality sector to the effect that businesses cannot serve food or drink to be consumed on the premises but can sell to order off

the premises before 11.00 pm. Takeaways can sell for consumption off premises to 11.00 pm. Off-sales from an off-licence but not from a pub or bar may carry on until 8.00 pm.

Face coverings are to be worn in places of worship except when at a seat and with an exemption for the couple at a wedding or civil partnership. There are new restrictions on weddings and funerals limiting numbers to 25. Libraries are able to operate a collection service and to admit people to use internet facilities.

I now come to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. The regulations add to the two previous Executive decisions about face coverings being worn on public transport and in retail settings. The regulations also require face coverings to be worn by customers in hospitality settings except when they are seated. They must be worn in an airport and when travelling by plane, and they must be worn by staff in retail or hospitality settings unless they are separated from the public by a screen or partition or unless they are in an area that is not open to the public and are able to maintain social distance. In addition, face coverings must be worn by customers of banks and similar financial institutions and those travelling by private bus, coach or taxi. Drivers of buses, coaches and taxis must also wear a face covering unless they are separated from the passengers by a screen or partition. A face covering must be worn in the parts of a building used by a Northern Ireland Department that members of the public enter to access services. Finally, driving instructors, examiners and their students must wear a face covering. It is important to point out that staff can ask customers to remove their face coverings temporarily if it is necessary to prove their identity. The reasonable excuses for not wearing a face covering are unchanged.

I know that many Members will have questions and comments that they want to put on the record during the debate. I look forward to the debate and to making a winding-up speech.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): Statutory responsibility for scrutinising the regulations lies with the Committee for Health, of which I am also a member. I look forward to hearing about its deliberations later in the debate from its Chair.

The Committee for the Executive Office has delivered a consistent message throughout the pandemic that has centred firmly on urging compliance with the restrictions that are in place. Our ability to reduce the levels of COVID-19 largely depends on the public's support for and understanding of the restrictions. The Executive's communications strategy is key to achieving that. Information campaigns need to be relevant, informative and impactful. I welcome the updated campaign, which includes personal testimonies to communicate the absolutely devastating human cost of COVID-19 and the undeniable value of complying with the restrictions, which are designed to protect people and save lives.

I will now say a few words in my capacity as an SDLP MLA. Once again, I begin by highlighting how many of the announcements made by the Executive have been trailed on TV. We saw that yesterday. It is unacceptable, and it

has to stop. Today, many people in the close-contact and hospitality sector are very unhappy about elements of the announcement made on TV yesterday. It has caused uncertainty and stress, and the decisions have not even been taken yet. That is irresponsible government, and it needs to be knocked on the head. It is grandstanding and trying to curry favour with the public by being seen to be inside the loop and able to provide little nuggets of information, and it is unhelpful.

The Executive should be allowed to make their decision; the decision should be relayed to the House; and a properly informed campaign to update those affected should follow. The Executive Office should at least endeavour to get right what is within its power, and that includes not leaking like a sieve, briefing the media ahead of meetings and slipping information to the public without the full details in place. Remarks such as, "Restaurants will be able to open without selling alcohol" show that the lead parties of the Executive are detached from reality. Such a policy will not work. If medical science says that sectors should close, sectors must close.

However, it is up to the Executive to make sure that those family businesses, those employers and those working in the hospitality sector are compensated for such an enforced closure. Leaving the hospitality sector high and dry would be totally unacceptable. Is that what will happen? We do not know, because the information has been leaked and drip-fed without any substance behind it.

1.30 pm

Throughout the first wave of the pandemic, everyone, in a sense, knew where they stood. We were all in it together. As the numbers gradually came down over the summer months, Members cautioned the Executive not to take their foot off the brake completely but to be conscious of the need for a step-by-step approach. Yet, as the restrictions eased and a greater sense of pre-COVID normality returned to our lives, we have seen, week on week and day on day, an increase in the numbers of those testing positive, those admitted to hospital and, sadly, those losing their life to this awful disease. Clearly, something is not working.

The palpable tension among many sectors in the North has been amplified as a result of these restrictions and televised announcements. We hear those in the hospitality industry saying that they cannot decide whether some in the Executive simply do not understand their plight or whether they just do not care. We hear those in the hairdressing and beauty sector asking why the one-size-fits-all approach should apply to them as well. The level of contact in a hairdressing salon is substantially different from that in a bar. Why can we have only 25 people at a funeral or wedding but, at the same church, upwards of 150 people present at other services on the same day?

Many in these sectors in the North tell us that they feel isolated and alone. I hear, very clearly, from them a sense of, "Yes, have a lockdown if we need to, but give us the real and lasting support that we need to get through this so that we do not have colossal job losses". We have to acknowledge this while being fully aware that this is what is happening in the South and in GB. Perhaps, what worked so well in the first wave of the pandemic and helped to bring numbers down was the cohesive approach taken by the North, the South and GB. On 21 October, the

South moved up to its highest level of restriction — level 5. This was replicated in GB when it was announced at Halloween that it, too, was heading for a further lockdown. This disease does not recognise borders. It does not recognise gender, age, sexuality, constitutional identity, job or class. Those who feel isolated and alone at the minute have to know that we are, all of us, in this together.

On 23 March, the deputy First Minister spoke to the House and used the strongest language possible when she said that the actions of some over the preceding weekend had put more and more lives at risk. She said:

"We, collectively as the Executive and Assembly, need to send out the strongest possible message: you are killing people by doing those things. It is time not for soft language but for us to be very straight with people."

To those in our community who continue to flout the restrictions and treat this as one big conspiracy theory, let me reiterate the deputy First Minister's words:

"you are killing people by doing those things." [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 127, p170, col 2].

There remains some concern about the process of how these health amendments are made. I welcome the fact that the Health Committee agreed to my proposal last week to write to the Executive and ask whether there was another way to present regulations to the House. Today, for example, we are being asked to approve amendment No 10, which is a series of components that rescinds or changes the decisions in amendment No 9, which is also being taken today. Many of these are required, but it seems silly that, seconds after approving amendment No 9, we will change the regulations by approving amendment No 10. It is silly. There was a justifiable reason to use this method at the beginning of the pandemic. However, now that the changes are more focused, and, at times, amend previous decisions, making such amendments and then waiting 28 days before discussing them here is futile. There needs to be greater accountability and transparency, and given that we hear much from our TVs, radios and papers rather than in the Chamber, a fresh approach might be most welcome and appropriate.

Many will be unhappy with the decisions that have been taken to manage the pandemic. Many will have been directly impacted financially by the decisions and in their business productivity, and that is difficult for them. They will wonder why they have to be the fall guys for managing the pandemic. The bottom line is that there is direct evidence that certain sectors and certain behaviours are directly leading to a rise in the number of cases, and we all accept that a rise in the number of cases leads to more hospital admissions, more ICU beds being needed and, invariably, more people dying. Therefore, it has been necessary to reduce person-to-person contact, which is more prevalent in certain places and trades than others. Even the mere way that people go about retail shopping versus spending an evening in a bar is different, and one can result in more close contacts than the other.

I urge the Executive to continue to follow the medical advice that is provided. We need to endorse and follow the advice of Michael McBride, Tom Black and others in the sector. They are at the coalface. They see the harsh reality and have to sit down and explain to families why their

loved ones have died, and they potentially have to choose who will and will not get a hospital bed.

Coronavirus is complicated. Its impact and —

Mr Buckley: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGrath: — spread is complex. I am sure that the Member can, and will, contribute after. There cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to all sectors. If the Executive are asking businesses not to open, operate and make money, appropriate compensation must be made available to those businesses. We cannot enforce closure and not provide support.

I conclude by, as ever, supporting the amendments, but I have to say that my patience is wearing thin on supporting the method for making these decisions. The Executive need to get their finger out and start developing a more coherent strategy for managing the people who are impacted by the decisions and for the longer-term exit strategy from the pandemic that we will need. They need to deliver for the sectors that they are forcing to close.

We are now three weeks into a four-week lockdown, and nobody has received any payments from the schemes that are there to help them. That is leaving people in a very frightening position in the mouth of Christmas and is leaving businesses that have to make a number of costs and outlays unable to do so because the payment scheme has not begun. Staff are getting paid, but employers are not. They are being left to struggle, and that is unforgivable.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): I will begin by, first of all, acknowledging that we have crossed a very sad milestone, as the statistics agency records on COVID-19 have now gone beyond 1,000 deaths. That is a very sobering milestone to have reached, and it sets the context for our discussion today.

I will raise a number of points on the process by which these regulations are made and the impact that that has on scrutiny before I turn to the detail of the regulations. As usual, due to the pandemic, these rules have been made and come into effect subject to post hoc scrutiny. As I outlined before, the absence of engagement on policy development, stakeholder responses to consultation or impact assessment means that the Committee's scrutiny after the regulations are made is both more difficult and more important.

As I previously advised the House, the Committee has raised with the Minister of Health and health officials on a series of occasions now the challenge of conducting post hoc scrutiny in the absence of supporting documentation that informs the Minister's recommendations and the Executive's decisions on whether to agree the regulations. Under the current process, the Committee considers it reasonable to expect clear information on the advice supporting the consideration of regulations, including models of their anticipated impact, and it has requested that papers be supplied for such regulations as a matter of course. The 28-day period for scrutiny is designed to compensate somewhat for the urgent process, creating a little breathing space for the Committee to observe the regulations in action, and to question officials on the early weeks of their operation, before coming to a view. That space has allowed stakeholders to contact members with queries and comments that have informed scrutiny and,

on several occasions, resulted in subsequent regulations being made to address flaws and issues identified.

Members discussed the challenge, particularly in public understanding, of debating regulations a number of weeks after they have come into effect and, sometimes, after they have been superseded. The provision of appropriate supporting documentation is one important step that would assist the Committee in conducting its scrutiny more quickly. The Committee agreed to write to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to request a review of the process of dealing with pandemic-related regulations. The Committee is keen to work in a constructive and timely fashion, but also to perform its scrutiny in a meaningful way. The use of a ministerial statement to announce the restrictions created an opportunity for preliminary discussion and enabled questions to be asked from a range of perspectives beyond health.

I turn to the detail of the regulations. The Committee asked a number of questions on Thursday that could not be answered by officials but which have since been addressed in correspondence received on Friday evening. Noting that amendment No. 8 has largely been revoked, the Committee sought to explore the impact to date of amendments No. 9 and No. 10. Officials were not able to provide detail, and the subsequent letter referred the Committee back to the update of 27 October, by which point the R number in new cases was estimated to have fallen below 1, though it was acknowledged that this was likely to have resulted not just from the first 10 days of the North-wide restrictions but from the earlier restrictions in the Derry and Strabane council area. The junior Minister may be able to provide a more up-to-date picture for us in relation to that today, and we would welcome it.

Members also considered the further requirements to wear a face covering and made a number of enquiries. We asked whether it might be beneficial to adopt a more straightforward approach, requiring face coverings in indoor settings more generally; whether any analysis had been undertaken of the impact of improper use of face coverings; and whether there had been consideration of providing face coverings free of charge. Written advice received after the meeting asserted:

“when there is very prolonged close contact between individuals cloth face coverings will not offer effective protections, and therefore extending the regulation to require blanket wearing of coverings would not be justified.”

There appear to be a range of circumstances between requiring masks in indoor settings generally and “very prolonged close contact” situations, so I am not sure that this fully addresses the point raised, but I leave it to other Committee members to elaborate on.

We are advised that the face coverings working group has considered, but not recommended, free provision of face coverings. The Minister's letter also restates that evidence overall suggests that the use of face coverings reduces transmission of the virus, but cautions that improper use diminishes or eliminates their benefits, alluding also to limited evidence of harm through individuals paying less attention to other mitigations. Members challenged the inconsistency in junior pupils having to wear face coverings on school transport but not in retail settings. The Minister advised that this will be reviewed by the

face coverings working group, but noted that prolonged close contact is more likely on a school bus than in a retail situation.

A further issue that came to the attention of the Committee was the current loss of close-contact services, such as massage, for those suffering from a range of conditions. Officials advised that, where such services are ancillary to health and social care treatment, they remain permitted. However, written advice supplied after the meeting confirmed that this is confined to services commissioned by health and social care. The Committee further enquired about enforcement, and awaits a reply on this matter.

Mrs Cameron: My thoughts are also with those families that have been bereaved throughout this pandemic, whether by COVID or non-COVID conditions. It is certainly a very trying time for families dealing with grief in different ways.

1.45 pm

We meet again in the Assembly to approve regulations after they have been put into effect. By now, we are more than familiar with the process, but that in no way takes away the pain of the impact of the regulations before us. We are in a difficult, unprecedented and dangerous situation as a society, in which the threat to life is real. Let me be clear that the threat to life that I speak of today comes from COVID-19, but it is not the only threat. The threat to life also comes from undiagnosed cancers, untreated cancers and heart disease, to name but a few conditions. It also comes from a mental health crisis that we should be in no doubt will only get worse and will cost lives, with the disease of despair that comes with losing a job and not having the money to support those whom you love. I worry for Northern Ireland and for its people, its economy and the fabric of our society.

In that context, as we look at the restrictions that the Executive have brought in and that will fall on Thursday night — let me make it clear that they do fall on Thursday night — I will largely focus my remarks on the amendment (No. 9) regulations. The restrictions are not aimed at making the situation worse. They are motivated by and designed to steady the ship and to make things perhaps a bit better. They are certainly about giving our healthcare system the space in which to help those in need and to survive the pressures that the health service is facing today.

I recognise the sacrifice that we are asking people to make. With reference to paragraphs 7 and 8 of the new schedule 2, I have friends and family who work in our hospitality industry and in close-contact businesses such as hairdressers. My heart goes out to everyone whose job and whose dream has been thrown into doubt because of COVID-19. I commend my colleague the Economy Minister for her response. She had led on these restrictions and in supporting jobs and livelihoods, giving hope where people thought that there was none.

There are issues in those regulations that money does not fix, however. I look at paragraph 10 of schedule 2 and think about couples who want to get married. All young couples want to be surrounded by friends and family and to celebrate that time together. It is in such cases that we need to ensure clarity on timescales. You cannot plan a wedding in a day, any more than you can plan to reopen

a restaurant in a day. I urge timely notice of how we make decisions and of how we inform those who are impacted on. I know that the First Minister shares my view.

I want to touch on our health service. It is creaking under the pressure that it faces right now, but it is buoyed up by the incredible staff whom we have and their commitment. I know that we can see this through. Our student nurses are playing their part, and today I call on the Minister of Health to ensure in particular that those student nurses are paid for putting their shoulder to the wheel, just as they did in the first wave.

I also urge the Minister to look at what can be done for those in hospital settings getting bad news, possibly not COVID-related, and who are being left to receive that news on their own. Across our constituencies, we have heard of many instances of those who are suffering through loss and through pain. I also think of those who have a deep desire for spiritual guidance in those situations but whose minister of religion is not allowed into the hospital setting. I urge the Minister to look at those issues and see how they can be addressed. We need to find our compassion again.

In conclusion, there is a need to give people hope. That is where I welcome the words of the First Minister about learning to live with COVID-19. We need to devise very quickly a strategy that allows our economy to continue and that breaks the cycle of lockdowns. We need to find a way in which schools and hospitality can be open, not have a pick-and-choose approach.

We also need more help in Northern Ireland. Let us take whatever assistance is available to us from the army. Surely there are many roles it could be assisting with, as it does across the rest of the UK. Testing is just one example, but there is track and trace, helping with infection control, and dealing with the logistics for our health service and of the vaccination programme to come. I welcome today's news about the very positive results from the vaccination programme.

I finish by again appealing to all to abide by the restrictions no matter how unfair they may feel. We need to play our part. I firmly believe that, by following the most basic advice in a long-term way — handwashing, covering our mouth and nose where appropriate, and keeping our distance from one another — we can avoid those draconian restrictions. Those measures will keep hospitals from being overwhelmed. Do not listen to me; listen to anyone who works on a COVID-19 ward or in ICU. Ask them whether coronavirus is real or a hoax. I look forward to hearing the Executive's latest decisions, hopefully, later today, and to debating them in the House in due course.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I can now call Mr Steve Aiken. Mr Aiken, bear with me: I may have to interrupt you to suspend the debate for Question Time, depending on how much time you take.

Dr Aiken: Mr Deputy Speaker, I intend to finish by 2.00 pm, so you should not have that problem whatsoever.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Or slightly before it.

Dr Aiken: Normally, I am accused of a degree of verbosity, but not on this occasion.

Right now, we have a serious situation in which more than 1,000 deaths from COVID-19 have been recorded in Northern Ireland. That is not a statistic; it is a tragedy.

It is a tragedy for all those in Northern Ireland who have been affected by it. Often, we have been concerned about a lack of hope. However, with the results from the Pfizer and BioNTech vaccine trials showing an effectiveness of, potentially, up to 90%, I do hope, as the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee said, that we have now reached a turning point. Equally, when we look at AstraZeneca and the other companies that are working on it, I hope that we can now begin to see light at the end of the tunnel. I think that all Members would wish to welcome the opportunities that have come from the biotech industry and, in particular, our own pharma sector and universities, which have been involved in many of those trials. We wish to support them fully so that they can succeed as quickly as possible.

The key issue about the regulations is that they are decided by the Executive. I am glad that the junior Minister is here, because it is up to all members of the Executive, collectively, to come together and make the best case that we can to defeat the virus. Despite the fact that there may be a vaccine on the way, we need to be in a position to defeat the virus and make that clear.

Nobody wants to see regulations coming before the Assembly that have already been passed. Everybody wants to have at least 28 days to consider them. Indeed, as Chairperson of the Finance Committee, I can say that we would be delighted to get the information that comes to us ahead of time. Most of the Committee Chairpersons here would be delighted if we managed to get that information, did not have to push through with accelerated passage, and had a timely flow of information. For once, however, particularly in this area and in the rapidly changing environment, the Department of Health and the Executive have an excuse. We did not expect to have a second wave, even though we knew that, if we did not follow all the precautions, it could come back. Regrettably, it has.

Here we are, being asked on behalf of the Executive — it is an Executive decision by all the Ministers round that table — for these rules and regulations to be brought in, even though most of them will be superseded fairly shortly. I would also like the junior Minister to update us — indeed, I agree with the Chairperson of the Committee for the Executive Office — because, due to the flow of messaging and information, we seem to find out more about it in the media. We have not quite got to the point where we hear about everything on Twitter, but, at the moment, as a Member, I would like to get information in the Assembly first. I would also like the leaks to stop, because it seems a bit strange that I find out more from the BBC about what is going on in the Executive and what is likely to come out than from Ministers or, indeed, from our own processes. I would like the junior Minister to address that. To ensure that people are aware of it, I want to point out that I have also raised the matter at the party leaders' forum, because we must be able to have effective government.

The decisions are for the entire Executive. Some issues need to be addressed, particularly for the excluded and businesses. They must feel that they are being supported and that people are listening to them. Last week, we received Barnett consequential of another £400 million. If we add that to the potential projections that the Finance Minister has already looked at, it is half a billion of support from our country — from our Treasury — that we have

to spend by the end of the financial year. What is our Economy Minister doing about that? We have already seen the Communities and Finance Departments make efforts to do something, but here we are, after close on eight months, and some of our excluded companies still have not had any financial support, even though it is there. What are we doing about it?

That is something that we need to address, because one of the things that we must do for all of the people in Northern Ireland, if we are to have an effective health message and an effective message for dealing with COVID, is to realise that we all need to be in it together. That means that we should not be going to funerals that we should not be at, and our MPs should not be mouthing out behind the scenes and putting out falsehoods. We must get behind the advice of our Chief Scientific Officer, our Chief Medical Officer and our Health Minister, as well as the advice of the whole Executive. Things are not helped by poor messaging and leaking. Let us work closely together to sort this issue out and to make it happen.

Finally, but not least, I want to talk about our NHS. South Antrim has one of the best hospitals in Northern Ireland, and some of my constituents have been making sterling efforts to ensure that we are able to fight our way through the COVID pandemic. If anybody doubts that COVID is real or doubts the impact that it is having, they should try to get into A & E or try to talk to the 30 or 40, maybe more, people who are waiting to be admitted to wards. This is not a normal circumstance; this is not a normal situation. When we look at and talk about the regulations and about how we are trying to get them agreed, we listen to concerns about them not being laid in time, our having to wait for 28 days before we get them and all the rest of it. Let us take ourselves out of here and look at what is happening with the healthcare professionals and listen to them. Whatever we do, we must do it to help defeat COVID.

Mr Deputy Speaker, that takes me to 1.58 pm and one second.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you very much indeed.

The debate stood suspended.

Assembly Business

Mr Givan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. Further to the point of order that I raised this morning with the Speaker, I have received further correspondence from the Justice Minister outlining her reasons for not being able to be here. That correspondence highlights that the Justice Minister will be available to meet the Committee on Thursday, albeit remotely. She intends to reintroduce the Domestic Abuse Bill's Consideration Stage on 17 November, which is eight days away. Given the fact that the Justice Minister has announced that she is self-isolating, I am sure the Assembly will take advice on whether that complies with the 14-day rule. Further to that, a Minister has written formally to the Justice Committee offering to take through the Domestic Abuse Bill tomorrow. Given that a Minister is able to take forward the Department of Justice's business at Consideration Stage, what standing does the Assembly have in reaching a view as to whether the business can be conducted next Tuesday? I would welcome the Speaker's advice in that regard.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I believe that the Speaker outlined the complexity and detail of the Bill, which you will be more than aware of, earlier. I have been advised that, in those instances, with the offer of another Minister, it is for the Minister who is charged with the responsibility for the introduction of the Bill to work out the alternative arrangement with the other Minister, if it is needed. Therefore it is not as if one Minister can assume that responsibility. It is for the other Minister to agree to it and work it through. We can seek further clarity if that is the case, but that is my understanding.

Mrs Cameron: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker, on a different matter. The UK has, rightly, made the tough decision to close our borders, temporarily, to Denmark. Health authorities have reported widespread outbreaks of coronavirus on mink farms, which have spread to some local communities.

I understand that County Donegal has mink farms but Northern Ireland does not. It is important and necessary that we take steps to protect our population from any potential threat from the new strain of COVID-19. In the absence of a debate in the Chamber, can you advise how the Assembly can urge the Republic of Ireland's Government to also take that precautionary and responsible step?

2.00 pm

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I suggest that that is perhaps not a point of order but that it is for the Member or her party to decide how or in what way they raise it, particularly, perhaps, with the aforementioned Minister who has responsibility for some of those matters at DAERA. That could be by way of a question for urgent oral answer on those issues.

Mr Buckley: Further to that point of order, I would like you to pass to the Speaker's Office the fact that I submitted a question for urgent oral answer on this very topic. I thought that it was of notable concern, given that it is now spreading through animals and given the potential impact on Northern Ireland.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Just to clarify, Mr Buckley: was that question for urgent oral answer on this topic?

Mr Buckley: Yes.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Yes. Perhaps you could raise that matter with the Speaker's Office, but we can relay it through, OK?

Thank you both for raising the importance of that.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

Economy

Travel Agents: Grant Scheme

1. **Ms Rogan** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will introduce a grant scheme to support travel agents. (AQO 1023/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): Thank you for the question. I have met representatives from the Association of Northern Ireland Travel Agents, and I understand the extent to which the sector has been impacted, locally and on a global scale, by the pandemic. I have also met one of our foremost local travel agents, Mr Mukesh Sharma.

Travel agents have been able to avail themselves of support provided by the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive throughout this period, including the three business support schemes introduced by my Department. Travel agencies would have been eligible for assistance through the coronavirus job retention scheme, the self-employment income support scheme, the rates relief packages and the business interruption loans.

With ongoing restrictions in travel and a lack of confidence among the public, I believe that there is a strong case for specific financial support for the sector. To that end, I am aware that the First Minister and deputy First Minister, accompanied by the Finance Minister, met representatives from the Association of Northern Ireland Travel Agents just last week. I await their recommendations from that engagement and any follow-up Executive decision in relation to that.

Ms Rogan: Minister, your tourism recovery steering group, along with NILGA, has acknowledged that, despite the decline in our tourism sector, all-Ireland tourism has increased and that has helped to ensure that our hotels and B&Bs can stay in business. You touched on this, but will you bring forward a specific proposal to ensure that there is growth in the sector and to compensate for the loss of tourism from overseas?

Mrs Dodds: First, may I comment on the preamble to your question? Tourism from the Republic of Ireland has increased very significantly over the past number of months, given the promotion of staycations and the fact that people were unwilling to travel abroad. We in Northern Ireland have benefited from having significant numbers of visitors from the Republic of Ireland. That is a good thing, and we hope that it will continue. We think that we can expand that market.

Of course, as I said in answer to your original question, I understand and recognise the grave difficulties that travel agents in particular face and the impact that the travel restrictions etc have had on those who visit overseas. I believe that there is a case for intervention from the Executive. I understand that they have met the Finance Minister and the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the Executive will take a further decision when there is a proposal.

Mr Buckley: I have met various representatives of the travel industry and know acutely, as, I know, the Minister does, the pain that they face at this time. It is about how we ensure that the industry rebounds from what has undoubtedly been a very difficult period. Does the Minister agree that we should look at giving a rates holiday to those businesses, given the length of the tail of recovery that is expected?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. We will maybe need to look at an immediate intervention and a longer-term intervention, such as rates relief for the next year. Those businesses have a good future, but the tail of recovery from COVID is long for them, and the road to that recovery is perilous, so I would like to see them being supported.

Mr Allister: The Minister says that she is sympathetic and supportive — all those encouraging words — but the situation has been known about for months. It is certainly some weeks, if not months, since I wrote to her, as, I know, other MLAs did, about that very subject. My fundamental question is this: why is there no package as yet? Why has that not happened? Travel agents work on a peculiar system that has an impact on their cash flow: when holidays are cancelled, money that they have already taken has to be repaid, as does the commission, so they lose on all sides. That has been known for months, so why the delay?

Mrs Dodds: Again, I thank the Member for his question. He will recall that I have said many times in the House that I put forward a list of the people who still required help, and, of course, travel agents were among those on that long list. These are whole-Executive decisions, taken with the money that is available through the Finance Department. Having had further allocations from the money that was originally allocated to the Finance Department in July by the Chancellor in his economic statement, we are clear that financial help should be forthcoming, and I hope that it will be in the near future.

Onshore Drilling

2. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister for the Economy when the results of the departmental research into the economic, environmental and societal impacts of onshore drilling for oil and gas will be available. (AQO 1024/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is undertaking a review of the petroleum licensing regime. To inform that review, the Department has commissioned independent research to provide a detailed assessment of the economic, environmental and social impacts of onshore oil and gas exploration and development in Northern Ireland. That will be a detailed piece of work, covering a wide range of complex issues. The researchers have been asked to consider the policy context of UK climate commitments; petroleum policy elsewhere in the UK, as well as in the Republic of Ireland and Europe; and the implications of Northern Ireland's developing energy strategy. It is anticipated that the research will take up to six months to complete. Similar regionally specific research has shaped petroleum policy in Scotland, Wales, England and the Republic of Ireland. The research will provide a solid regional evidence base on the impacts of petroleum licensing in Northern Ireland. The Department will use the information gathered to consider options and develop,

through stakeholder engagement and consultation, evidence-based petroleum policy proposals. Those will include the need or otherwise for a petroleum licensing regime.

Mr McGuigan: Given the negative environmental and societal impacts of onshore drilling for oil and gas, there is an obvious need for action. Minister, given what you said about the countless other studies on these islands and further afield that have shown that the practices are deeply damaging to the environment and to the health and well-being of the population, will you commit to ending fracking and conventional exploration for fossil fuels?

Mrs Dodds: I have commissioned the research so that we will have a solid way forward for policy on the issue. I do not wish to pre-empt the proposals or the research or, indeed, any further proposals or the consultation by the Department. Clearly, it is a contentious, cross-cutting issue, and the final decision will be taken by the Executive as a whole.

Mr Dickson: Minister, how do you see the future of fossil fuel exploration aligning with your desire to bring Northern Ireland to net zero carbon and to tackle climate change?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for that very important question. As the Member is aware, I recently published 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy'. One of the four pillars in it is the need for a clean, green recovery for Northern Ireland. I see that as having huge potential for the way forward. The sector already provides a significant number of jobs and contributes significantly to the economy in Northern Ireland. That is where the future for energy lies. However, we have to make solid policy proposals that are based on evidence and research. That is what we are doing and will continue to do.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for her answers. The Minister will be aware that one of the things that the Conference of Parties (COP) 26 later this month will look closely at is the move towards decarbonisation. What conversations has she had with the Welsh and Scottish Governments? This could be a great opportunity for all regional Governments in the United Kingdom to come together to ban fracking.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you for that topical question. Just last week, I engaged with Michael Gove and my counterparts in Scotland and Wales on a variety of the issues. The overall topic was economic recovery. It was interesting to note that each constituent part of the UK saw a clean, green recovery as essential to the future and a decarbonisation policy as an essential part of economic recovery. Every part of the United Kingdom saw the opportunity for economic recovery through focusing on clean energy. I want us to get to that stage in Northern Ireland. I look forward to bringing forward my energy strategy early next year and, in the meantime, to continuing to work with the sector on that trajectory.

Brexit Transition: Business Support Scheme

3. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister for the Economy whether any work has commenced on a scheme to prepare and financially assist businesses following the end of the Brexit transition period in December 2020. (AQO 1025/17-22)

2.15 pm

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for her question. At the outset, I will say that I continue to oppose frictions in trade in any direction between Northern Ireland and its greatest market in Great Britain and the resulting costs to businesses that arise from the implementation of the protocol. Those in the House who, over and over again, call for the full implementation of the protocol should be aware of the conversations that were reported in the news last week from Sainsbury's and a number of other companies, which raised very significant fears about the cost to and choice for consumers and the cost to business in Northern Ireland as a result of our particular situation.

However, to specifically answer the question, the Executive have made it clear that the UK Government should provide funding and support to Northern Ireland businesses if they are in any way impacted at the end of the transition period. Work has been ongoing for some time to help businesses to prepare. Invest NI offers a range of support services to companies, and InterTradeIreland's Brexit advisory services provide financial and professional support. I continue to urge businesses to take up that support. The Trader Support Service portal is live and will provide guidance and support to Northern Ireland businesses and organisations that receive goods from GB or the rest of the world. I welcome that the United Kingdom Government are funding that service, and I encourage businesses to register. While we recognise the need for support, businesses tell us that what they most need is clear information to enable them to prepare. I will continue to press the Government to take on board the concerns of businesses and to provide them with urgent clarity and guidance on these matters.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, thank you for your answer. You referenced the transition period, and you will be aware that the clock is ticking towards the end of that period and that, for a lot of businesses, time is running out. Do you accept that, in the event of a no-deal Brexit, we will not get the clarity that we need and that, therefore, plans must be put in place as a matter of urgency?

Mrs Dodds: I am not as pessimistic as the Member. I think that the European Union and our own Government are committed to getting a deal. That is in the interests of all parts of the United Kingdom and, indeed, of French farmers and fishermen and many people and communities from across mainland Europe. I will continue to advocate for Northern Ireland businesses on this issue. However, we need to get a sense of what unfettered access is, what a Northern Ireland qualifying good will be, how we will instigate anti-avoidance measures to stop Northern Ireland being a back door into the United Kingdom and, very importantly, whether the European Union will commit to exempting large portions of trade between GB and Northern Ireland from the health certificates that they currently require. Those certificates cost significant amounts of money, and significant bureaucracy is involved. If, as he often said to me in many conversations, Michel Barnier wanted to be imaginative and innovative in the way that he implemented the protocol, this is one step that the EU could take right now.

Mr O'Toole: It is worth being clear that if anyone in the Assembly is able to talk about costs to business from Brexit, be they from North/South data flows or implementation of the protocol, it is no one from the

Democratic Unionist Party, which brought these problems on the people and businesses of Northern Ireland. Let us be absolutely clear about that.

I agree with much of what the Minister said on qualifying goods and several other questions that are outstanding. Since the Minister is in front of us, I will ask her this: when will she come to the Assembly and give a fulsome update to businesses and households in Northern Ireland about what the Department and Executive are doing? Will she support calls for Northern Ireland businesses specifically to be included in European Union free trade agreements? There is enormous benefit to Northern Ireland businesses in that, and if it can be agreed with Brussels and London, we could genuinely get some of the benefits of both markets.

Mrs Dodds: I will start my answer by reminding the Member that this is a matter of democracy. The United Kingdom as a whole voted to leave the European Union. We are part of that United Kingdom, and therefore we will be leaving the European Union. We now have to ensure that Northern Ireland leaves on the very best terms. I, of course, do not see the protocol as the very best terms for Northern Ireland leaving the European Union. As we now know, there are costs and bureaucracy involved in that protocol. I call on the European Union to instigate measures immediately that will help Northern Ireland to navigate the protocol, so that retail coming from GB to Northern Ireland, for example, will be exempt from checks. It would help the people of Northern Ireland significantly if the European Union was minded to do that.

Everyone accepts that the protocol involves significant costs to businesses. As preparation for this part of Question Time, I looked at what the Department is already doing in relation to that. We have the EU exit resilience tool, the Brexit preparation grant, the advice and webinars, the information and support on the Invest NI website, the InterTradeIreland Brexit advisory service, the Brexit planning voucher etc. However, the most important thing is clear information. I do not think that we will see that until we actually see the shape of a deal. I accept that businesses find that incredibly frustrating, as do I.

Mr Beggs: The Minister has referred to how, already, some supermarkets are indicating that they may withdraw from aspects of the Northern Ireland food retailing market, but this goes much wider than that. Our garden centres are indicating difficulties in supplies. We have also learned of potato producers having difficulty in accessing seed potatoes, which come mainly from Scotland. Of course, this will affect virtually every aspect of movement of goods across the Irish Sea unless reasonable accommodation is made. What are the Minister and the First Minister and deputy First Minister actually doing to minimise disruption to our economy?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. What he outlines is obviously absolutely true. When I had the opportunity, as a Member of the European Parliament, to vote on this, I did not, because of the implications of the protocol for Northern Ireland businesses. It is something that I have warned this House about over and over and over again. I have outlined the practical measures that are in place. We need clear information on these matters. I advise the House that I speak many times during the week to members of Her Majesty's Government on issues in relation to the protocol: the supply of goods for the

manufacturing chain from GB to Northern Ireland; how Northern Ireland milk products will be treated, should some of them be processed in the Republic of Ireland; our parcels, which will simply arrive in Northern Ireland from GB. There is much that the Joint Committee can do to make these things easier to bear for the people of Northern Ireland. I appeal for the European Union, in this last round of negotiations, to get serious about doing that, if it is serious about protecting Northern Ireland and its consumers.

Students: COVID-19 Safety Advice

4. **Mr O'Dowd** asked the Minister for the Economy what advice her Department has given to students in relation to COVID-19 safety. (AQO 1026/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. Following discussions with the National Union of Students - Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI), we have developed advice for students across a range of issues relating to the impact of COVID-19. This advice has been published on the nidirect website. It covers everything from safety in travel, finance and support, and health and welfare to exams, placements and graduation. For further education, it refers to all of the above and gives advice on apprenticeships.

In addition, my ministerial colleagues in the Executive Office, along with the Chief Medical Officer, the Public Health Agency and officials from my Department, have convened meetings with the universities, the main purpose of which has been to ensure the safety of students on campus. The universities have been working closely with the Public Health Agency to ensure that they are providing advice to students that is fully in line with the agency's guidelines. That advice includes information on what support is available to students, including for those students who are self-isolating, as well as on the expected behaviour from students.

Further education colleges have been provided with a framework for recommencing on-site educational provision. The document provides practical guidance on how students and staff should prioritise their own and others' safety around COVID-19. In addition, my Department requires the colleges to provide students with an extended induction process to ensure that they understand the policies and procedures in place to protect their safety.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for her answer. She will be aware that students have had a particularly difficult year, particularly first-year students, who were awaiting their A-level results and then had to deal with the mix-up around those. They are now seeing their studies disrupted. They are facing financial hardship, because many who had part-time jobs no longer have those jobs, plus they have the worries of living with and dealing with COVID. On Friday, the Scottish Government awarded £1.32 million to assist with students' mental health and well-being. They will assign dedicated officials to engage with students and to counsel students on their mental health. Will the Minister undertake to work with the Health Minister to bring a similar proposal to the Executive to have dedicated funding for our students' mental health and well-being?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for what is an incredibly important question. COVID-19 does not just affect students. It has placed an enormous strain on mental

health and well-being right across all our communities, in all age sectors and for all people. Sadly, we will see the impact of that in the years to come. Indeed, many people have indicated that it could be an impact similar to that of 30 years of violence.

The Member is very well aware that I have lobbied very hard for additional funds for students to address hardship. In fact, in this financial year, there is a student hardship fund spread across the universities that totals about £5.6 million. It is the highest amount of hardship funding available to students in any part of the United Kingdom. My officials have also conducted a review of mental health provision in the higher education sector, and we are pleased to note a robust and proactive offering across all the institutions. I am acutely aware, however, of the impact of COVID on our health, and I will commit to having conversations with the Health Minister on that to see whether there is a need to do more to ensure that students, particularly those young students who have come straight to university following their A levels, have the support and protection that they need.

Mr Nesbitt: On 29 September, Sammy Wilson MP said:

“The climate of fear deliberately created by Ministers and their advisers has done untold damage to individuals and to the economy as a whole, and has now hit students and universities”.

He then challenged Gavin Williamson, the Secretary of State for Education, asking whether he believed:

“it is fair that universities still hold on to the money paid by students when they are not offering the student experience that they promised”.

Does the Minister agree with her party colleague?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. It is very topical, and I am asked a significant number of questions about that every week.

As the Minister responsible for higher education, I am responsible for policy but not for fee-setting. The responsibility for that lies with the universities themselves. I am clear, however, with the universities that they need to provide a wide-ranging set of teaching methods and an appropriate assessment method for students.

I continue to monitor that and to ensure that our students receive the best education that they can in the very difficult circumstances in which the universities have to operate. If there are indications to the contrary, I will be happy to take action.

2.30 pm

Mr Carroll: During an era in which students are primarily being taught remotely, does the Minister agree with me that it is unjustified to push students further into debt by making them pay tuition fees when they are abiding by public health measures to stay safe? What plans does she have to ensure that students do not rack up further debts at this time?

Mrs Dodds: Tuition fees are probably an issue that we will debate at a future date in the House. I am clear that students in this era of COVID-19 should be safe, should be taught via a variety of methods and should receive the best possible teaching in the circumstances. If there are

indications to the contrary, I will be happy to take it up with the universities. There is nothing more important to young people than receiving an appropriate education. The future of our economy and the stability and prosperity of Northern Ireland relies on it.

Ms McLaughlin: My question has been answered, but I will ask another. With the student experience being so diluted at present, I am very concerned about some students who are being held in contracts for accommodation in England, Scotland and Wales. Will the Minister join or commit to joining with the other devolved Governments to push for students to be released from contracts for accommodation so that they can return home and study remotely, instead of being tied into contracts and isolated in places where they have no backup or support?

Mrs Dodds: Of course, much of that will vary from university to university. In Northern Ireland, I understand that Queen’s University has offered students in halls of residence a holiday payment for this term because of the difficulties that some have experienced from having to self-isolate during this very difficult period. Many students have private accommodation, which offers other difficulties, with the contracts between landlords and tenants. That is why I moved during the year to provide additional funds to our university hardship funds. Should it be indicated that we need to be more proactive again in lobbying for more funds, I will not hesitate to include a bid for that in the January monitoring round.

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

COVID Closures: Support for Businesses

T1. **Mr Lynch** asked the Minister for the Economy, given that, on 22 October, she announced that support would be available for businesses impacted by the restrictions — those that were directed to close and those within the supply chain — albeit that only the scheme for those businesses that were directed to close has opened for applications and he is hearing from businesses that are in financial difficulty as a result of that, how quickly she expects payments to be made and when she expects the scheme to open to those businesses that are in the supply chain. (AQT 621/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Thank you. The support package for business is in the form of two particular supports: one led by the Department of Finance and the other led by my Department for the Economy. For those who are instructed to close and who have business premises, the Department of Finance offers a solution. I am looking at those who have no business premises to operate out of and particularly — I do not know — mobile hairdressers, driving instructors etc.

As of 9 November, 2,170 applications had been made, of which 106 have been verified. The first payment run was made last Friday and represented £127,000 in assistance. I will seek to have that progressed as quickly as we can, but we need to do verification checks, which are very important in ensuring that public money is well spent.

Part B of the scheme is around the supply chain. We will, probably, have the final paper to the Executive about that tomorrow.

Mr Lynch: I thank the Minister for her answer. Back in October, you were allocated funding for the newly self-employed. Many of those people have received zero support to date. Will you tell them when they can expect, finally, to get much-needed support?

Mrs Dodds: There are a number of issues around bringing forward a scheme for the newly self-employed. I recognise the real financial difficulties that they have been in. One of the issues is verification and cooperation from HMRC. That has been a difficult part of the process, but, again, we should have a paper for the Executive to make a final decision on this week.

Project Stratum: Update

T2. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on Project Stratum and its implementation, given that many people are working from home, many students are studying from home, many school pupils and teachers are working at home and rural businesses are trying to operate online. (AQT 622/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: We are almost at the end of the legal processes in relation to Project Stratum. I hope to be in a position very soon to make an announcement to the Assembly and Executive about the progress that that has made. That will ensure that many businesses in rural parts of Northern Ireland, which, I think, about 97% of the project covers, will have access to high-speed broadband. That will help not just in a COVID situation but with the competitiveness of our economy and the ability of rural communities to be more competitive and productive.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. Obviously, there will be a lead-in time with regard to getting that implemented. Have you had conversations, or are there any ongoing, with providers to boost what we have at the moment to get an initial better speed for some places? That would be an easy, quick win.

Mrs Dodds: We have, of course, had a number of conversations. Just last week, I was really glad to announce further progress in that area. Project Stratum is a long-term intervention in the economy, but it is hugely important. It will ensure that Northern Ireland has almost full coverage in all parts. I look forward to that; it is an aspect of delivery that the Executive, the Assembly and we, in the Democratic Unionist Party, having lobbied for that under the confidence and supply deal, can be proud of.

Remembrance Sunday: Queen's University

T3. **Dr Aiken** asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will join with him in thanking the vice chancellor of Queen's University for marking, yesterday, the considerable sacrifice made by many Queen's students in the conflicts in which our nation has been involved. (AQT 623/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I, of course, join with you in that regard. Remembrance is hugely important for all of our society. Remembering those who made the ultimate sacrifice is massively important for us as a nation. I was glad to see commemorations going ahead yesterday, even in a pared-back way. It is also hugely important for Queen's University and its vice chancellor to make such remembrance a priority, given the very considerable concerns that there

have been in sections of our community around some of the decisions in the university in recent days.

Dr Aiken: Thank you very much indeed, Minister. Will she, as part of the celebrations that will be undertaken next year for our 100th anniversary, encourage the university, as part of its badly needed outreach to the unionist community, to set up an endowed chair for the study of unionism and its contribution to Northern Ireland? It would be particularly apposite if it were named after Edgar Graham.

Mrs Dodds: I do indeed think that that is a very laudable suggestion, and it is one that I would be very happy to support in my Department. We are also making preparation for the centenary of Northern Ireland, looking at the economic powerhouse that Northern Ireland was at the beginning in its creation and looking firmly into the future at how we can develop the economy of Northern Ireland in a way that sees it fit for purpose in its second century. These, I think, are exciting events for us all. I know that, in many ways, some in the House will consider it divisive, but a sign of the maturity of this House will be in how it reacts to the commemoration of the centenary of Northern Ireland.

COVID Closures: Support for Businesses

T4. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister for the Economy, given that businesses in Derry and Strabane have been subjected to additional restrictions and have been closed for the past six weeks, while those elsewhere, including in his constituency, have been closed for four weeks, with employers closing their businesses in good faith, albeit that the vast majority of them have yet to receive a single brass penny of the support that they were promised, when they will be paid what they are owed. (AQT 624/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As I said in my previous answer on this particular matter, there are two aspects to the business support schemes that are ongoing for this restriction period. One is the scheme that is organised and run by the Department of Finance where, as the Member rightly talks about, businesses that closed their premises have had no support. As someone who has considerable experience of running business support schemes, I recognise that these are not easy things to implement and that they are not easy things to have verification on, particularly when you are trying to have a speed of response on it. Therefore, as I indicated, I am particularly concerned with the scheme that we are running for those businesses that have no premises, and we have already made the first run of payments on that. I hope that, having made the initial run, we will be able to speed up the process, but, again, as the House is quite rightly very concerned with, it is important that the proper processes and verifications are in place so that we can ensure that public money is well spent.

Mr Catney: Thank you, Minister. The situation facing these businesses is totally unacceptable. In my view, the Minister has been far too slow to support those who have been asked to close and to support supply chain employers that have been affected by these decisions. Will she apologise to those business owners, who are in despair this afternoon, and commit to providing them with the support that they need now?

Mrs Dodds: I am really not sure which businesses the Member is referring to. If he is talking about businesses

that have had to physically close their premises, he needs to refer his question and his requirement for an apology to the Minister of Finance, because that is where that particular scheme is being run. I am running a scheme for people who have not been able to carry out their normal business. That is people who do not operate from a premises and people who are mobile in the way that they conduct their business. As I said, we have moved quite quickly to ensure that that scheme is up and running. The first payments are under way, and the rest will follow in due course.

HMS Caroline

T5. **Mr Chambers** asked the Minister for the Economy, after assuming that there will not be time for his question and a supplementary question, given the time, and stating that he welcomes the latest news regarding the postponement until the end of the year of the redundancies of staff employed on HMS Caroline and the fact that he understands that consultants have been working on a report regarding HMS Caroline, to state whether she can confirm that the consultants' brief contained a direction only to consider relocation sites outside Northern Ireland. (AQT 625/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am really unsure of the direction of the Member's question. First, I welcome the agreement that we were able to strike with the Royal Navy museum in relation to the people who are employed on HMS Caroline.

I have made it clear on many occasions in the House, and I indicated at the beginning of September, that the Department did not want anyone to be made redundant, and we were quite willing to put in place a process to ensure that those people were paid until the end of December and, indeed, thereafter if necessary.

2.45 pm

I am very committed to ensuring that HMS Caroline remains in Northern Ireland and, as an important historical part of the Northern Ireland landscape, that it is open not only for tourism but for the intrinsic value that it represents for people here. Therefore, that is the aim of the work that my Department is undertaking. I am glad that the Royal Navy museum was able to come to an accommodation with the Department. I will continue to work with the Royal Navy museum to ensure that the ship has a full future in Northern Ireland and that those currently employed remain employed.

Mr Speaker: Alan Chambers has concluded his questions. I call Colm Gildernew.

Student Debt

T6. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister for the Economy for her view on the following: a report in the 'Belfast Telegraph' last week that stated that, over the past seven years, higher education students in the North saved £1 billion in tuition fees and student debt when compared to students in England; that the saving was due to the Executive's commitment not to follow England and, instead, to keep student fees affordable; and the fact that Sinn Féin believes that that approach is important in breaking down barriers to education. (AQT 626/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Speaking as someone who has benefited from a university education in Northern Ireland, I think that it is extremely important to ensure that all our young people have access to quality education. I am glad that the Northern Ireland Executive had a collective approach to looking at the issue of student fees and did not follow the automatic £9,000 requirement in the rest of the United Kingdom. I look forward to continuing that approach.

Mr Speaker: As there is a minute left, Colm Gildernew can ask a supplementary question.

Mr Gildernew: My question has been answered.

Mr Speaker: The time is up for this item of business. I thank Members for their contributions and ask them to take their ease for a moment or two while we prepare the Table.

Education

Nurture Units: Rural Schools

1. **Ms Dillon** asked the Minister of Education to outline the number of nurture units in schools in rural areas. (AQO 1038/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): I thank the Member for her question. Members will be aware that there are two definitions of "rural" in education, which we are trying to align. Based on figures from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA), one primary school currently receives funding from the Department for a nurture group, and that is St Oliver Plunkett Primary School in the north-west. The other definition that is sometimes used for sustainability between urban and rural may be a little out of date. Of the original 31 schools, about 22 were deemed as urban. The new group of 15 schools to receive funding for nurture groups has five schools that are Belfast-based, and 10 are based outside Belfast. In addition to the direct funding for nurture groups in schools, as part of this year's funding process, which will be ongoing, all educational settings, including rural primary schools, will have access to a nurture approach in education programme through the Education Authority. The aim is to try to mainstream this across the board.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can he confirm that a full rural-proofing exercise was carried out? I understand what he says about the first definition and the second definition. The second definition can be ruled out, because some Departments consider anything outside Belfast as rural, which is not the case.

I invite the Minister to see an excellent example of a primary school in a rural area. If he were to visit St Mary's Primary School in Pomeroy, we would really appreciate it.

Mr Weir: I will deal with a couple of those issues. The position on the most recent announcements is that some of the implementation remains subject to the provision of a business case. As part of that process, a rural needs impact assessment and a quality impact assessment will take place. The criteria used for the previous set of announcements have been in existence for a number of years. It is, effectively, a competition for nurture units, because the funding is not infinite. The system used to produce criteria was developed a number of years ago. That system is ongoing, and schools are therefore ranked against those criteria.

On the urban/rural definitional split, particularly for sustainability issues, anything within the old city council area in the north-west and anything within Belfast was counted as urban; everything else was counted as rural. There is a good argument that that is out of date, and I recently signed off on a proposal to change that to try to align our definitions of urban and rural with those of NISRA so that they are consistent across the board.

I am sure that many schools are providing very good services but, if the school could put an official invitation through the system, I would be happy to come down to Pomeroy to visit it.

Mr McNulty: Can the Minister confirm whether there are plans to bolster the existing Irish language nurture units and to open more in the future?

Mr Weir: The position is that all groups should be treated on the basis of equality. In the different sections of funding, there were originally 20 nurture units. That moved up to 30 and then 32, one of which dropped out. Recently, another 15 have been put in place, and two of those are in Irish-medium schools. The criteria that have been used from the start are objective. All schools are treated according to the set criteria, and treated equally. Whether it is a controlled school, a maintained school, an integrated school or an Irish-medium school, decisions are based on how the schools meet the qualifying criteria for a nurture unit. Nobody should feel that they are being superseded or being unfairly leapt over. Objective criteria will continue to apply in establishing any form of ranked order for nurture units. We have seen expansion, and it is widely accepted that nurture units are important. That is why we are trying to mainstream them across all schools. Not only have they been very successful in the short term but they will bring long-term dividends.

As is the case for all Ministers, it is a question of funding constraints. If I had the money to fund another 50 nurture units, I would be happy to do so, as would any Minister. So far, we have been able to progress 15 nurture units. After this, I have a meeting with the Finance Minister to discuss next year's budget. A massive expansion is unlikely, given the other pressures, but any additional units will always be judged on how they rank according to the criteria. It means that, depending on how much money is available, one school will be the final one to be funded. The school below will be next in line.

Mr Butler: Given the success of nurture units and early intervention, will the Minister commit to expediting the legislative change that will create flexibility in the age at which children start school, especially for premature children?

Mr Weir: I am certainly keen to look at that. As with a lot of things, the focus has been more on COVID than on developing a policy, but I am sympathetic to the situation. Something needs to be done, and we will need to look at whether it is done on a legislative basis or in a different way. We need to do something to allow greater flexibility on the starting age in limited circumstances, because if you were simply to make that very open-ended, it could be very disruptive to the school system. However, there are some tough cases, and there is no flexibility in that at present, so I am happy to look at it.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. I declare an interest as a governor at Edenbrooke

Primary School, which has a nurture unit, and I thank the Minister for extending that to Glenwood Primary School. The Minister said in an earlier answer that he is working under financial constraints. Will he look at the outcomes of the expert panel that is looking at educational underachievement? Given that early interventions are cheaper and better, perhaps some money can be unlocked and freed following the publication of such a report.

Mr Weir: I cannot prejudge any of the panel's outcomes. I should say that some of the advantages of nurture units are those that do not purely bring direct educational achievement; they also have a very major social impact, particularly on disadvantaged young people. They are a potential win-win. As such, I will want to look at whatever proposals come out of that panel. It is likely that there will be some commitment from any panel to earlier interventions, which may well lead to nurture units.

As the report is due to complete in May, it will then require additional funding from next year's budgetary settlement. It has been accepted from proposals that we have put forward that, although we do not know the exact nature of what will come out of the educational underachievement panel, as it is an NDNA commitment, we would like to see the Executive as a whole back it up with funding. That could lead to additional support, particularly for nurture units and early intervention.

School Principals: COVID-19 Support

2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Education what support his Department is providing to school principals during the COVID-19 pandemic. (AQO 1039/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am on record praising the tremendous efforts of all school leaders and staff not only for their tireless work to support our vulnerable children, the children of key workers and the thousands of pupils who have been educated through remote learning but for the significant planning and preparation that was undertaken to get schools ready for the new term. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to see the results of some of that work at first hand.

On 24 August 2020, I outlined a significant package of funding, with the support of the Executive, to help to support the safe reopening of schools. The funding will help principals to address some of the new pressures arising as a result of COVID and, in doing so, to protect our children and young people as well as those working in educational settings.

The package includes £17.5 million towards the cost of substitute teachers and other school expenditure; £6.4 million for PPE; £5 million for school well-being initiatives; £3.1 million for additional costs for home-to-school transport; and £1.4 million to support special educational needs. That is principally focused on the first term of the new academic year.

An updated version of the COVID guidance for school and educational settings was published on 29 September, and that is intended to support principals and educational settings. The guidance outlines a range of additional supports that are available to schools, including a named cross-organisational link officer for all schools; a Public Health Agency (PHA) helpline; and a dedicated Education Authority helpline for schools that require advice on

COVID where a positive case is identified. A range of information and flow charts are also available on the DE website and C2k Exchange.

In addition, through the monitoring rounds, additional allocations have recently been made to the education sector. Those are very recent; consequently, we need to move them through. About £8 million was made available directly for schools in addition to a range of other issues to cover, for instance, some EA pressures, including SEN.

There is a range of support there, but not all of that has been entirely rolled out.

Sorry, also, as part of that, the figure for schools includes the fact that there has been growth in years 13 and 14. The figure for schools was £10 million that was provided directly for that. There was another £1.8 million for non-statutory preschool settings.

3.00 pm

Mr Beggs: I declare an interest as a governor of Roddensvale School. I join the Minister in showing my appreciation of the staff and teachers of all our schools in helping our children.

The Chancellor has recently extended the furlough scheme, at least until March 2021. Given that recognition that the challenges of COVID-19 will extend until at least that time, what additional moneys does the Minister see coming to schools to assist with this challenge in keeping children safe and teachers protected as they carry out this vital work?

Mr Weir: I indicated that, during the recent monitoring rounds that have just taken place, Education as a whole received £12.8 million of what was bid for in the October monitoring round and then, on the COVID side of it, £49.4 million, of which £10 million was directly related purely to schools. Other actions were taken. It was also the case that, for PPE equipment, in addition to the £6.4 million that was granted, about another £19 million, I think, roughly speaking, was granted to help to pay for PPE for all schools and settings. There are a range of activities.

The Member rightly indicated that the furlough scheme has been extended. With the exception of very limited circumstances, the furlough scheme does not apply all that much directly to the public sector, albeit that, across the board, people are able to take advantage of it. While it has a major impact on Northern Ireland plc, if I can put it that way, there is no direct Barnett consequential of the furlough being put in place, other than that people in Northern Ireland are able to avail themselves of it. There is not a particular additional block that comes into Education as a result of the extension of the furlough scheme.

Ms Mullan: A post-primary school in my constituency had to close after four days of reopening because the principal, the two vice principals, six teachers and all the canteen staff had to self-isolate. It was not safe. Intervention over and above the packages that you have mentioned is needed there. I have highlighted to both you and the Health Minister the burden on principals in relation to tracking and tracing. I asked both your Departments to work together to significantly enhance the PHA's capacity in schools. Can you give us an update on progress?

Mr Weir: I will take a couple of those issues. Obviously, there is a wider issue for the Executive. The PHA obviously

falls within the remit of the Department of Health. There is a wider opportunity, as we move ahead, to increase the availability of tracking and tracing. In schools, we have seen a situation where we will work with the Department of Health on a pilot scheme to ensure that testing can be turned around at a quicker rate. We have seen examples in England where they do daily testing. That is moving on. Directly speaking, I appreciate that tracing people creates a burden for schools, but where someone has tested positive — particularly a school student — the school is probably in the best position to identify those who have been close and those who have been sitting next to them. That is the role that schools play in providing that level of information.

I am glad that the Member has raised the issue where we have probably seen a bigger problem at times in some areas, and that is where there has been community spread among adults. That has obviously impacted on staff. Sometimes, the reporting of the media is not entirely accurate. I have heard two conflicting dates mentioned, and on the media there was talk of the school in question closing for a fortnight and of remote learning: that is not the case, and I am glad there is the opportunity to put that right. I understand that, possibly on Thursday of this week, following a deep clean, there will be —. There will always be a knock-on effect on that basis. It is the intention in the way that money is being made available for substitute cover, because you can have a school that is hit quite heavily, that it will be on the basis of drawing down as much as possible, within what is available, on the basis of need, rather than a top-sliced allocation per school. We have seen, for instance, on that basis —.

Mr Speaker: Time is up, Minister.

Mr Weir: In about half the schools, there have been no cases at all, and in others it has been deeper. It is about responding to the need. Apologies.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Ms S Bradley: Does the Minister agree that there is a real need to set up a working group, with stakeholders drawn from across the education sector, to help inform you on your decisions in the weeks and months ahead?

Mr Weir: I agree, but a stakeholder group has already been set up. From the point of view of providing advice, a stakeholder group of school principals has been meeting regularly. It continues to meet and is informed of a range of issues in order to do that work. In addition, there are discussions at times with trade union representatives. There is a stakeholder group.

A balance has to be struck. In education, as with other things that have happened with COVID, there will be times when there has to be a quick reaction to things. That means that you cannot have everything convened. A balance between consultation and responding quickly has to be struck. The stakeholder group of about 20 school principals encompasses all the sectors, including primary, post-primary selective and non-selective schools and special schools, and acts as a sounding board for discussion. That group is already there.

Mr Speaker: I should have said that question 5 has been withdrawn.

SEN Assessments: Waiting Time

3. **Mrs Barton** asked the Minister of Education how he will reduce the waiting time for the referral of primary-school pupils for special educational needs (SEN) assessments. (AQO 1040/17-22)

Mr Weir: Give me a second.

The Education Authority has established a special educational needs and disability strategic development programme that will incorporate work to reduce delays in the SEN assessment process. The programme will also address recommendations from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) report 'Too Little, Too Late', the Northern Ireland Audit Office reports on SEN and the EA's own internal audit of practice report.

The Department is consulting on a new SEN framework that will introduce new duties for the EA, schools and the Department of Health that are designed to reduce timescales and bureaucracy in the statutory assessment process. Actions are also ongoing to reduce delays in the statutory assessment process through the EA's improvement plan and the joint Health and Education notification, referral and statutory assessment (NRSA) action plan.

I have established a SEN governance group to provide strategic oversight and coordination of the overall programme of improvements in the EA and the Department. The group will provide an assurance that the Department and the EA are working collaboratively to improve processes and procedures to achieve better outcomes for children with SEN.

Mrs Barton: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. You will be aware that there are also long waiting lists for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) assessments. I understand that those are to be completed by the medical profession, but that has a knock-on effect when children are being assessed in school by the school psychologist. Will you commit to working with the Health Minister to reduce that assessment time, for the educational benefit of our young people?

Mr Weir: I will be happy to work with him. It is important as part of this. As with a lot of things, if there were simply a single intervention that would make things work more quickly, it would have been made some time ago. It is about trying to reduce bureaucracy.

With statements, while it is still far too long, there has been a reduction in the time taken for assessments, and that is starting to work through the system. Where there are direct individual assessments, COVID has created its own problems, but we are trying to work around those.

I am happy to give that commitment to work with the Health Minister and continue to work between the two Departments to make sure that we improve the lot of anybody with autism or, indeed, wider special educational needs.

Ms Dolan: Minister, you touched on this briefly in your previous answer. What is your assessment of the impact of the onset of COVID on referral waiting times for special educational needs assessments for primary-school pupils? What action are you taking to address it?

Mr Weir: To be fair, despite COVID, there has been some improvement. For example, between July and September, the percentage of statements completed in time rose by about 11%, so there are some positives. That is across the board. There have been improvements in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, for instance. Indeed, with regard to the unacceptable number of children who were waiting more than 40 weeks, which is 14 outside of that, there has been an 83% improvement. The number has gone down from 265 to 44. Undoubtedly, COVID-19 has had an impact on some of the assessments that were there earlier in the year. For all of us, including even those in the medical profession, there was a level of reluctance in trying to assess what was doable on the ground. None of us knew precisely what was coming down the track. We have seen some level of improvement, but we have to push that consistently.

To take another appalling statistic, exactly one year ago 107 children had been waiting over a year and a half for the completion of their statutory assessment: that figure is now down to zero.

Mr McCrossan: For some time now, there has been a long, lingering crisis in SEN. Many children and families struggle, and that has been worsened by the pandemic. Does the Minister feel that his Department is doing enough to support those families, particularly in the absence of schools, which have proven to be vital to those children and their development over recent years? Does he feel that it is satisfactory that SEN schools were not included in the Engage programme for vital funding, which has angered many parents?

Mr Weir: I have indicated that, with regard to SEN, I have directed the Education Authority to work directly with those schools and to provide individual interventions where it can provide support. There is an onus on the EA to do that.

As I indicated, some good work has been done. Improvements are being made. Can more be done? Yes. We are not at the endgame. As with anything in public life, there is always the danger of seeing it as an event when, in fact, it is part of a process. We need to ensure that that process continues. That is part of the reason why, from a strategic point of view, we put the SEN regulations out to consultation with the idea that, at the end of that process, new SEN regulations and a code of practice would be put in place. That will be helpful as well. As with everything, though, will there be instantaneous answers or improvements? No. They will not happen instantaneously, but we need to move in the right direction constantly. Ultimately, can more be done? Yes, and more will be done.

Schools: Self-isolation Levels

4. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Education how many pupils and staff have had to self-isolate due to COVID-19 since schools re-opened in August. (AQO 1041/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department does not hold daily specific information on the number of pupils and staff who have been or are currently self-isolating. However, we capture pupil attendance data through the school information management system (SIMS) using a reappropriated attendance code that is not solely for COVID-19. Over the first couple of months, that averaged about 2% per week. In the week commencing 12 October, it reached a

peak of 5-6%. Those figures were on the basis of where pupils were receiving direct support learning and, indeed, engaging directly with remote learning while self-isolating or shielding.

As regards teachers, again, the overall figures were produced by the Public Health Agency, which monitors them. It had identified that, prior to the Halloween break, just over 2,000 cases were, in some way, connected with schools, with a breakdown of about 1,400 pupils and 600 staff who, over that eight-week period, cumulatively had tested positive for COVID-19. Again, the fluctuation is due largely to the figures in schools reflecting what is going on in the wider community.

As regards staff, the most recent available figures are for 13 October. They show that about 90% of teaching and non-teaching staff were on-site on that day. Of the one in 10 staff who were reported as not working on-site, schools categorised just over one third as having been:

“Identified by PHA Testing and Tracing to self-isolate”.

That is a little over 3%. It should also be noted that half of the staff who were reported not to be working on-site were reported to be working remotely.

We should also remember and put into context with regard to staff that, on average, the bill for substitute staff in a normal year is around £100 million, which is a little bit shy of 10% of the overall wage figure. We need to put that into context as well.

3.15 pm

Ms Anderson: As the Minister knows, principals in Derry and across the North are doing their utmost to protect pupils. They have carried the burden of tracking and tracing. I have been listening to the Minister’s comments today, but I do not see that dedicated support is being given to the principals in Derry and elsewhere who are carrying that burden on their shoulders. I do not think that what the Minister has outlined today tells them that enough support is being given to them.

Mr Weir: Schools can contact a dedicated PHA helpline directly. With regard to tracing, we should remember what is being said about close contacts and that, largely speaking, they are those who are within 2 metres of the affected individual for more than 15 minutes. The people who are in the best position to determine that are the people within the schools. There is, therefore, that level of support. There is support in this area, as there is with everything in relation to the issue; I am not suggesting that education has been treated unfairly with regard to the level of support. If more support was available, could more be done? Yes, it could, as it could in a lot of things, but I am confident that what has been put in place provides the maximum amount of support available, given the level of resources. That is irrespective of where the school is based.

Across the board, the latest figures suggest that roughly half of schools have not had a single case and half have had at least one case. Of those, about half had a single incidence, involving one individual. Schools will largely reflect what is happening in the community. Schools are a relatively controlled environment. I do not believe that they are somewhere in which the spreading of COVID is a particularly major problem. The problem is a range of

the activities that happen alongside schools, and we are seeing that within the wider context. As numbers of COVID cases continue to come down, I hope that we will continue to see reductions in schools, and if they go up, I suspect that schools will reflect that.

Mr Lyttle: How many P7 pupils have had to self-isolate since schools reopened in August?

Mr Weir: I do not have those figures to hand, but I will get them for the Member. We know the figures for pupils who have tested positive across the board. We will take a look to see what figures are available. I am happy to write to the Member with any information that we have, broken down as much as possible.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We move to topical questions.

Post-primary Transfer: Contingency Plan

T1. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Education, further to the Northern Ireland Assembly’s unanimous vote, when he will set out a clear contingency plan for post-primary transfer this year. (AQT 631/17-22)

Mr Weir: As I indicated at the time, contingencies need to be put in place. The people who are doing it, legally, are, first, the schools that can set their own criteria and, secondly, the organisations that put the tests in place. We will ensure that everything is put in place with regard to the health and safety of individuals, but, from that point of view, I think that it runs contrary to the law and the right of schools to have academic selection. I appreciate that the Member and I take a different view in relation to that. I support the right of schools to have academic selection. Schools have the opportunity not to use that, if they so desire, but I am not going to try to impose on schools the removal of academic selection.

Ms Armstrong: I appreciate that the Minister may not be able to provide me with this information, here, today, but I would appreciate it if he could get it to me. Following on from his response, will he provide a breakdown of how many meetings there have been with the Association for Quality Education and the Post Primary Transfer Consortium and his Department, his ministerial office and his special adviser, please?

Mr Weir: I am happy to get any information on those meetings, and there will have been discussions, too. We want to ensure that children are operating in a safe environment when it comes to the transfer tests, but we should put it in context. As I indicated in the debate, around 10,000 pupils will sit the tests on each Saturday that they are held, and a range of mitigation measures will be put in place, but that is in the context of more than 300,000 children going to school daily. It is about trying to ensure that any health and safety mitigations are put in place. As for the specifics of any discussions on that, I am sure that we will get the details to the Member.

Holiday Hunger: Funding

T2. **Mr Beggs** asked the Minister of Education whether Barnett consequentials will be received from the additional £170 million that was recently announced by the Prime Minister to allow local government to support free school meals during holiday periods and tackle the holiday

hunger issue and to state whether a commitment exists for ongoing funding in that area in Northern Ireland. (AQT 632/17-22)

Mr Weir: We would need considerably more than a Barnett consequential, because the number of children, for instance, who qualify for free school meals is of a greater nature than it is across the water. Again, it seemed that this was a case in which the Westminster Government followed behind the devolved Administrations. As the Member is aware, a proposal had been put to the Executive to ensure that, for instance, as a result of the additional week off, initially, that would be covered. Strictly speaking, time outside term time lies outside the legal remit of the Department of Education. However, what we found, across the spectrum of the Executive, is that there has been a considerable willingness and unanimous support — I do not think that I am breaching any Executive confidentiality. During the recent Halloween break, we agreed to support the payment for across both weeks. That position is similar to what was adopted when schools were effectively, more or less, not meeting face to face during the March-to-June period and to the provision agreed by the Executive for the summer period.

We are scoping out what needs to be done in terms of the cost for the Christmas period and beyond. I think that, given what has happened in the past, the Executive will step up to the mark and provide that level of support. One of the things that needs to be scoped out is an additional level of weekly cost as it is likely, as time moves on, that the numbers of those on, for instance, universal credit will, sadly, increase. Therefore, there will probably be a higher cost per week, but I think that there is a strong commitment from the Executive to tackle the issue, and, again, I suspect that we will be ahead of the curve in comparison with Westminster.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his answer. There is considerable research in the UK about holiday hunger programmes providing not only food but constructive physical and educational activity for disadvantaged children, particularly during summer and holiday periods. Does the Minister have any plans to continue to develop and provide such constructive activity to raise the educational attainment of disadvantaged young people in Northern Ireland? In particular, in Carrickfergus, in my East Antrim constituency, the YMCA has been involved in providing such a scheme.

Mr Weir: A lot of good work has been done on that, particularly by third parties. Tackling the absolute immediate issue will be about the pure issue of holiday hunger and what level of support needs to be provided there. In addition to that, particularly on the academic side, while there has been a focus, for instance, on support for academic catch-up during term time, there was investment, first, in a number of initiatives over the summer this year. Through Youth Services, a range of bespoke interventions have taken place. One area where there has maybe been a little bit of constraint in doing some of the direct help is that there has been a limit on what can be done directly through youth activity during COVID. For instance, while there have been bespoke summer schemes, the ability to have those as wide as they ideally should be has been limited a little bit by COVID. Hopefully, again, we will move to a situation in which we move away from that. However, the work, particularly, of the youth

sector in this is critical, and I pay tribute to the hard work that it has done throughout this. Sometimes, it is not as well recognised, perhaps, as what is there in the more formal education system.

Digital Devices: School Pupils

T3. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Education to outline how many digital devices have been provided to pupils and how his Department is dealing with the issue of internet connectivity for pupils whose families are financially disadvantaged. (AQT 633/17-22)

Mr Weir: On the level of support — obviously, we had a three-stage process — as of 31 October, about 8,300 devices had been given out directly. In addition to that, the EA obtained a number of Mi-Fi devices, with built-in data allowances, and we have worked closely with BT on that. There are roughly 3,000 devices in the system that we are able to draw down on, but we have indicated that, if there is a need for further devices this year, we will look to DOF to see whether any additional capital can be drawn down.

The focus has effectively been on a range of groups, particularly those who are at a socio-economic disadvantage. The level of connectivity is also critical. You can have all the devices in the world, but they cannot be used effectively, particularly in some rural areas, until connectivity has been rolled out. That is why my colleague the Economy Minister is rolling out Project Stratum to try to ensure that broadband width is escalated in those areas in order to make sure that we are marrying the two.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. We are aware that additional funding was offered to schools to provide extra assistance to children in catching up on lost school time. Will further funds be available for schools to widen the availability of that extra assistance to enable more pupils to benefit?

Mr Weir: As I said, we are constantly exploring what direct digital devices are needed. So far, the Executive have agreed a package of £12 million, which has gone into the programme to allow for catch-up. There was money for a number of smaller initiatives over the summer, but the main one was the Engage programme, for which there was £11.2 million. That will take us up to the end of March next year, and we as a Department will need to bid for around £4 million or £5 million to complete the project by June. That will have positive spin-offs not simply through what is there for pupils but by providing some additional opportunities for, for instance, substitute teachers who are on the list to be able to provide that direct level of intervention. Schools have been given the opportunity to apply that money where they decide that it is best placed. That is on the academic side.

Additional money will shortly be distributed for specific support, in response to COVID, for mental health and well-being, beyond that which would be provided under normal circumstances. It is about having a healthy mind, from a mental health and an academic point of view. It is about marrying the two.

SEN Assessments: Impact of COVID-19

T4. **Mr Clarke** asked the Minister of Education to outline the impact that coronavirus is having on the special

educational needs (SEN) assessment process, given that the waiting times for SEN assessments are well documented. (AQT 634/17-22)

Mr Weir: As I indicated, the assessment process figures were very big previously, but we have seen a reduction. There has, for example, been an improvement, particularly between June and September, in meeting the statutory assessment period. There is also provision, as I indicated, for those at the far end of the scale who have been waiting for a very long time. Over the period of a year, we have seen that number come down from 107 who were waiting 80 weeks or more down to zero. It is part of an overall process. There is no doubt that there was some disruption to direct assessments, particularly during the spring term. Again, in society as a whole, there were barriers that made people feel uncertain about what could and could not be done. Indeed, the lines of communication probably were not as strong as they would be under normal circumstances.

Mr Clarke: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he attribute any of that to remote working in the education setting? Can he give an assessment of how many people are continuing to work remotely and when he anticipates those people being back in work as normal?

Mr Weir: I have given an indication of the number of school staff working remotely. I do not, however, have figures directly to hand for what is happening in the broader process with, for instance, educational psychologists and those working in health. What I will say is that, from my experience of having seen some special schools, there is a critical intervention for face-to-face teaching. That is of benefit throughout the system, but it is particularly pertinent for those with special educational needs.

3.30 pm

Schools: Ventilation

T5. **Ms Bradshaw** asked the Minister of Education, following his response to a question for written answer about classroom ventilation, in which he said that he was following the evidence and watching how it developed, whether he is setting aside funding for the school estate that can be used as we move in to the winter, when it might not be possible for schools to keep their windows open. (AQT 635/17-22)

Mr Weir: There is direct Public Health Agency (PHA) advice on the maximum ventilation that can be provided. Schools have to apply this sensibly. I have been contacted by parents asking why windows are open. They are open to create ventilation, but schools will also have to adapt. For example, they will have to change how they look at school uniforms and consider allowing extra layers of clothing. There have to be common-sense solutions.

The money being made available to schools will meet a range of issues. It is not hypothecated to say, "You need to spend this in a particular way". Schools are given a degree of freedom. There is a concern that high levels of ventilation will have the knock-on effect of additional colds or whatever. As with a lot of things in meeting the challenges of COVID, there is rarely a solution that produces something so virtuous that it does not also create complications.

Mr Speaker: I call Paula Bradshaw for a supplementary. We have about a minute and a half left. The Member has relinquished the opportunity.

Academic Selection

T6. **Mr O'Toole** asked the Minister of Education, after commenting on getting in very briefly and the need to be concise, whether, when his expert panel on educational underachievement comes back, if it has found that academic selection is a clear cause of educational underachievement amongst disadvantaged people, he will take action. (AQT 636/17-22)

Mr Weir: Without wishing to upset others in the House, I will use the expression, "The education panel has not gone away, you know". The panel is continuing to receive submissions on underachievement. The specific issue of transfer from primary to post-primary is focusing largely on the wider review of education. I have signed off on the draft terms of reference going to the Education Committee. They still have to go through the Executive, which is probably the best place for them to go. On underachievement, there is always a danger that the media will focus on what happens at the age of 11, when, actually, a lot of the lessons are really about what happens much before that.

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

Question for Urgent Oral Answer

Economy

Caterpillar: Job Losses

Mr Speaker: Stewart Dickson has given notice of a question for urgent oral answer to the Minister for the Economy. If Members wish to ask a supplementary question, they should rise continually in their place. The Member who asked the original question will be called automatically for a supplementary.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what action she is taking to avoid the loss of 700 jobs at Caterpillar in Larne and Belfast.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): The decision by Caterpillar in the US to enter a period of consultation will be a worrying time for many. While the company has explained that that is part of a process for restructuring its electrical power division at Larne, the scale of the potential job losses will be a great shock to the workforce and their families.

I met Caterpillar's Northern Ireland senior management team, along with representatives from Invest NI, on Friday to express my disappointment at the decision. I have asked Invest NI, which has a good working relationship with Caterpillar, to continue to engage with the company throughout the consultation period in order to explore ways to minimise the impact at the Northern Ireland sites, and I know that that is happening today. Tomorrow I am meeting the Unite union to hear its concerns, and I am confident that everyone will be working to ensure that we can support the workforce at this critical time.

Be assured that my Department and Invest NI, alongside other stakeholders, including Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, Manufacturing NI and the Manufacturing and Engineering Growth and Advancement (MEGA) network, are liaising with Caterpillar's senior management to ensure that assistance is available to support workers throughout this process. That will include redundancy clinics, reskilling, job fairs and identification of job opportunities. The company is also working with union and salaried-worker representatives as it enters the 90-day consultation period.

Mr Dickson: Thank you very much, Minister, for agreeing to come to the House so quickly to answer questions about these potential job losses in Larne. Minister, I am sure that you will agree that there is a movement in manufacturing not only in Northern Ireland but across the world towards a greener and higher-tech economy in the manufacturing sector and that we need to go all out to secure major opportunities for the future. Can you tell us what you are doing to ensure that greener apprenticeships and skills are at the heart of your future economic strategy and that the money that is needed to provide for the future growth of companies such as Caterpillar is there to deliver?

Mrs Dodds: I thank the Member for his question. As I said to the House this afternoon, in rebuilding a stronger economy, I identified that a clean, green economy is an ambition not just for Northern Ireland's environment but

for growth in its economic sectors. I believe that in doing so we can add many thousands of jobs in Northern Ireland and protect our environment for future generations. That is an extremely important part of my economic strategy going forward and has been part of that medium-term plan.

We will work with Invest NI in order to ensure that it opens up opportunities in the clean energy sector to ensure that progress is made. I have also been working with Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, other councils in Northern Ireland and through the city deal process to make sure that this is an opportunity that we do not miss in Northern Ireland. As I said, I spoke with colleagues in other parts of the United Kingdom just last week to recognise that this is an important ambition for all parts of the United Kingdom as we go forward with economic recovery.

Dr Archibald: I thank the Minister for her responses so far. Caterpillar indicated that these job losses are not related to COVID or Brexit. As part of the economic recovery strategy, will you look at encouraging the start-up and capacity building of indigenous business and at how we harness the potential of key sectors, meaning not just the more established ones but the developing ones, like green energy, creative industries and digital innovation etc?

Mrs Dodds: Yes. Caterpillar indicated very clearly that this is not about Brexit or COVID but is a corporate decision that was taken at its headquarters on how the operation works globally. Unfortunately, that has resulted in workers and their families in Larne being put into a terrible position. It is a very worrying and difficult time for them. As I said, I met senior management from Caterpillar in Northern Ireland on Friday. I intend to meet the unions to see what we can do, working together, to try to alleviate what is a very difficult situation.

Yes, I do believe that encouraging start-ups and working with indigenous companies is an important element of our economic growth strategies. We have many wonderful and very ambitious globally operating companies that have been born and bred in Northern Ireland and are doing absolutely magnificent things. We intend to work to support them and also those small start-ups where we see significant growth opportunities. There are very innovative start-up companies in Northern Ireland, particularly in the digital sector, and we are working to support them.

Mr Hilditch: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. This is an unmitigated disaster for the workers' families and the people of Larne and east Antrim in general. There has been very poor communication from the company. If it had not been for the workers tipping us off as they came off night shift, or even slightly before that, it would have been on the news that morning before the area's elected members knew. That was very bad. It is down to reorganisation of the company but, without dressing it up, it is really about cheap labour. It is going to India and beyond and other places. There is no dressing it up. That drip, drip effect is now with us. Is the Minister confident that Caterpillar has a long-term future in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Dodds: Again, I agree with the Member that this is incredibly difficult for the Larne plant workers and their families, who face an uncertain future because of it. Caterpillar has indicated that this is part of its corporate global overview of where the company is operating and how it can be more cost-effective and competitive in that global market. However, Caterpillar will continue to be an

important part of the Northern Ireland economy. I hope that, working with Invest NI, we can draw back some of the job loss projections. However, even if job losses are at the maximum, Caterpillar will still have 900 employees in Northern Ireland and be a valued and important contributor to the economy here.

I will expand on that slightly, if I may. On Friday, I also spoke about this issue to the Caterpillar agent who works with government in London. Caterpillar operates on 23 sites right across the United Kingdom. Both Invest NI and I made the point that it is important that we open up opportunities for supply companies from Northern Ireland into that larger UK family of sites, so that maybe opportunities that are lost in Larne will open up in other parts of the United Kingdom. Invest NI will explore that with the company in the coming days.

Ms McLaughlin: The Caterpillar job losses are absolutely devastating for the workers, their families and the communities in both Larne and Belfast. Unfortunately, we are probably at the very beginning of major job losses throughout Northern Ireland in the coming months, which is very sobering to think about. Does the Minister agree that we must urgently reshape the economy for the future, particularly around investing in skills and new green technologies, and accelerate our programmes of change? What is she doing to lead and deliver in this revolution for driving technology within the Northern Ireland economy?

Mrs Dodds: I have said in the House before that COVID has been both a disruptor and an accelerator in the way in which the economy operates. The process of digitisation, for example, has progressed at a much higher pace than we might have anticipated.

In the past six to eight months, we have seen that process accelerate throughout Northern Ireland and, indeed, globally. For our digital sector, for example, this has been an opportunity to prove its innovation and resilience, and many of our companies in the sector are winning and gaining work from sister companies in larger corporations.

3.45 pm

We need to look very quickly at what the future will look like, not just for manufacturing but for all aspects of our economy. That is why it is important that we brought forward the apprenticeship recovery programme and the apprenticeship challenge fund. Through those, we will be able to create new apprenticeships. It is important that we continue to look at the assured skills academy, because we require that really quick, sharp intervention in the economy where jobs are needed in different sectors. In the next few weeks, I am really looking forward to going to some of the companies that have completed assured skills programmes and in which many young people have gained jobs. I often quote the Microsoft example from just a few months ago. That programme was done completely online, and 23 out of 24 of the young people in that skills academy got jobs.

It is also one of the reasons that we need to bring forward the skills strategy for Northern Ireland. Last week —

Mr Speaker: Time is up, Minister.

Mrs Dodds: Skills and improving young people's opportunities in Northern Ireland is probably my favourite subject, Mr Speaker. Last week, I looked at how we

improve skill levels at levels 3, 4 and 5, because that is where the skills gaps are.

Mr Beggs: Some 10 years ago, Caterpillar employed almost 3,000 people in Northern Ireland, but, sadly, that number has declined significantly. We were previously told that the smaller units, which can be mass-produced, were moving to China but that the bespoke larger units were remaining in Larne in Northern Ireland. Given this significant announcement, can the Minister advise what support will be given to those workers who may lose their job? She met the management on Friday, but what commitment has it given to remaining in Northern Ireland, given that previous commitments have already been significantly changed?

Mrs Dodds: I am on record in the House as saying that I believe that Caterpillar will remain an important part of the economy of Northern Ireland. Although there are difficult days ahead in Larne, I think that we can work with the company to ensure, for example, that those bespoke solutions that Northern Ireland has been so good at providing in the past will remain. Indeed, the Northern Ireland management team has identified opportunities for growth in those sectors. I am also extremely encouraged by the fact that the company's back-office operations are stable and working well in Northern Ireland, and there are opportunities in that direction as well. Caterpillar is an important company. It is important to Northern Ireland and to the United Kingdom, and, given its strategic importance, I will be talking to Minister Zahawi about the issue later in the week.

Mr Muir: The announcement by Caterpillar is a body blow to all those affected and to the economy of east Antrim. In 'New Decade, New Approach', there is a commitment to publish an economic industrial strategy. I know that the Minister is very focused on action, but we need an overarching strategy for the time ahead, as we try to safeguard jobs and livelihoods across Northern Ireland. Can the Minister give us an update on where we are at with that?

Mrs Dodds: As the Member is aware, my Department has been focusing on bringing forward a number of strategies that will feed into the economy of Northern Ireland. We need an overarching economic strategy, but we need an energy strategy, a skills strategy and other ideas to feed into that in order to build the Northern Ireland economy as a whole. We should not always be focused only on strategies, however. We should be focused on the short-term gains that we can make for the economy that make a real difference to people's lives. That is why with, for instance, the energy strategy, I am engaged on the potential use of hydrogen fuel and setting minimum targets for renewable electricity generation in Northern Ireland. Those are important issues on which we can set the direction of travel now while working on the larger time frame of the overall strategy.

Mr Allister: Minister, the management told you that it was not about Brexit or COVID-19. Did they tell you what it was about? Was it plain and simple job migration and moving for cheap labour? Was that the case and, if so, can that be spelled out? In that regard, do you agree with me that it is appalling that a senior manager in Caterpillar has, through the offices of the chief executive of the local council, sought to muzzle councillors and MLAs by urging us not to talk about the issue? He said that we should not speak in

good or bad terms about Caterpillar. Indeed, it was all the more disappointing that the chief executive of the council thought that it was appropriate to give legs to that message by even sending it out.

Mrs Dodds: I am answering questions in the Assembly, so I am unaware of that message.

It is important that we understand the motivation for what has happened in Caterpillar in Larne. When I spoke to the senior management team, they indicated that it was part of the global restructuring of the company and that that is how the company sees the way forward with location to market and cost competitiveness. That is very regrettable. Having said that, however, Caterpillar is an important part of the overall economic outlook for Northern Ireland. It remains an important employer and, at a UK level, contributes about £4.5 billion to the economy. We want to work with Caterpillar to ensure that we can maximise any future opportunities and ensure that the company remains part of our future.

Mr Carroll: It is very concerning that manufacturing workers are, once again, facing the prospect of job losses and life on the less than adequate universal credit. My sympathies go out to them all, including those in my constituency. Does the Minister agree with me that we need to move away from a failed economic model that throws large sums of public money at major corporations, with no guarantees that jobs will be safe or secure, and, instead, move towards a more environmentally friendly and sustainable model of job creation and protection, with the state taking a lead role? That will ensure that people's lives are not thrown up in the air such as has happened with Caterpillar.

Mrs Dodds: Much as I am tempted to get into a debate about public- versus private-sector companies, I refuse to do that. What is important is that the Assembly commits to working with those who face an uncertain future in Larne and, indeed, in the Caterpillar family in Northern Ireland as a whole; that we try to minimise the number of jobs that will be affected; and that we work with Caterpillar globally to try to ensure that any opportunities that there are to bring further work to Northern Ireland are maximised. As I have said repeatedly during my answers, Caterpillar remains an important contributor to the Northern Ireland economy and is a very important employer. We want to work with them to secure the future.

Mr Dunne: We all feel the pain and loss of another sector of engineering being hit. Will the Minister assure us that Invest NI is doing everything that it can to sustain jobs in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 crisis and that we will not see a recurrence of this, maybe tomorrow or later this week, that affects other such businesses in the Province?

Mrs Dodds: Through my Department and, indeed, Invest NI, I will do everything that I can to minimise job losses in Northern Ireland, but I cannot predict the future. We live in an uncertain economic environment. That environment is fed by COVID, particularly for firms here in Northern Ireland. I have said, on the record, many times in the Chamber that that uncertain economic environment could lead to further job losses. We need to learn to live with COVID rather than continue any proposed cycle of lockdowns, such as we have seen thus far. That has been

my view consistently throughout this whole process, and it remains my view.

My Department has been doing some modelling of the impact of the four-week lockdown. It is projected to have a £400 million hit to the economy of Northern Ireland. That is not something that we can sustain over and over again.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for her answers. A Member who spoke previously asked about the support that could be put in place for all the workers who could, potentially, lose their job. The Minister mentioned the upskilling opportunities, which I was really glad to hear about. Will she elaborate a wee bit more on the work and conversations with councils about how they could, potentially, support workers who may be facing unemployment?

Mrs Dodds: Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, through its chief executive, is one of the most proactive councils on that matter. The council, along with Invest NI and, of course, the Careers Service in my Department, will do everything that it can to support workers and their families in uncertain and very difficult times.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, with respect, you seem to be quite keen to not rock the boat too much with Caterpillar, which has, in the last few days, sacked hundreds of workers in Northern Ireland with very little explanation other than saying that it is not to do with the two big economic crises of the age. You referred to conversations that Invest NI is having around future plans, and you seemed to imply that that was about possibly protecting some of the job losses that have been announced. Will you say a bit more than that? Will Invest NI promise public money or some kind of assistance to Caterpillar, and have there been specific guarantees or pledges from Caterpillar around protecting those jobs?

Mrs Dodds: The Member may want to have a headline out of today's debate and his contribution to it, but I have no desire in the wide earthly world to add to the fear and anxiety that exists among workers in Caterpillar, both those who may be made redundant and those who will remain. I believe that Caterpillar has an important future in Northern Ireland. I will commit the resources of my Department and Invest NI to talking to Caterpillar and exploring with it how we can continue to secure that future. As I said, it is an important company not just for Northern Ireland; it has 23 sites across the rest of the United Kingdom, which contribute about £4.5 billion to the economy of the United Kingdom every year. There is an important opportunity for supply chain companies to be part of that family of Caterpillar in the future.

Assembly Business

Extension of Sitting

Mr Speaker: I have received notification from the Business Committee of a motion to extend the sitting past 7.00 pm under Standing Order 10(3A).

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 9 November 2020 be extended to no later than 9.00pm. — [Mr Butler.]

Mr Speaker: The Assembly may sit until 9.00 pm this evening, if necessary.

Members should take their ease for a moment or two.

4.00 pm

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

Executive Committee Business

Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

The following motions stood in the Order Paper:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, junior Minister, for being here today. Yet again, we face the oddity of debating regulations that are, in effect, well out of date. I welcome at least that we are covering a range of amendments today.

The evidence presented by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in mid-September was that transmission was largely in households. It appears, not least from the evidence bank now published by the Department, that that evidence was already outdated. The SAGE evidence of 21 September already clearly stated that hospitality and universities were significant drivers. Last week, the Chief Medical Officer confirmed that you cannot have schools and hospitality open and keep transmission declining. For example, in August, there were far more applications per head of population for the Eat Out to Help Out campaign in Northern Ireland than any other region of the UK, and it was exactly at that time that transmission levels rose to the highest in the UK. That may be a false correlation, of course, but, unfortunately, the subsequent evidence such as that from the University of Colorado and the University of Warwick, especially around aerosol transmission, backs up the fact that hospitality was a clear risk area.

One consequence of the test, trace and isolate system not working to maximum efficiency is that we did not have and do not have at present clear evidence about the sources and chains of infection here. To be clear, there was good evidence for the restrictions on household gatherings, although they appear to have made limited, if any, difference to transmission levels in the postcode areas in which they were initially introduced. What have clearly made a difference are the restrictions that were introduced in Derry and Strabane on 6 October and elsewhere 10 days later. We can see that, even in the Castlederg area,

where transmission rates were not as high as elsewhere in the council area, those rates dropped notably to among the lowest levels in Northern Ireland by the beginning of last week.

This presents us with some useful information and knowledge and also with a conundrum. The good news is that, to some extent, we now know what works. The bad news is that, well, we also know what works in the sense that we absolutely do not want to close down an entire economic sector, potentially for a year or more. We should be concerned about that close-down, and we should not be afraid to challenge it. For example, when it came to closing close-contact services, there was genuine confusion. It was only much later, for example, that clarification came that holistic therapies could be offered only upon a referral from the health and social care sector. Why was that not clarified at the outset? It was only after the Health Committee requested that information last week that we received it today, and I know that there are many small, private enterprises that would have appreciated that information a long time ago.

I turn now to face coverings. The challenge was demonstrated at the Committee last week when we found that insignificant consideration of the latest evidence had gone into the development of the regulations on face coverings. If these are to be enforced, there needs to be more straightforward application of the regulations. The evidence is clear that face coverings dramatically reduce transmission in all indoor public spaces. That is the starting point for living with the virus, and that is a phrase that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have used in recent days. There seems to be a profound misunderstanding about what we are trying to do when we introduce such regulations.

At issue is not just the epidemiological evidence but the presentation of the regulations, which must be clear to the public and easily enforced. On the wearing of face coverings on school transport, I have continued to enquire as to why some locations are included and others are not, and why some ages are applicable in some places but not in others. It is confusing and ultimately suggests that the Executive are not entirely serious about the need for face coverings at all. The simple fact is that face coverings should be worn by everyone of post-primary age in all indoor public spaces. There is no doubt that a simple law to that effect will achieve much higher compliance and acceptance.

I will now comment on the test, trace and isolate system. Before we consider taking significant steps out of the current restrictions, we need at least some of the evidence to be presented. We cannot pull out of a side street unless we have a clear view of the traffic on the road ahead. The test, trace and isolate system has not given us that clear view. The last time that the Assembly discussed the amendment regulations, I warned that we should not waste these four weeks. By mid-November, contact tracing needed to be reformed and resourced to provide us with clearer and more specific information about the origins of the infection, and that is how we can best intervene without closing down entire sectors to break the chains of infection.

The question now arises: what steps have been taken to reform and fix the test, trace and isolate service? Are we going to test, as is happening in the Republic, anyone

who has been in contact with a person who has tested positive to identify who must be isolated? Are we going to trace more quickly? Are we going to do more to encourage people to self-isolate? That matters, because without that knowledge, there is no way to see whether the route is clear to reopen at least some aspects of hospitality. I know that the inevitable consequence of a rising transmission rate will once again mean closing down vital health services.

My challenge for the junior Minister is this: what changes are being made to the test, trace and isolate system? Can he update us on the face covering regulations that will enable us to make significant amendments to the restrictions as they have applied to Derry and Strabane since 6 October, and to the whole of Northern Ireland since 16 October? I hope that the junior Minister will address those issues in his response.

Mr Buckley: I rise to speak as a newly appointed member of the Health Committee. I will make no bones about it, my view about this specific set of regulations is on the record as being sceptical and critical. I am still as sceptical and critical today as on the day on which the regulations were introduced.

My party's view is also on the record, and Members can reflect on the differing opinions in the Chamber about the approach that should be adopted going forward. I took great interest in listening not only to colleagues from different parties but to the junior Ministers, who are on record as saying that we need to live and coexist with the virus. Indeed, the junior Minister said that we cannot legislate our way through COVID. I very much support that line of thought and, as we have learned to come to terms with the devastating effects that COVID has had on our society, we have also learned that lockdown is simply not the answer.

Lockdown is simply not a sustainable mechanism and strategy as it is built purely on the premise that a solution via a vaccine is needed. We have heard promising conversations in the media today about a vaccine. However, the premise of a lockdown is based solely on the need for a vaccine. We have to look at long-term sustainable solutions, and society needs to learn to live with and adapt to the situation in which we are now.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Member for giving way. He has touched on the issue of a potential vaccine, and that is very exciting and very good news. Will the Member agree that the failure to secure his question for urgent oral answer on the new variant strain COVID outbreak in Denmark is a very serious issue? The UK has temporarily closed the border with Denmark, and the Republic of Ireland really needs to do the same.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. Will the Member take her seat? It is not in order to challenge a decision of the Speaker. I ask the Member to continue, if she wishes to do so, but she must not challenge the Speaker's decision.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Deputy Speaker for that ruling.

Does the Member agree that it is vital that the Republic of Ireland act in a way that will also protect Northern Ireland when we are dealing with a variant of the COVID-19 virus?

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for her intervention. I agree, and, keeping to the spirit of her language, I think that seeing a mutated strain of COVID-19 in an animal

species such as mink is deeply worrying. Northern Ireland does not have any mink farms but the fact that there are mink farms on our periphery, in Donegal etc, is alarming. It would have been preferable to have a Minister here to talk on the issue today but, unfortunately, we are where we are, as outlined by the Speaker.

The regulations need to be targeted, balanced and proportionate. This is what society has been grappling with since the moment that regulations were introduced. It is why many in the Assembly called for targeted data and evidence to show why a particular sector had been targeted with such an approach. We heard those in the hospitality sector crying out for much-needed intervention and asking that we look at different ways in which they, as an industry, could coexist with the virus. Hopefully, the junior Minister will elaborate on this. I understand that he and his colleagues have done a lot of work, looking at the hospitality industry and how it might, potentially, become COVID compliant. Members will join me in asserting that, although some businesses, sadly, acted irresponsibly, many businesses across the breadth of this country stayed in line and kept to the spirit of the regulations that were introduced. When given the opportunity to reopen, thankfully, they acted in an appropriate way. They were very much in compliance with the basic health messaging of observing good hygiene practices, social distancing and wearing face coverings. I expect that the junior Minister will elaborate on that.

The sectors were not the only ones calling into question a lot of these regulations. As I mentioned in my speech during the debate on the third Budget, a document called 'Protecting Lives, Protecting Livelihoods: Finding a Balance to Protect our Community and our Economy' was released by a number of businesses. Some of its content needs to be repeated here today:

"The Executive's decision to place large parts of the local economy into another lockdown will, quite simply, result in another round of job losses. Those who have had to shut their doors are deeply concerned by the decision after following the Executive's own guidance and investing money they didn't have in making their businesses safe. They are understandably anxious about the viability of their businesses and the jobs they have created and so too are the many companies who are in their supply chain or rely on them for footfall ... Our economy is an ecosystem and closing down one part isn't a limited intervention – it harms us all."

This is the crucial element:

"Pursuing a path of lockdown, release and repeat will undo all of the good work we have done to build a strong and diverse economy and protect workers and their families."

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. One of the things that he read from his notes was that the economy went into lockdown. It was not just the economy; homes, families and everybody suffered. What does the Member think about the success of the six-week draconian restrictions in the Londonderry and Strabane area, where transmission rates reduced by 70% and, in my humble opinion, lives were saved? How does that fit into the strategy that he is outlining today?

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for his comments. He refers specifically to the restrictions in Londonderry and Strabane. That was a targeted approach. If the evidence is clear that action must be taken, I support such an approach. I do not support blanket restrictions across an entire sector or industry when we can, in fact, through test, trace and isolate and the data that our scientists etc are collecting, look at more specific, targeted solutions to deal with the COVID outbreak, wherever it may be.

4.15 pm

The Member talked about lives being saved as a result of the Executive's actions, and I have no doubt that that, perhaps, is the case in many of the circumstances that the Member outlined. However, lives have been lost as a result of the restrictions that have been put in place. I know that the Member has taken a strong interest in suicide throughout his time in this place. People are suffering from adverse mental health. There are also those in —

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Mr Buckley: Not just at this time. I will give way at a later point.

There are other issues where people with cancer and other such serious illnesses are missing appointments. Unfortunately, lives will be lost as a result of the lockdown measures that have been put in place. I have said it clearly before, and I will say it again: COVID kills — we have no doubt of that — but lockdown can kill also.

I outlined the concerns that I had about the restrictions that were put in place at the time, as did other Members, and I outlined that people in the business community had concerns for their livelihood. It is also important to note that there are medical professionals who do not agree with the strategy of lockdown. I refer to the note that we all received, and I think that it received some media publicity today. Four clinicians wrote collectively in a letter to us all to say:

"We believe that the widely publicised calls in the local media to keep the hospitality industry closed are not founded on evidence based medicine and that a measured and mature debate on their implementation is required."

That goes to the heart of our democracy, and those are the points that I really want to get on to today.

COVID has wreaked havoc on the democratic processes not only in the Assembly but in democracies across the world. We see a need to balance speed of action from Ministers on targeted intervention where it may be required and curtailing public debate on these important issues. We can all agree that any restriction, no matter how vain it may feel to some Members, has a massive impact on day-to-day life. I think that I said at my first Health Committee meeting last week that the public will be as bewildered as I am that, because of the mechanisms in the House, here we are, three weeks in and four days before the regulations come out of force, debating them in the House only now. I would like to see the junior Minister address that today.

I noted at the Health Committee that the Member for South Down Mr McGrath had brought forward a unanimous suggestion that we write to the First Minister

and deputy First Minister, as well as the Executive, to look at alternative ways in which the House can give the regulations the scrutiny that they deserve. Every Member would agree with that, but we cannot have an approach where we have our cake and eat it. I listened to Mr McGrath say, on the one hand, that he was calling for full and proper scrutiny of the regulations — I agree with him 100% on that — but, on the other hand, he was saying that anybody who dares to speak against or disagree with the approach adopted by the Chief Medical Officer or Chief Scientific Adviser is in direct violation of the regulations. That is not true. We heard on the radio this morning and on air waves from across the world that there are scientists and doctors who look at different approaches, and it is only right and proper that we, as Members, give those due consideration. At the Committee, when we were discussing the vital lack of the transparency that allows us to really home in on the regulations, the Clerk informed us that, because they were laid in the way that they were with no consultation and no stakeholder engagement, we, the politicians, had become that stakeholder. It is vital that, whatever direction of travel the Executive take, the Assembly is given its place and the opportunity not only to question but to scrutinise the evidence presented.

There are many questions that come from the data that we receive. I know that I speak for a lot of people who are in close-contact services, and I can think of beauticians and hairdressers who were forced to close their doors. I think that Members across the Chamber will agree that, if there was anybody that was abiding by the regulations and had invested money and time to put the practices in place to ensure a safe environment, it was those industries. Yet, because of the blanket approach that was applied to the regulations, they were all forced to close. Sadly, the financial assistance promised to them has been slow, and that is through no fault of their own. They were promised support, and it is important that we, as an Executive and an Assembly, stand by our word and support those people in these difficult times.

I also want to refer to the likes of driving tests. In the days since lockdown began, how many young people have contacted us, frustrated that their lives are on hold because of something as basic and fundamental to their freedom as a driving test? There was good news: things had started to get moving again, albeit that there was a backlog in the system. Now, because of the regulations that were passed, those young people still cannot pass their driving test and start to contribute to society and maybe to their household bills etc. They cannot do so at the moment because of the regulations that are in force. I implore the Infrastructure Minister to bring forward a plan to see driving tests resumed across Northern Ireland and ensure that those young people can be dealt with as soon as possible.

I mentioned this at the Committee, and the Chair of the Committee touched on it in his remarks: I was shocked to hear Health officials come to the Committee who could not even answer the most basic of questions about how the regulations affected everyday lives. They were not questions that were off the wall; they had been trawled through the media for weeks. When simple questions were asked, they could not answer. They were simple questions from the Committee, such as the evidence base for the introduction of all the rules or “As we are now two weeks into the four-week period of restrictions, how well

does the Department assess the restrictions imposed are working to reduce the spread of transmission?”. They were simple questions around compliance and enforcement information. The answers simply were not forthcoming, and it is a damning indictment that, while we curtail parliamentary scrutiny in the House, when it comes to Committees such as the Health Committee, basic questions are asked two weeks in, and there is still no clarity or answer; in fact, the answers were just forthcoming on Friday, before this debate. I do not think that that is acceptable, and I do not think it is a level of scrutiny that anybody can stand over.

There should be scrutiny of the science as well. The regulations were brought into place, but the data and evidence that supported the closure came after calls in the Assembly for the data to be released. It should have been the other way around. It should have been given first, so that people could make an informed decision about why it is affecting their lives in the way that it is. Those are basic principles that the Executive need to take into consideration as we try to fight the virus.

I also want to talk about the exit strategy. Maybe the junior Minister can elaborate on it. If it is the case that it is “lockdown and repeat” until a vaccine comes, I worry for the state of the economy and for the livelihoods of everyday people across the Province and the country. Each time we decide to place restrictions on certain sectors and individuals, we run the risk of those businesses never returning. I had a constituent on the phone to me in deep hysterics on Thursday past: “You have asked me to close my business. You have told me that financial support will be forthcoming. Here I am, two and a half weeks into the regulations, and I do not know how I can pay my mortgage bills. I have four children to feed; I do not know how I am going to feed them”. All the talk in the media about restrictions and how they can help bring the R rate down must be looked at through the lens of balance when determining the approach. That is why I said at the Committee and repeat here that, much as I respect the Chief Medical Officer and hold him in high regard, it is not appropriate for him to go on the air waves and talk about how one sector cannot open unless the other sector closes, with those sectors being hospitality and education. Whether intentional or not, that simply sets communities and sectors against each another. That is not a strategy that the House should endorse. We should see the evidence. We should discuss and debate it in this institution and go forward with a cohesive plan.

The issue of non-COVID patients is really starting to come home to a lot of Members across the Chamber and, indeed, the people of Northern Ireland. Every restriction has a consequence, and some consequences are more hidden than others. I ask the Health Minister how the needs are being met of hundreds of non-COVID patients across Northern Ireland who would currently be in hospital but are not, as a result of the pandemic. Since the middle of October, the number of hospital beds occupied by patients with non-COVID illness has dropped dramatically by between 800 and 900 beds. That is according to the Department of Health’s own dashboard. I am keen to hear from the junior Minister or from the Health Minister, who may be listening from another place, an assessment of the scale of the problem and whether patients may be at risk of tragically passing away because inpatient care is not available. Ultimately, nobody should be turned away,

regardless of whether a person is coming to hospital urgently or the attendance is planned or whether it is for a COVID or non-COVID service or COVID or non-COVID care. The Minister claims that that is simply not feasible in the current climate, but I again urge him and his officials to explore all options for expanding the health service workforce. We have a duty of care to those people, and the challenge now facing the Department of Health is to demonstrate what has driven that outcome and how the data justifies the restrictions that are put in place and the actions that we take.

Households and businesses have had to make great sacrifices. Their consent and cooperation should never be taken for granted but earned and respected by us, the politicians. That means scaling up the evidence base for every rule and regulation and rationally setting out why they are necessary. In the past three weeks, more scientific evidence has been published indicating transmission risks in various settings. For sectors such as close-contact retail, as I have outlined, those figures alone do not stack up to the need for wholesale closure. Moving forward, the duty is on Ministers to account for that.

Mr Sheehan: As has been stated on numerous occasions in the debate, we are talking about regulations that have already been implemented. A number of them deal with the wearing of face coverings, face masks or whatever you want to call them. I am sure that the junior Minister will recall that I have raised the issue on a number of occasions in previous debates in the Chamber. The evidence about face masks has been compelling for some time; indeed, when the Chief Scientific Adviser was at the Health Committee a couple of months ago, before the introduction of the regulations, he said that he was concerned to discover that, whenever he went into a shop, he was the only one wearing a face mask. He appeared on 'Good Morning Ulster' a few days after that and stated that there was considerable evidence that wearing a face mask significantly reduced the transmission of the virus.

4.30 pm

One thing that I have noticed about the countries that have been most successful in suppressing the virus is that they are the countries that moved quickly and did not wait for absolute, 100%, solid, concrete evidence. They moved quickly. It is the countries that have a culture of wearing face masks that, in the main, have been most successful in dealing with the virus. They did not wait for 100%, solid, concrete evidence before they did that. However, there was evidence — and it was compelling evidence — that the wearing of masks reduced transmission of the virus. We waited, and we waited longer than we should have. We should have moved more quickly. That should be a lesson to us when we come to make other decisions about what will be useful in the fight against the virus.

Like most of the regulations introduced over the past months, the regulations are draconian. Of course, under normal circumstances, we would not introduce legislation like that. The question that people ask is this: why do we need those restrictions? Quite simply, we need them because if we did not have them, the health and social care system would be overrun. I heard Jonathan Buckley say that COVID-19 kills but that lockdown can also kill. It is not the lockdown that kills but the fact that the health service does not have the capacity. It did not have the

capacity in the first place to deal with all the diseases and conditions that exist out there. Waiting lists were already far too long. On top of that, we have a pandemic that is killing people, leading people into serious illness and leaving others with long-term conditions as a result of the disease. How have we ended up in that situation? Why does our health and social care system not have the capacity to deal with what is coming at us in the pandemic? It is because the health system has been underfunded for years. There is a direct causal connection between that lack of investment and underfunding and the lack of capacity in the health and social care system to deal with the pandemic. It is not rocket science; we do not have the capacity.

We need to introduce measures, draconian though they may be, to ensure that the system is not completely overrun. I agree that there are people who are dying from cardiovascular disease, cancer and other diseases who cannot get the proper and requisite treatment as a result of what is happening with the virus and the fact that the health service is being overrun. The fact is that if people are seriously ill with COVID-19, they have to be hospitalised. If people are seriously ill with cancer, cardiovascular disease or whatever, they also have to be hospitalised. The capacity is not there.

Some argue that we should have built up capacity in the hospital system, but that cannot be done overnight. We are in the position that we are in because of years of underinvestment, and we will not be able to fix that overnight. We need an alternative. What the restrictions do is give us a breathing space. They ensure that the health and social care system does not collapse on us, that the most seriously ill can still get treated and that the transmission of the virus is reduced in society and our communities.

I have some sympathy for those who oppose the lockdowns, but I have suspicions, too, because among them are the science deniers, the crackpots and so on. None of us wants any sort of lockdown. None of us wants to live under the conditions that we have had to live under for the past seven or eight months. Who in their right mind would want to live in this situation? Is there an alternative to this type of draconian legislation that means that people cannot have the wedding that they would normally have, visit their families or visit relatives in care homes or hospitals, for instance? Is there any alternative?

I believe that there is. We need to look at international best practice. I have already given the example of the face masks. Among the countries that have been most successful in tackling the virus are such East Asian countries as Vietnam, South Korea, Hong Kong and Taiwan, with a combined population of 178.5 million people. How many deaths have there been? There has been a total combined death toll of 629. That is fewer people than have died here, in a population of 1.5 million. Why is that? What are they doing right that we are not doing? What can we learn from them?

A couple of weeks ago, at a Committee meeting, I asked the chief social worker whether the Department had made any direct contact with any of those countries to find out what they were doing and from which we could learn. The answer was no; there had been no contact. I am not suggesting for one second that we are exactly the same as any of those countries. Of course, we are not;

there are differences. I also remember, at the outset of the pandemic, being told about the lockdown in China, particularly in Wuhan. Commentators were saying that there was no way that that would be acceptable here — we could not have such a lockdown — because we are a democratic country and China is an authoritarian country. Lo and behold, we had a lockdown, and it did what it was intended to do. Unfortunately, we did not use the time to try to prepare for a second wave of the virus, and we are in a very difficult situation now.

Five or six weeks ago, I spoke here when the Health Minister was responding, and I raised the issue of our contact-tracing system. I told him that it was insufficient and that, with the upsurge in the number of people contracting the virus, it was not going to cut the mustard. Not long after that, the chief executive of the PHA, which has responsibility for contact tracing, was at the Committee. She said that 151 people were involved in contact tracing. When I asked what that amounted to in full-time equivalents, she could not, or would not — I am not sure which — give an answer. It has since transpired that there are 88 full-time equivalents. Do the sums. At that point, when the PHA was giving evidence to the Committee, the rate of transmission was around 1,000 cases a day. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) states that, in a lockdown situation, you can expect each positive case to have had two or three contacts.

Outside of a lockdown situation, that number rises to between seven and 20. So, do the sums: let us take an average and say that each positive case had 10 contacts; that means that there are 10,000 people who need to be traced in one day. Somebody explain to me how 88 people can do that. The sums just do not add up.

Just by coincidence, on the following day, there was an article in 'The Irish Times' about the contact-tracing system in the South. Some were saying that it had been overrun on the previous weekend, whereas others were saying that it had not been overrun but that it was understaffed and that that was the problem. Professor Samuel McConkey, who is a consultant in infectious diseases — he is originally from this parish but is in one of the universities in Dublin — benchmarked the system in the South with Wuhan in China, and he estimated that the South need 2,500 contact tracers to have a proper and efficient system to track and trace all those who have been in contact with positive cases. If you extrapolate from that, we need around 1,000 contact tracers, and we have 88.

According, again, to the ECDC, it takes between four and 20 hours to train a contact tracer. The topics covered include disease epidemiology, the contact-tracing process, how to conduct interviews, practical examples and exercises, and data protection issues. Why are we not taking 1,000 people off the dole queues and training them to contact trace in order to put in place a proper system of find, test, trace, isolate and support?

What do we mean by "find"? Well, the only way that you can get a test here is if you have symptoms, yet it is estimated that up to 60% of people do not have symptoms at all. How do we find them? We find them by mass testing. I welcome the announcement by the Chief Scientific Adviser, and more recently by the Minister, to say that there is a possibility, in the coming weeks, that the

capacity may be there to carry out mass testing in a way that has not happened thus far.

We need to find those who have the virus, to isolate them, and then to support them. If they live in a house in multiple occupation (HMO), for example, how can they isolate in that context? They need to have support from the powers that be — whether it is the Department or the Executive or whoever — that can take over a hotel — as happened at the start of the pandemic, when one of the hotels in the centre of Belfast was taken over — so that people can isolate and have support and so that there is a system in place. If people need somebody to go to the shop to get their messages, there is somebody there to do that. If they need financial support, it is there as well, and that is —.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. I have shown great latitude in allowing Members to extensively discuss the matter, but I draw the Member back to the specific regulations that we are here to debate today. We, in the Speaker's role, are showing flexibility, but we need Members to refer to the legislation for which approval is being sought.

4.45 pm

Mr Sheehan: Thank you for that advice. Of course, we are discussing the legislation, with the restrictions on gatherings, on going into other people's houses, on weddings, on funerals and all the rest of it. Collectively, it is all being described as a lockdown. I accept that it is not a lockdown in the true sense of the word, but that is the way that it is being described. I have tried to outline the type of system that we could put in place that would be an alternative to those restrictions so that society and the economy could carry on very much as normal, as is happening in South Korea, Vietnam, Taiwan, Hong Kong and so on. In a sense, there is agreement. I am in agreement, to an extent, with Jonathan Buckley. I do not want a lockdown. Jonathan does not want a lockdown. Let us think of some other way of tackling this, and let us look to international best practice, because others have been much more successful than we have been.

Mr Middleton: I welcome the opportunity to speak on the regulations. I thank Minister Lyons for being with us and for giving us some clarity. Hopefully, we will hear more from him later in response to some of the questions. Like many others, I am mindful of the fact that we are living with these regulations, so it can be quite difficult at times to give an evaluation of how they have worked. Of course, many members of the public look to us for guidance on how we go forward, but we need to be mindful that the vote today, if there is to be one, is specifically on what has already been put in place.

The clarity that the tightening of regulations brought to the wearing of face masks was welcome, particularly for restaurants, cafes, bars, taxis, buses and those types of businesses, because many in those industries wanted that clarity. A taxi driver did not want to get into an argument with somebody who got into their taxi and was not wearing a face mask because the legislation did not specifically say that they had to do so. That clarity was very much welcome.

That messaging was important, because it has increased compliance right across our communities. Over the past number of weeks, I know that all of us have said that it

was worrying that members of the public seemed to have dropped their guard when it came to wearing face masks in shops and other places, but I think that that message has finally got across to the public once and for all.

Amendment No. 8 relates to the restrictions that were brought in in my constituency and the wider Londonderry and Strabane area. The context at the time was that the infection rate in our area was several times higher than the Northern Ireland average and, at one point, was the highest in the United Kingdom. There was broad recognition, therefore, that the status quo could not continue and that something had to be done. At that time, while it was disappointing that it had to be done, the Executive were right to step in and take action. Thankfully, today — we have heard some of the news reports and some of the data that has been talked about — we have seen a 70% reduction in the infection rate. That was down to the fact that communities and businesses rallied and listened to that message. We can debate which specific restrictions did and did not work, but the fact is that the infection rate came down, and that was the ultimate goal. We need to ensure that we continue to go in that direction.

Obviously, from a business and an employer perspective, it came as a blow. We know that those in the hospitality sector in particular had put in a lot of work to get PPE in place and to make their premises as secure as possible, so to find out that they had to close their doors came as a blow. That is why — we have said this all along — it is important that, when the Executive close businesses, support packages be in place. At that time, I was on the record with various news outlets as saying that the localised restrictions support scheme brought forward by the Finance Minister was not enough; it just was not sufficient. We talked about there being £400 for those at the lower end with premises with an NAV of £15,000 or below and about the amounts being scaled up.

Thankfully — I am not putting it down to me, although, if people want to do so, they can — that was doubled and rolled out across Northern Ireland, and it is welcome. We need to ensure that money, regardless of which Department it comes from, gets out as quickly as possible to those who need it.

Amendments No. 9 and No. 10 close up a lot of the gaps. There are varying views in the Chamber on the way forward. There is, I think, a collective position that we would rather be in a position where we did not have to shut anything down. We need to get to a point where we can coexist with the virus and are not switching the economy on and off.

A few moments ago, we heard the Economy Minister say that the four-week restrictions cost the Northern Ireland economy £400 million. That is a devastating blow. Absolutely, we have to point to the fact that our priority should be saving lives, but we also have to look at the evidence and the science. Mr Sheehan, who has left the Chamber, spoke about science deniers. For many businesses, however, it is not a case of denying; they want to see the science. They want to be assured that shutting their hair salon or beauty parlour makes a difference and that there is a genuine reason why they need to close their doors.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with his vein of thought. Does he agree that one of the

most frustrating parts of the evidence supplied by the Chief Scientific Adviser and others is that it is modelling based on behaviour as opposed to transmission and infection rates in the settings that he talked about? Hair salons and beauty therapists, for example, that put measures in place so that they could safely admit their clientele had no transmission rate. Yet, because of a behaviour modelling approach, they were branded as a potential cause of transmission and forced to close.

Mr Middleton: I agree with that point completely. That is why we need to get to a stage where we try to find another way. I can speak only about my barber — I will not name him in case he loses business because of my haircut, of course. The level of PPE that he put in was exceptional, but he accepted, when localised restrictions came in, that something needed to be done.

This is not about criticising. The Executive have a huge balancing task. We hear from experts — they include the likes of Dr Tom Black, whom I know and whose view I respect — who have genuine concerns from a health perspective. The Economy Minister brings to the table her concerns about the effects on the economy, and, subsequently, on the mental health of those who lose their jobs and livelihoods, and that is where we may differ from the experts. All that has to be taken in the round but it is important that we recognise that we have to find another way to coexist with the virus.

Amendments No. 9 and No. 10 bring clarity on close contact, which was one of the frustrations when the restrictions came in. We need clarity. We need to know who is to shut and who is to open. They also bring clarity on worship, churches and face coverings. I would welcome the junior Minister giving us a bit of clarity on where places of worship sit going forward.

The need for clarity is the key message that I have been getting from businesses in my constituency, city centre and rural. They want the message to be clear. The current restrictions come to an end at midnight on Thursday. Café owners are asking me whether they can order produce, and people want to know whether they can take bookings for beauty salons. We hear a lot of talk in the media, but it is important that the Chamber is given its place. It is important that we get to hear and give our views on what is brought forward. I think that that view is unanimous.

Businesses regularly reiterate that we have to find a way to coexist with the virus. My colleague Mr Buckley spoke about the Belfast Chamber of Commerce. I, and others, have engaged with the Londonderry Chamber of Commerce. There is concern about job losses.

The furlough scheme has saved many jobs, and, thankfully, it is there, but it will come to an end at some point. We cannot keep coming to this cliff edge and worrying about what we are going to do next. We need a strategy, and that is about getting the balance right.

Like other Members, where the health service is concerned, I thank the Health Minister, because his is a difficult job, but we should not get ourselves into a position where we are pointing fingers and criticising. The Health Minister is just one Minister. We have lots of Ministers in the Executive, and that is where they can bring these issues, debate them and come to a consensus. There is an onus on all of us, because there are five parties in the Chamber that are in the Executive, and these

are Executive decisions. When a decision is taken, as uncomfortable as it may be, it is important that we unite around that message and ensure that we go forward collectively.

In closing, I thank our healthcare and key workers for all that they have done over the past number of months and for their work going forward. We are coming into a challenging time. We know that waiting lists are increasing and that people are queuing to get in through the doors at A&E departments. We appreciate that work, and we cannot forget that those people are continuing to work day in, day out.

These are tough times for our businesses. It is important that we send a message to the businesses in our constituencies that we will stand behind them, continue to fight for their funding and support them. We want to ensure that as many people stay in employment as possible over the next couple of months.

Ms Anderson: There is no doubt that the rate of COVID transmission in Derry and Strabane was alarming. It was out of control. The regulations that are before us today were vital in bringing the rate of transmission of the virus down. I acknowledge the people of Derry and Strabane, because when the restrictions were introduced, I said that I had confidence that our people would do what needed to be done. They responded and reacted in such a manner that meant that they curtailed the transmission of the disease. We were reminded that, if we needed to be, when the restrictions were introduced that we are the people who carry the virus and that, therefore, we are the people who transmit it to one another. Thankfully, as I stand here today, the good news to report is that, five weeks after the restrictions were introduced, there has been a 70% reduction in COVID infections in Derry and Strabane. That shows that the restrictions worked.

The restrictions are draconian. Who wants to introduce them? There is not one person in the Chamber who wants people's civil liberties or rights taken away. However, when you hear how we were back then and think about where we are now, it is very clear that it has worked.

However, it has not gone away. Most of us know someone who ended up with the virus or self-isolating or, who, unfortunately, ended up in Altnagelvin hospital. I am thinking of two friends of mine, Moira and Neil, who are in ICU. Their families are distraught with worry, and they cannot get into the hospital to see them. I am conscious of the appeal that was made today by the vice Chair of the Health Committee, because it is important that we try to find a COVID-free pathway so that families can get in to visit their loved ones.

I say to those anti-maskers who are sending and spreading nonsense that they should stop sending me emails, because I, for one, do not want them. I do not want to hear that argument. I support what was said, and I support my colleague Pat Sheehan when he said that, at times, we acted too late with wearing face masks, but, thankfully, we are there. I support the need for us to wear them where we have to.

5.00 pm

We know that, when the restrictions were introduced, there were bars, restaurants and sole traders who were worried about their businesses and livelihoods. They are

still worried. We all talk to them; they contact us. The emergency financial scheme that was put in place quickly by the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, was welcome. However, in Derry and Strabane — this is probably not just in Derry and Strabane, but in all constituencies — we are being contacted by people who are designated as the “newly self-employed”. They have heard that a financial scheme was going to be put in place to help them when these restrictions came in. They have been waiting and waiting, and they are getting very frustrated. They are still waiting. They heard from the Economy Minister that they are the people who fell through the cracks. However, Minister, I would like you to bring this back to your ministerial colleagues: enough is enough. They have waited for far too long. The Economy Minister needs to get moving to put in place such a financial package for the newly self-employed.

I heard the Economy Minister say today that she would be taking something forward to the Executive this week. I hope that is the case for all those in our constituency and other constituencies who have been dealing with these restrictions since March and waiting desperately for a package. They do not want any more excuses. They do not want any more dilly-dallying. They are giving out to each and every one of us, because they are absolutely disgusted and fed up with having to wait as long as they have waited. There should have been a scheme in place long before now.

I want to acknowledge the communication from the two Junior Ministers to us, as representatives in Derry and Strabane, since the restrictions were introduced. You have had almost regular weekly engagements with us, and that is very much appreciated. I also want to put on record that I acknowledge the work of other Ministers. Conor Murphy, the Finance Minister, met business stakeholders in Derry and Strabane more than once.

Minister, I know that you understand and appreciate that we need to protect our front-line workers, including our carers. To this day, those who are on low wages still do not qualify for statutory sick pay if they have to self-isolate. We cannot keep telling people that they have to self-isolate but not provide them with some kind of financial support if their employers are not paying them sick pay.

The discretionary grant that has been put in place by the Minister for Communities is very welcome. It is actually better than any other grant that is in place anywhere. However, the Communities Minister understands — I have talked to her — that, if you have a partner who earns over £20,000, you cannot apply for that discretionary support grant, even if you have two, three, four, five children or more. All the carers out there whose partners earn more than £20,000 are not getting any kind of financial support.

I am not the only one in the Chamber who has raised the valuable contribution that our carers make to people with dementia. I mention people with dementia because information from NISRA has clearly stated that dementia is the most common underlying condition associated with the deaths from this virus.

I have talked to many carers and agency workers who are working flat out and feel burnt out. Many of them are not getting a proper night's sleep. They certainly do not feel, and have never felt, that we are all in this together. What COVID-19 and these restrictions have done once again

is laid bare the dire state of our social care, whilst those who work in it go beyond the call of duty. Social care can be seen as the poor relation of the health service, yet it is one of the most vital elements. The people working in it are dealing with the most vulnerable in our society.

When these restrictions came in, we said that people could not attend family gatherings and that people could not go into each other's homes. Although carers were able to go in, we know that the restrictions had a detrimental effect, particularly on the most vulnerable and those with dementia who live in Derry and Strabane. Minister, although the restrictions were necessary and supported, we also need to find a safe COVID pathway, just like in the hospitals, for family members to visit residential care homes. I know that the homes have been trying to facilitate that, but it is one of the areas that is very traumatic for people.

Minister, Altnagelvin Hospital in Derry needs additional support to stop it getting to the point of being overwhelmed every time that the R rate rises. Despite the news today that the rate of community transmission of COVID is down by 70%, Altnagelvin's COVID surge plan remains on red alert. That is still its status as of today. When the restrictions were introduced, Altnagelvin Hospital repurposed ward 21, which is a vital, state-of-the-art, recently opened and much-needed orthopaedic service. The waiting time for a hip replacement or any other orthopaedic surgery is alarming. I have raised in the Chamber the example of one constituent who has been waiting for five years. That is just not acceptable.

Being in the EU has afforded quite a number of people the opportunity to avail themselves of the cross-border healthcare provision. I personally know two people from Derry travelling to a hospital in the South of Ireland today for healthcare provision. We talk about the restrictions and the orthopaedic service being closed as a consequence of Altnagelvin Hospital being overwhelmed, but people have had a pathway to try to obtain a service. With the Brexit transition period finishing in 52 days, however, people are worried that we could have further restrictions: that these restrictions will still be in place and that there will be other restrictions. They are therefore asking this question: what will happen to that kind of cross-border service? COVID is bad enough, and, of course, the restrictions have been tough, but when you layer Brexit on top of that, you can understand why people are so deeply worried about where we are at now with the restrictions that are in place and about possible other restrictions being put in place.

It has been said here that we owe a debt of gratitude to our healthcare workers, who have, without doubt, been to the forefront of the fight against COVID-19. Although we once again face the very serious challenge that this deadly virus presents, there remains an onus on us to ensure that other vital services — I have referred to the orthopaedic service in Altnagelvin Hospital — continue to operate in hospitals, wherever they are, even when we are seeing a rise in transmission. When restrictions are being put in place and services in hospitals are being curtailed as a consequence, we need to look seriously at the support that is needed for our health service.

Many strands are needed to pull this all together in order for these restrictions to be effective in the long term whilst ensuring that Derry and its services, both public and private, are not, as Dr Black said, overwhelmed

and brought to their knees. The restrictions show that there is no good coming out of COVID, but we need to work to build back better. "Build back better" should be our motto for improving the quality of life of our citizens, for protecting and enhancing the environment and for resetting the economy. That means tackling regional inequalities with ring-fenced allocations and policies, such as the Communities Minister announced last week with the reintroduction of —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can I draw the Member back to the regulations, please?

Ms Anderson: I am; it is all part of the regulations, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am not challenging what you are saying.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. I am acting as Deputy Speaker, and I will determine whether I think that it is appropriate.

Ms Anderson: OK. I will apply the regulations to deprivation and to deprivation for those who live in Derry and Strabane, which has some of the highest levels of deprivation. I will also speak about the restrictions that have been put in place and COVID-19. There is a correlation between deprivation and what happened in Derry and Strabane, why we needed the interventions that we had, and why community transmission was so high.

I return to the point about the need to ring-fence resources and allocate them where they are needed in places such as Derry, where the people have suffered from chronic and persistent levels of deprivation. We had the spike, and restrictions were put in place in the way that they were. I believe that that is the work of the Executive and the Assembly. If we are to build back better, we need to make sure that we do not leave the most deprived behind.

Ms Hunter: I thank the junior Minister for being present. I am glad to have the opportunity to respond to the regulations, as they continue to be the most pressing of issues. I begin my remarks by paying tribute to all in society who have made many sacrifices over the past eight tumultuous months. From front-line workers to single mothers and elderly grandparents, we have witnessed sacrifices from people from all backgrounds and walks of life. I would like to thank the public, who have considered the safety of others and their loved ones by continuing to wear face masks and washing their hands whenever necessary.

My party and I acknowledge the need for the regulations that are being placed into legislation. However, in the past number of weeks, I have had a number of outstanding concerns, including some that were raised with me by my constituents. As we all know, mental health is a huge crisis in Northern Ireland, and I am sure that the junior Minister, and all Members, will share my concerns about its impact on all our constituents and the effect that the pandemic and lockdown has had on mental health, especially during the dark winter months.

One deeply worrying fact is that, in June, 504 patients in the Western Trust, which serves areas such as Derry and Strabane that face deprivation, breached the nine-week standard waiting time for adult mental health support services, and the average waiting time for those services was 21 weeks. That is very alarming. I agree with the Member to my right, who spoke earlier. COVID-19 has

truly revealed and further highlighted how chronically underfunded our health service is.

A survey on COVID-19 and mental health by Queen's University earlier this year, which was raised previously in the Chamber, showed that a third of people in the North meet the criteria for anxiety and depression and that 20% meet the criteria for COVID-19-related PTSD. Following the implementation of the restrictions, which limit human social contact so much, I am concerned about the student demographic. Recently, I spoke to representatives of the student unions about the restrictions. They told me that, given the unprecedented circumstances, we, as a society, private institutions and beyond, must change how we provide support to our young people. Currently, six mental health counselling sessions are being offered by university counsellors, but young people are being passed to other counselling services. Many students whom I have spoken to are greatly distressed as they are on NHS waiting lists and, depending on their trust area, and specifically in the Western Trust, they may not receive help until mid- to late 2021.

Sadly, the pandemic shows no signs of disappearing, and I am sure that the restrictions will remain in place. Our young people will need more mental health support. Their social contacts have been incredibly limited over the past eight months and so have their support networks. Although we must do everything that we can to protect ourselves and our loved ones from contracting the virus, including by adhering to the regulations that we are discussing, we must also ensure that, as we do that, we are prepared for the knock-on effects of the virus and the mental health impact of the pandemic in the months and years ahead for all of us who have experienced it.

5.15 pm

Understandably, the new realities of life during the pandemic have caused great distress and anxiety, not least because of the separation from family and friends, the wearing of face coverings becoming the new normal — that is especially distressing for young children — and the fear of a virus with no apparent end in sight. A huge part of alleviating that anxiety is through ensuring that there is clear messaging on what is expected of us all.

We have learned today that the Executive will discuss and consider plans for restaurants to potentially reopen without the sale of alcohol. I heard this morning from several frustrated restaurant and business owners who feel that they are not being listened to and that that would force them to close their businesses and livelihoods. I urge the Executive to ensure that the guidelines are communicated clearly and concisely, with, most importantly, the scientific reasoning at the forefront of the messaging to the public.

Mr Chambers: Members have spoken about the unsatisfactory method by which regulations such as these are being brought through the Committee and the Assembly; indeed, we are discussing legislation that has been operating since 16 October and is due to run out at midnight this Thursday. Having expressed dissatisfaction at that situation, we must acknowledge that this is a pandemic that is being grappled with by democratic government forums in many countries across the globe. It is an emergency and thus requires emergency and agile approaches to making rules and creating guidance designed to save lives. Delaying to meet normal

bureaucratic standards could cause more lives to be lost. I do not like the situation, but I would not wish that any demand from me or my party to deliberately delay the implementation of any regulations would result in any further loss of life.

Perhaps, when we overcome the many challenges that the virus has thrown at us and maybe even new challenges, given the news coming out of Denmark, we can reflect on how we reacted and what lessons we can learn that might assist those who come behind us in dealing with future pandemics. Pat told us — I cannot argue with the figures — about how well a number of Asian countries have dealt with the virus. We have to acknowledge that they have the benefit of having dealt with SARS and many other deadly viruses and have learned their lessons from those. That is why they have managed the virus better than other countries have.

Mr Sheehan: I thank the Member for giving way. That is exactly my point: those countries have vast experience of SARS, MERS, swine flu, avian flu and all the rest of it. They were prepared to put in place everything that was needed. There were lockdowns in some of those countries, but, in others, there were only localised lockdowns and so on. We are not the same as those countries, but we can certainly learn from them. Let us take the best examples and the best practice that they have used to try to get our situation under control.

Mr Chambers: Thank you for the intervention. Maybe that is the role of the World Health Organization; perhaps it has let us down in not sharing what it knows about how Asian countries have dealt with viruses.

My colleague Mr Steve Aiken spoke about leaks emanating from within the Executive. Whether it is political gamesmanship or someone's attempt to ingratiate themselves with members of the media, the people who are doing it are not serving the public interest and should reflect on how it will compromise confidence and trust in the Executive. Reports presented and debates held should remain confidential in the first instance. I genuinely do not envy the Executive their decision-making at present. I am sure that they are having a difficult time today, trying to come to some conclusions. If ever there was an occasion when it is almost impossible to please all the people all the time, it is right now. The decision-making task is not made easier by Ministers being lobbied through the media when they have not even sat down to consider what should have been a confidential document. If a Minister went straight to the media with a departmental report before submitting it to the Executive, there would rightly be outrage. Why would anyone else involved in the Executive think that it is clever to take it on themselves to pass someone else's report on to the media?

Reference has been made today by a Member to calling in the army to assist in our fight against COVID; indeed, the Minister was asked about that subject by that Member at the Health Committee last week. It is a fair question. The Minister of Health informed the House many weeks ago that he would not hesitate to seek additional help wherever he could source it, as and when required. What the army does well is providing engineering and logistical support. To date, we have not required such help other than provision by the military of temporary mortuary accommodation at Kinnegar camp in Holywood during the first surge that, thankfully, did not need to be utilised.

On offering medical backup, it is a fact that around 75% of army medical reservists are already involved in the battle against the virus in their day jobs in the NHS. On the army assisting in the track-and-trace and testing process, I imagine that, given the number of people out of work at present due to the virus, there should be an adequate pool of civilian workers to do that work. All that said, I go back to what the Minister is on record as saying: he will not hesitate to call in military assistance should the need arise. I will fully support him if that becomes necessary.

The other issue that worries me and should worry the House is the undermining of the public health messaging in relation to this dreadful virus. Elected Members, some who serve in another House and should know better, have been guilty of this. There have been examples even today of remarks that are not helpful. No matter what experts who seem to enjoy taking part in local radio programmes think, their input is not helpful. One wonders what their motivation is. The mental health champion has cautioned against highlighting the impact of the lockdowns on mental health. We need to respect that advice from the mental health champion.

Mr Aiken reminded us that all decisions around lockdowns and regulations are collective decisions of the Executive, on which the five main parties in the House are represented. The regulations made are not Robin Swann's regulations, as some people who should know better try to portray it; indeed, last week at the Health Committee, one of the two officials who were referred to and who were there to answer questions was representing the Finance Department.

The virus will not be defeated by petty party politicking nor by the input of armchair experts, even those who have the benefit of letters after their name. The experts who really matter are our Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser. My party has full confidence in those two gentlemen and their teams as they advise the Minister of Health and the Executive on the best way forward.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. I understand his point about the significance of the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser and health officials, but will he accept that, because of the radical speed with which we are putting the regulations through, other voices matter and should be considered? Today, four leading clinicians in Northern Ireland said that the regulations were not, as they saw it, in the best interests of defeating the virus. Important as those voices are, we as elected representatives must take cognisance of all the opinions and come to an informed decision.

Mr Chambers: No, I do not accept that. The experts whom we employ are the people whom we need to listen to. Is the Member advocating that I heed the hundreds of emails sent to me by crackpots telling me that this is some sort of fascist takeover of Northern Ireland? I do not think so. The advice that I want to listen to is the cool professional advice of our Chief Medical Officer and our Chief Scientific Adviser. If the House has no confidence in the officials, there must be a method to change their employment situation.

The other experts who appear to like the sound of their own broadcast voices should step back, as their input is not helpful. Today, Members could have indulged in a bit of finger-pointing, but they have been controlled. However, do

the Members who have been criticising the test, trace and isolate system, face coverings and all the other aspects of what the Executive are trying to do and have said that we need to do better realise that they are criticising their own Executive Ministers? The lockdown and all that goes with it is a policy endorsed by the entire Executive. All the regulations being discussed today are collectively supported by every member of the Executive.

Today, I have heard a Minister and a Member say that we have to learn to live with the virus. When they say that, do they mean that we have to start learning to die with the virus? That is an important point. Jonathan mentioned the fact that the virus kills and the lockdown kills, but we have to acknowledge that lockdown saves lives. There is evidence that it has helped to save lives. If we look at the figures in Strabane and Londonderry, we realise that it works. Jonathan also said that he worried about the economy, jobs and mental health: he omitted to say that — I am sure that it was just a slip of the tongue — he worried about the health of every citizen in Northern Ireland. I worry about the health of every citizen. I know that Robin Swann worries about the health of every citizen, and that is quite correct because that is his job as Minister of Health, just as the Economy Minister, the Finance Minister and the Infrastructure Minister have their jobs to do. Robin Swann is focused on one thing: protecting the health of every citizen in Northern Ireland.

Pat rightly talked about underfunding. That underfunding has not just occurred over the last two, three or four years; the underfunding has gone on for decades. The pandemic has been a wake-up call. It has shown us how close our National Health Service is to disaster. We know that the waiting lists for different treatments, even before the virus, were the longest in the United Kingdom. The pandemic did not cause the waiting lists. Whom do we blame for the underfunding of our National Health Service? We do not have to look any further than the House to see where the decisions were made or not made that, perhaps, would have put the National Health Service in a better place than it is in now. I know that talking about people who are waiting for treatments such as cancer treatment and hip operations is a sensitive subject. It is shocking, but put yourself in the place of a clinician standing at the hospital door. He does not have a bed available in his hospital, and somebody presents at the front door of the hospital who cannot draw a breath because of the virus. The person is dying with the virus. What does the clinician do? Does he say, "I am sorry, we do not have any beds. Just go home"?

No. He goes into the hospital. There, he may have a patient who is waiting to have a hip replacement the next morning, but he will send that patient home to make the bed available for the patient who cannot breathe because of the virus. Those are tough, tough decisions but, unfortunately, they are having to be made.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): May I draw the Member back to the regulations?

5.30 pm

Mr Chambers: I will finish now, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I go back to underfunding. Let us stop talking about building bridges that would cost millions of pounds. Let us start focusing on making the National Health Service the best that we can make it. The people who work in it are

the best, and they need the best facilities that we can give them.

Ms McLaughlin: I support the regulations but, unsurprisingly, not the process. First, I recognise that COVID-19 has, sadly, claimed over 1,000 lives locally, left many others with debilitating conditions and put our healthcare workers under immense stress. Therefore, and given the high rate of community transmission, it was undoubtedly necessary to act quickly to implement the new measures. However, while I appreciate the unique situation that we find ourselves in, it is unacceptable that we are debating these restrictions in the Chamber just days before they are due to expire. We are denied the opportunity to give them due scrutiny, which reduces the chances of accountability and risks eroding the public's trust. We depend on that trust to get us through this pandemic. If the public do not trust us and our decisions, they are much less likely to heed the restrictions, which would render them totally ineffective and useless. These restrictions have had a huge impact on individuals, and they deserve proper scrutiny.

I am sure that some people watching today are asking what the point of this debate is, and I absolutely understand why. Unfortunately, conspiracy theorists will seize on this lack of accountability and use it to justify their false claims that the pandemic is a hoax. We must not be complicit in adding fuel to that fire.

We must also ensure that our message is clear. Mixed messages have muddied the water and left many of my constituents feeling very frustrated. Most people want to stick by the rules but it can be hard to navigate the different restrictions. We need clarity in policymaking so that the public know what is expected of them and why. It is therefore concerning to hear the phrase "living with the virus" being bandied about. This is a highly infectious virus that has devastating consequences for many. It is completely disingenuous to suggest that we simply start living with it rather than implementing a proper strategy that seeks to suppress it.

There is no contradiction between the health of our people and the health of our economy. The solution, for employers and employees, is for Northern Ireland to deal effectively with this pandemic. In particular, that lies with the Health, Economy, and Finance Departments.

Members, I agree with my legislative colleagues Jonathan Buckley and Pat Sheehan, both of whom made points, albeit from slightly different angles, that we need to get our test and trace to work effectively. We also need to speed up reforms in our National Health Service so that Northern Ireland has sufficient resources and capacity to support our patients and enable them to recover. It is unacceptable that 400 COVID patients can bring our National Health Service to near breaking point — 400 patients nearly flooded our health service. That is a real difficulty and one that we will have to face. We have to fix it.

We have seen that the restrictions on activities in Derry and Strabane have worked. The transmission rate has fallen, as colleagues said, by 70% as a result of the recent restrictions, but we are not out of the woods yet. In Derry, Altnagelvin hospital had 16 COVID-positive admissions this weekend. That is a significantly high number. So, whilst the restrictions are improving things in my city and region, we are certainly not out of the woods yet.

Some proposals, such as authorising restaurants to provide meals but without alcohol, are just silly. We have to give employers, employees and the wider public hope for the future, including for Christmas. Put yourselves in the shoes of our healthcare workers, who are sacrificing their mental and physical health to cope with rising hospitalisations. The phrase "living with the virus" offers no solutions and very little comfort. We need more than a vague sound bite to get through this crisis.

I emphasise the importance of promptly putting in place the necessary support measures. While support schemes have been announced, we find ourselves in the farcical situation where the restrictions are due to end this week but some schemes have not even started paying out money. They have not even opened up.

We still do not know the specifics of part B of the COVID restrictions business support scheme, and help for the previously excluded self-employed workers was announced many weeks ago, yet we have not heard a single bit of detail. That is unacceptable.

Minister Lyons, one constituent put it to me like this: "It is the silence that is the real killer. The lack of communication, with no indication when payments will be issued. It makes it impossible for me to plan my business". The current delays are spreading fear and panic, making a difficult time even more challenging for thousands of workers.

We need a plan that balances support for our employers and employees with the health of our communities. I cannot see it yet.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call Robbie Butler.

Mr Butler: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. You caught me unawares there. It is a pleasure to speak in the debate today. I thank everybody who has engaged so far. Whilst there are a number of different opinions on some elements of the strategy and how we go about it, we have to remember that we have been talking about this for some months now. It has gone by in a flash, but for those families who have suffered, are still suffering and are going to suffer, it is imperative that we speak with one voice and that we are not afraid to challenge each other.

As the previous contributor said, when the message goes out, we need to speak with one voice because that will give confidence. When we look at these regulations, we find that we are talking about them belatedly and slightly too late. However, I thank the Speaker for continually writing to the Executive to try to encourage them here to lay these regulations as quickly as they can. I also put on record my thanks to the Executive Office for offering up the junior Ministers, because that adds to the quality of the message that is going out.

We cannot be divided on this, guys. It is right and proper that each of the Executive Ministers and those with their different priorities give voice to that, but let us be honest about it: protecting and saving lives is the priority. It takes precedence over everything. A case has been made from both sides of the House about finances and poverty and the pressures that our businesses are under at this time, but we also have to give voice and testament to those businesses that are speaking to us and saying, "We really need help. We really want to open, but we do not want to open if our business is in any way a danger".

The evidence has been raised, and people have been calling for scientific evidence. That is OK, but when the evidence came, they said, "That is not the right type of evidence. We want it in a different way and in a different fashion". Guys, we are not virologists or scientists. We have to trust those we have put in place. I thank Mr Chambers for the point he made: either we trust our Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser, or we do not. They do not work on their own; they have offices. Yes, we have a letter from four consultants who have raised concerns, but I suspect we have a thousand consultants in this country. Had the letter been signed by 1,000 consultants, I would maybe be prepared to give it a little bit more light.

Mr Gildernew: Will the Member give way?

Mr Butler: Absolutely.

Mr Gildernew: Does the Member agree that the quest for evidence is not only to assess whether what was done was necessary, but whether what was done was enough? We need to be very conscious that we should take all the help and expertise we can get, from wherever around the world it comes, and stop this nonsense of trying to unpick the measures as to whether there was enough evidence. We are not an exemplar, and there is plenty we can and should learn.

Mr Butler: Yes. I do not disagree with what the Member says. This is something that none of us have dealt with before, and something that all our friends and families are involved in. When you embark upon any journey such as this, it is important that, numerous times, you put your head up, take a look around and assess what is working and what is not, and that you are agile. I do not see any conflict with anything that has been said here today. We all want the same outcome.

Looking at some of the regulations, I pay tribute to the communities we have. One of the greatest burdens has been the inability to spend time with family and loved ones. The Northern Irish personality is such that a lot of doors would normally be open in our streets. We are very hospitable, and very hospitable within our families. That has been ripped away from us for months now. Like many of you, there are members of my family who I have not seen since the start of this pandemic. Thankfully, we have some technology; we can speak and see each other. However, it really is quite tough.

The case has been made, and rightly so, for businesses that are struggling. The information and the finances need to be expedited into their hands. What actually cripples people is the unknown. That is what causes the most damage. When there is a void of information, a void of financial assistance and a void of a promise, that is more catastrophic than when you know the answer. I am not going to point the finger at any Minister, whether Finance or Economy, and think that I am just going to protect my party's Minister. These are Executive regulations. The Executive, in most cases, have worked exceptionally well in their messaging. You have only to look at the elections in America recently to see how divided a country that some of us admire can be. We have a complicated system here but, in some ways, we need to be proud of some of our achievements. However, we need to improve and ensure that life and safety are the number-one issues.

With regard to masks — perhaps the junior Minister might respond to this — one of the things that concerns me, and which I have witnessed when travelling to work this past few mornings, is when I see the post-primary schoolchildren gathering for buses. You see them in great crowds. They are standing in big numbers, and they do not have masks on. I know that the direction is to wear masks on buses, but what can we do to encourage them to wear masks even when they are gathering at bus stops? We have seen a remarkable response from young people in this country. We talk about them and say we worry about them but, in the round, they have been exceptional. Instead of a draconian measure pointing out what is not happening, we should ask how we fix the situation at bus stops and similar places to encourage schoolchildren to wear their masks.

The other thing was a conversation last week with regard to university students. Christmas is fast approaching, and we have thousands of students living here who will have to go home and students who will need to come back here. I declare an interest. My son is in Aberystwyth as we speak so, as a father who wants to see his son at Christmas, I think that it is incumbent upon this legislature, in conjunction with the other devolved nations, to ensure that our students have that information as early as possible and that they get back for Christmas. I hope that is something we can look at.

Finally, I am going to issue a challenge, and it is not a challenge for you guys. I go to church on Sundays; I am a churchgoer. I love my church. Last week, I was worried when I read a letter from some of the Church leaders in the UK who said that they were thinking of challenging the regulations across the water.

I call on them not to challenge the regulations. I call on the Church leaders to lead by example. In any church that I am involved in, I certainly want them to lead by example with the New Testament teachings and say, "Love your neighbour, so protect your neighbour". I want them to say, "If the Government have made a decision about restrictions, well, do you know something? They have done it in your interests and in the interests of your neighbours". I do not know whether the junior Minister will speak to that, but it is certainly a challenge to the Churches from me.

5.45 pm

Mr Nesbitt: I want to start with the notion of the four consultants who have come up with a different view. We might call it a second opinion, because it is in the medical field. The question is this: is it for the House to say, "Here is a letter from four people that contradicts the direction of travel that we are going in, and that therefore justifies us perhaps taking a different turn"? I am not sure that it is.

By the way, let me declare that I am somebody with cardiovascular issues that had to be dealt with in an acute hospital during COVID. I was dealt with in a timely, professional and empathetic manner, and I thank all the professionals involved.

The point that I want to make, which is relevant, is that consultants no longer say to you, "Here is what you need to do. Here is the procedure that you must have". They will say to you, "You have a condition" — for example, I had a heart condition — "that a pacemaker should sort out, but you have to make the decision that you want the pacemaker fitted". They will then say, "You have another

condition that could kill you. If you have an internal defibrillator fitted, that should keep you alive, if the condition kicks off, until we get you into hospital". They tell you your options; they do not tell you what you have to do. In the same way, if four consultants say that they think that we are taking the wrong tack, is it not for the Minister of Health to speak to his Chief Medical Officer and say, "What about that opinion? It contradicts where you are. I need to be reassured by you that what you tell me is the right thing and the right recommendation". I am sure that it is for the Health Committee to test the Chief Medical Officer and the Minister of Health by asking, "Are those four right, or are we sticking with our Chief Medical Officer?". I do not think that it is for the House, particularly those in it who want to take a view contrary to the path that we are on, simply to say, "Aha! Here is a handy bit of evidence: a new letter from four people who call themselves consultants, because they are, so I will use that to justify my path". That is not the right thing to do or the way in which scrutiny should work. We should test the Minister. The Minister should test the Chief Medical Officer. The Committee should test the CMO. We should follow the right medical and scientific advice.

Mr Sheehan made the good point that, for at least 10 years, the health service has suffered from underinvestment. We have an Ulster Unionist Minister of Health today. Ten years ago, we had an Ulster Unionist Minister of Health. Michael McGimpsey was able to forecast years ahead, to within three decimal points, in billions of pounds, what the health service needed to stand still, and the House did not vote through that money; in fact, the House tortured Michael McGimpsey. It brought him back again and again for debates, making sure that he spent as much time as possible in the Chamber, which meant that he had as little time as possible to do the job of being a Minister in his office. The House absolutely tortured him, but he was right, not least about the finances.

Let us also recall that, 11 years ago, there was a global pandemic: swine flu. Michael McGimpsey was in charge, and what did he do? He ensured that there was a vaccine for every citizen in this country. What happened? The vaccine was not needed. We did not need anything like a million vaccines. What did the House do? It tortured him for wasting millions of pounds. What if we had needed it? Did we learn the lesson from that? I am not sure that we did. I have been in the Chamber this year when some Members have tried to torture the current Health Minister over the Nightingale hospitals because the beds were not needed in the first wave. What if they are needed? I get the argument that it takes resource and takes professionals out of their day jobs to put them into a Nightingale hospital where, perhaps, they will sit unoccupied, but those are tensions that we cannot resolve, not if we want to be prepared for worst-case scenarios.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Can I draw the Member back to the restrictions that we are debating?

Mr Nesbitt: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I understand your desire for me to do that.

I have a couple more points to make, if I may. Mr Buckley and Mr Middleton referred to the effects, particularly under regulation 8, of the impact on businesses, including those in the hospitality sector. This morning, upstairs in my office, I took a phone call from somebody who did not tell me who he was except that he was a businessperson. I

did not ask his constituency or whether he voted, because those are not the important issues. His issue was that he had had to close up his business in mid-March and had not been able to reopen since. He said that he vacillates between frustration because he thinks that we are useless and anger and despair because he thinks that we are useless. His point was that this is the second wave that we all knew was coming. His question was this: why did Departments, such as the Department for the Economy, not make sure that they had their data sets and processing arrangements in order so that, when they came up with a scheme to grant-aid businesses, that could be processed quickly and the money delivered?

That follows a lengthy email that I received yesterday, again with regard to regulation 8, relating to hospitality in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area. The sender made the point that they now face the sixth week of having received none of the financial help — the £400 to £600 per week — promised by the Finance Minister. He said that businesses in the hospitality sector around Derry were informed that their claims would be dealt with first and that it would all be done in short order, seven working days after they were notified that the money was to go into their accounts, but here they are, having been told that they were successful in mid-October, still waiting for the money. In fairness to the Finance Minister, I sent him an email last night, and he has already responded to say that there have been difficulties getting the right data out of some councils, the Department is working on it and he believes that the pipeline for grant aid is now open. I thank him for doing that, but the point of this morning's caller remains: surely, we should have ironed out all those data problems in advance. Given that the pandemic may be with us for a long time and that there may not be just a first and second wave but more to come, I encourage the Executive to do more to ensure that the data sets are in place so that processes can be activated as quickly as possible.

Thank you for allowing me some latitude, Mr Deputy Speaker, but the point is that the health service needs to be supported not only to fight COVID-19 but to prepare for the radical reforms needed to best serve the health of the people of this country. Once again, I thank all those who have helped me with my cardiovascular issues in recent months.

Mr Catney: I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate. There has been a lot that I could agree with and a lot that I could not agree with. Business is not easy, folks. You all know that. If it were easy, everybody would be at it. We live in difficult times.

The whole point of having the regulations in statute and, in fact, the main reason that we have our laws written down is to provide clear instruction to our citizens and businesses on what must be done, how it must be done and when it must be done, clear instructions so that no one is disadvantaged or put under unnecessary duress. However, there has been no clarity on how we have got to the restrictions of this second lockdown. Yet again this week, we heard the First Minister say that there will be no extension to the current restrictions, but, yesterday, we found out in a TV interview that that will probably not be the reality for a lot of businesses. How do we expect any business to survive in this environment? How do we look at those who run our supply chains and need time to prepare

for any reopening? They will be in limbo for another week, caught between the expense of preparation, if there is an extension, and a loss of income, if there is not.

It is particularly annoying that that is exactly what happened when the Executive first introduced the new set of restrictions. On the Monday, the Education Minister guaranteed that schools would not close. Questions had been asked for weeks about whether the schools would close, with no answers. On Tuesday, they were told to close. Honesty with the public is needed. Tell the public that a six-week lockdown now is a big step but would allow certainty that there could be some sort of relaxation to allow people to come together and businesses to open for the festive period. Surely, that clear instruction, rather than the political spin that we have got over the past few weeks, would give us a better standing with our business community.

I applaud the vast majority of the public, who have followed the restrictions over the past period and helped to get our infection numbers down from some of the worst rates in Europe. However, unrest exists due to the lack of clarity and a lack of decision-making based on scientific evidence. That will grow if what was leaked this weekend turns out to be true. Shame on those who leaked that information. Show me the evidence that a restaurant that serves a bottle of wine with dinner is more dangerous than a restaurant that does not. Maybe I am wrong, but that sounds less like decision-making based on evidence and more like decision-making based on the outdated conservative prejudices against alcohol that the Chamber spoke so strongly against last week. It is nonsense to suggest that restaurants should open, denying their access to the support schemes for businesses that are asked to close, but should not sell alcohol, which is critical to their business model. When the Executive ask any service to close, whether it is schools, restaurants or retail, they need to provide additional support to allow people to follow the rules. The slow pace of support to date has not inspired confidence.

Before deciding the way forward, the Executive should take advice from the president-elect and the first female vice president-elect of the United States: now is the time for science and the time for truth. That is how we build trust with our business community. That is how we can support them, and that is how we will get through the pandemic.

Mr Allister: There is something inherently farcical about the debate in the sense that we are debating regulations the first of which — the amendment (No. 8) regulations — have already been superseded. The amendment (No. 9) regulations will run out in three days' time. Yet this is the opportunity for the Assembly to say whether it consents to horses that have already bolted in terms of legislation. There is something inherently farcical about that.

The farce exists not only in the mechanics. I take you back to the amendment (No. 9) regulations. Members may recall hanging about the Building three weeks ago tomorrow — or was it four weeks? It was a Tuesday evening, and we were awaiting with bated breath an announcement from the Executive. It was coming at 5.00 pm, then it was coming at 7.00 pm, 8.00 pm, 9.00 pm. At 11.00 pm, we were told to go home. Why? Because, again, the dysfunctionality ruled. When the regulation came the next

day, we were told that it was coming into effect at 6.00 pm on the Friday.

Businesses, in good faith, prepared to close at 6.00 pm — a whole evening of trading was lost in the hospitality industry — but the regulation was not made until 10.30 pm that night.

6.00 pm

Meanwhile, we had a sports Minister intervene to tell sports fans at Coleraine to go home. They could not get into the ground under a law that had not even been made, and, when it was made, it did not even say that. It never said that; it had the specific exemption for elite sports and was never in the business of banning the limited number of spectators.

That is the background of farce and incoherence, which speaks to many people in terms of the level of confidence that they should exercise in respect of these measures from the Executive. That is a contributor, among other contributors, to the loss of confidence among many in the public as to the regulations that are made. That is unfortunate, potentially damaging and dangerous because COVID is real. We all have our personal responsibilities to obey regulations and to take that personal responsibility upon ourselves. However, when an Executive behave in that incoherent way, of course, it is easy for people who want to depart from regulations to find that route. Those are the reasons why I say that there is something inherently farcical about debating these matters at this stage.

Nonetheless, it is important to do it, because we are still in the climate of this virus where, frankly, we do not really know what the direction of travel is. We had the First Minister telling us, not later than last week, that that which was forbidden in the amendment (No. 9) regulations comes to an end at midnight on Thursday. Then we had the deputy First Minister tell us yesterday that that is only partially true, because some of it is going to open up but some of it is not, and we are now going to have new ideas about restaurants opening without the capacity to serve alcohol. Mr Catney depicted that as some sort of a fall out over a view about alcohol, but, frankly, I think that it is more likely to be the typical horse-trade of this Executive rather than anything else. However, I agree that it is illogical and that it makes no sense.

Mr Catney: Will the Member give way?

Mr Allister: Sure.

Mr Catney: Maybe he could help me, Mr Deputy Speaker. I was told that the Executive were going to meet on Thursday. They did not meet. I was told that they were going to meet today, and that is why we are debating in the House. I hope that the Member agrees with me that we have not got any direction from them. From what I can see, it is the two larger parties — Sinn Féin and the DUP — that are holding this whole process back at the moment, because I do not think that all of the Executive have met yet.

Mr Allister: I do not know whether they have met today or not, and I do not know whether we are going to hold our breath for some announcement tonight. Who knows? However, I know this: the Executive have not addressed the issues that they ought to have addressed post-phase

one of COVID. Let us take the issue of care homes. Care homes were devastated by COVID in the first wave, and yet, today, we are back at the point where there are 139 outbreaks in our care homes. Why would that be? I respectfully suggest that one of the reasons for that might be that, up until last week, we were testing staff in care homes only every two weeks. Last week, the Minister announced that we will now do it once a week.

Given that care homes are effectively closed down to visitors, it is quite clear to anyone that the entry point for COVID has to come unwittingly through the staff. Why is it that staff are not being tested every day or at least every other day? What lesson has been learned from the first phase, given that, suddenly, multiple months later, we are only now starting to talk about upping the testing in care homes? I do not think that once a week is enough, although it is better than every two weeks. Again, knowing that the highest level of fatalities will be among people in the age bracket who populate our care homes, it seems a gross neglect to have allowed that situation to develop again.

It is not enough to say, "Oh, we must all rally behind the Executive; they are doing their best". Sorry, there has to be a role and an opportunity for criticism. When four clinicians, who are not four busybodies, decide to swim against the tide, it is not an easy task — swimming against the tide: I have a bit of experience of that myself — when you have the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Scientific Adviser, the Minister and the head of the BMA all telling a particular theme. It is not a particularly easy course for four clinicians to put their name to a letter and say, "Well, in fact, is this right? In fact, do we not need better evidence than the evidence we have?". It is no answer to those four clinicians to say, "There's not a thousand of them". If they are making a valid point, the Minister and the Executive should be looking at that and taking heed of it.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. Does he agree that, while many in the House call for more robust scrutiny, more conversations and more discussions in this place to discuss the regulations, when opinions contrary to those of the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser come to the fore, they simply want to dismiss them out of hand without giving them due consideration?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I have given quite some flexibility to Members. I ask that Members come back to the regulations that we are here to discuss today. Please refer to the regulations.

Mr Allister: I am discussing the regulations before us, including amendment Nos 8 and 9. Amendment No. 9 was brought in on the basis that the Chief Medical Officer said that it had to be. That is the same Chief Medical Officer who, a few days ago, remarkably said that you could not have both hospitality and schools open. When a Chief Medical Officer says that and when four clinicians write a sentence such as this, I think that this is very germane to whether or not these regulations are on the money. What did the four medical officers write? Amongst what they wrote was:

"To deprive our population of livelihood, civil liberties and education, we believe that the evidence to support this should be scientifically robust and beyond reproach."

Who could disagree with that: before we do what we are doing, we need to be sure that what we have is scientifically robust and beyond reproach? They go on to say:

"That is clearly not the case."

Mr Stalford: I am grateful to the Member for giving way. What he is saying and the argument that he is driving at remind me of Harold Macmillan's maxim:

"We have not overthrown the divine right of kings to fall down for the divine right of experts."

Does the Member agree that, going forward, a much more robust interrogation of contrasting and competing points of view on these matters will be called for in order to ensure public confidence?

Mr Allister: I think that the public, watching on to buttress their confidence that they should believe all that they are told, have come to the point at which they recognise that challenge is an essential part of building confidence. It is easy to say, "Here is what we must do", but you cannot do that and ignore credible contentions. If four clinicians of the standard of Dr Walsh and his colleagues are bravely saying that there is clearly no evidence for what lies behind some of these measures, it would be grossly irresponsible for the House simply to say, "We don't want to listen to that. That doesn't suit. We're going to ignore that". The letter says many other important things. The four clinicians make the point that people are dying because of COVID but not of COVID. People are dying because they are not getting the treatment for their other diseases. Every day in this country, 12 or 13 people die of cancer. What will that figure be next year because of those who did not get their diagnosis, did not get their tests or had their treatment delayed?

In the House, in the early stages of COVID, I raised with the deputy First Minister the tragic case of a young mother, aged 32, who had been diagnosed with cancer and whose treatment was paused. After some time, the Minister intervened — I appreciated that — and treatment was resumed. In the weeks that were lost, however, she had weakened, and, tragically, that young mother died a few weeks ago. Was she a casualty of COVID? How many casualties of COVID will there be next year? As Ms McLaughlin said, we are in the situation where 400 cases have put our National Health Service in crisis. Really?

That brings me to Mr Nesbitt's point. He is absolutely right: some of the rundown in our health service was self-inflicted by the politics of this House. When Michael McGimpsey was Minister of Health and said that he needed funds to keep us standing still, the greater political forces in the House mocked him, refused him and forced upon him cuts, which, to this very day, we are bearing the consequences of. That was politics, not health. In fact, in the past 10 years, the House has reduced the number of hospital beds in our community by 1,500. Then, we are surprised that we are unable to deal with a pandemic and that 400 cases put us in this spin. The House needs to take a look at itself: why did it do that, and what will it do going forward?

In the autumn of 2016, there was a nationwide pandemic dry run, as it were. The Minister of Health in Northern Ireland was our present deputy First Minister. What

lessons were learned? What preparations were made for a pandemic?

Mr Sheehan: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. The Member is insinuating that the Health Minister at the time of Exercise Cygnus had knowledge of the results of or the report from that simulation of a pandemic. In fact, the details were not made public until after she had left office.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I do not consider that to be a point of order but your comment is on the record.

6.15 pm

Mr Allister: I assure Mr Sheehan that I would never think of or accuse the deputy First Minister of being knowledgeable. *[Laughter.]* What preparations were made for a pandemic such as this? The preparations of the House were to reduce the number of nurses, reduce the number of doctors and reduce the number of beds. Those were the preparations that were made. Unless and until those are reversed, we will not be in a fit position — I hope that this does not arise — to meet future pandemics.

Where are we going now? Regulation 9 came in, and it expires on Thursday night. The First Minister told us that that is the end of it. We were told that if we get the R number under 1, the regulation has served its purpose. From what I have heard, the R number is significantly under 1. So why is there even a debate about continuing to strangle our economy with further regulations? Yes, it is very good to have all the support of the furlough scheme, and its generosity is considerable. However, I fear this: how many zombie jobs we are sustaining? How many jobs will not be there when furlough ends, as it must do one day? That is part of the real challenge. That is why the four doctors were right to say in this letter:

“The deprivation of livelihoods and extreme measures that are being called for seem very difficult to justify on the basis of the current clinical evidence. When the wider societal and health costs are also considered we really must think again.”

I echo that. We really do need to think again.

Mr Carroll: Once again, it is ridiculous in the extreme that we are discussing these regulations in the Chamber weeks after they have been brought in. By all accounts there seems to be consensus among the majority, or certainly among the big parties of the Executive, to further lift the restrictions, thus effectively making these regulations meaningless just weeks after their introduction. Welcome to Stormont, where basic logic need not apply when making a decision. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask the Member to leave the Chamber.

Mr Stalford: Is that ‘The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba’? *[Laughter.]*

Mr Carroll: I was going to try to guess the composer of that mobile phone ring tone, but I will not.

We cannot have a situation where the Westminster Parliament, which is hardly a bastion of democracy, has more accountability in its course of action than the House. Why is it, as others said, that we have to wait three weeks from when regulations are brought in before we have the chance to discuss them? We are in a health pandemic

that has claimed the life of over 1,000 people, and I give my sympathies to all those families who have lost a loved one. Why can the House not have emergency or extra sittings in the Chamber to discuss the regulations in order to challenge or alter them?

As I am sure is the case for others, whenever there is a proposed change to the regulations, I am inundated by questions from constituents about what is going on and what it means for them and so on. We should insist that Ministers bring the regulations to the House before they are implemented. Otherwise, we cannot say that there is any serious scrutiny or accountability at play here. Is that because, as was revealed in Sam McBride’s book about the RHI scandal, Ministers are overtly sensitive to criticism and in this instance are running scared of it, or is it because they do not want any scrutiny of their dangerous strategy of living with a killer virus like COVID?

Amendment 8 relates to the regulations and restrictions in the Derry and Strabane area. It is worth remembering that those restrictions on hospitality were brought in because case numbers rose rapidly. Evidence shows that the restrictions helped to bring the infection rate down by a significant number. We heard that the biggest proportion of cases in the Derry and Strabane area came from hospitality and then from community transmission. Restrictions on workplaces are not ideal and are not what anybody wants, not least workers themselves, but these restrictions are an important method in getting the infection rates down as opposed to letting it spread rapidly across our community. In the absence of the Executive adopting a zero-COVID approach, they are clearly still necessary.

Amendment No. 9 implements restrictions on hospitality and other sectors. Again, this situation arose after the Executive moved prematurely to lift restrictions at the end of the summer, precipitating the spread of COVID in a second wave. This move, alongside the abject failure to establish a proper track-and-trace system, has created this disastrous, uncertain situation where the Executive have been forced to put the hospitality sector into lockdown again after lifting it too soon. That said, I strongly contest the idea that now is the correct or safe time to further open up hospitality or any other sector and to push people back into restaurants and other venues when this virus is still spreading and taking people with it. How many more lives will be put at risk and lost because some people in here want to see laissez-faire capitalism run riot over people’s lives?

In the Chamber, I have criticised DUP members for their approach to the virus. Obviously, Mr Sammy Wilson has been at it again. I think that we urgently need to isolate the rotten politics of Sammy Wilson. Now even Sinn Féin, or the deputy First Minister at least, seems to be dancing to a similar tune. When we have a whole range of medical experts warning against the reopening of hospitality and suggesting that an easing of the current restrictions would be dangerous and result in mayhem, the First Minister and deputy First Minister seem to be taking a very different approach in the media this week — very worrying indeed.

I have to say that it is quite astounding to see some quarters feigning concern for low-paid workers despite not lifting a finger to support them or improve their conditions since Stormont has been sitting. Is this a tough period for hospitality workers? Absolutely. Many workers in this industry are worried about their future and their livelihoods, but they are also terrified of this virus. If people here are

seriously concerned about these workers, I appeal to them and urge them to support the motion on the Unite Hospitality rescue plan that Rachel Woods and I submitted last week. The last time that I checked, the bigger parties had not supported it. That motion calls for a policy which would financially protect hospitality workers and adopt a proper testing system, along with making other important and achievable demands.

We cannot look at hospitality in isolation from how people may react to the rumoured change in restrictions. If people see that, according to the Executive's logic, it is safe to go into a restaurant, they will also draw out the obvious contradiction. If it is fine to mix and socialise when they are spending money in a restaurant, then why not in their private lives? The Executive need to stop trying to effectively privatise social interaction by allowing people to mix only where they spend money but then restricting, and indeed fining, people in respect of elements of their family lives.

My worry is that efforts to reduce the spread of this virus in recent weeks will again have been wasted if restrictions on workplaces are relaxed once again. This is happening because our political establishment at both Westminster and Stormont are too tight-fisted to deliver the real provisions that need to be put in place to help workers and small businesses to shield and protect themselves from COVID.

Amendment No. 2 relates to face coverings. I have raised the point several times that wearing a mask is an important act of solidarity with those in our health service, retail supermarkets and so on and so forth. I have raised this with a number of Ministers a number of times, but I repeat my call for the Executive to urgently adopt a position of providing free reusable masks to the general public. If we are saying that masks are an important part of protecting people from this virus — and they are — then the Executive need to step up to the plate and support people in those endeavours.

Finally, the Executive need to radically shift from their dangerous policy of living with the virus and adopt the zero-COVID approach and elimination strategy outlined by the independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) and others. When we look at other countries adopting this approach and strategy, we see not only that they have a level of deaths way below our astronomically high figures, but that they are not going in and out and in and out of lockdown. Those countries are living what could be considered, in this period, to be relatively normal life, with people being able to go to large sporting events and do other activities.

The Stormont Executive's living with COVID strategy is a disastrous one which creates a false choice of health versus economy. In reality, it delivers the worst of both of those worlds by continually pitching people's health against their jobs. You cannot keep sending people back to work unsafely before a proper track-and-trace system exists, for example. The negative repercussions of this impact on individual workers as well as on businesses and workplaces collectively. If cities such as Liverpool can implement mass testing of citizens, we should be able to do so in Belfast and across the North more generally.

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

We need to adopt urgently a zero-COVID strategy of elimination and control, not this constant stop-start

situation of mini lockdowns, with seemingly no rhyme, reason, logic or long-term planning involved. Anything less means more deaths, as well as job losses in the long run. The lack of vision of the Executive on this is astounding and increasingly appalling.

Mr Stalford: After listening to Mr Carroll, it is probably important for me to note that pennies do not fall from heaven. They have to be earned here on earth, and the economy pays for everything that government can do. Without a strong and thriving economy, government cannot exist and the services that we want to provide for our people do not exist. Only the most economically illiterate would attempt to assert that we should continue to keep vast swathes of our economy under lockdown.

I do not envy Ministers. At the start of this year, no one had heard of COVID, so they have been dealing with an extremely fluid and evolving situation. They have to take advice. We have a Chief Medical Officer and a Chief Scientific Adviser who are paid to give advice, but, as this progresses, I hope that there is a preparedness perhaps to look outside government and to take advice and to listen to other, contrary opinions.

I want to speak about the hospitality sector in particular. For many people, the sector provides a second job, and those few pounds that were coming in through that second job were perhaps going to pay for Christmas, the kids' school uniforms and other such things. The longer that those jobs are not accessible, the more that devastation and hardship is being heaped upon people. I am also mindful of the fact that, although we are making decisions, the income of no one in this Chamber will be affected by the decisions that are made here, because we are public-sector workers. It is therefore easy for us to stand up, as the previous contributor did, and say "Lock it down, lock it down, lock it down". It is not us who will be damaged economically by a loss of income through taking that approach. It is easy for us to sit in a big white house on top of a big hill in Belfast and tell people, "You cannot go to work".

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for giving way, but, to be accurate, I did not ever say "Lockdown, lockdown, lockdown". He raises concerns about low-paid workers and about hospitality workers. I have said repeatedly in the Chamber that there is a plan in place from Unite Hospitality to support workers and ensure that their pay and jobs are protected into the future. Will he and his party support that motion and plan?

Mr Stalford: That is the difference. You can pass motions, as the Member's party is wont to do on Belfast City Council, that are a form of words or you can actually use the levers of government to act. The best way in which to act is to get the economy open as quickly as possible, because — I said this in March — the cost of all of this is immense. We are running up huge debts that my children, and possibly their children, will be paying off as a consequence. There is no such thing as free money. This has to be paid back, and therefore, for the good of people, I am pleased that relaxations have been announced for the economy and to allow people to get back to work. I urge the Executive to move as quickly as possible in that direction, because people need to be allowed to live, allowed to earn and allowed to support their family.

6.30 pm

I want to ask a question. I do not know whether the Minister can tell me the answer; if he cannot, that is fair enough. It would be useful for people to know what the R number is currently. I was not in the Chamber for the entirety of the debate, so I do not know whether it has been put into the public domain, but it would be useful for people to know it. We knew that it was well above 1. If we are aiming towards a goal and the Minister was in a position to tell us that it has fallen from where we thought it was and will keep falling if we do X, it would give people something to aim for. That has been one of the problems, and, as I said earlier, I do not envy Ministers. As the situation has evolved so quickly, and because the regulations have had to be amended almost weekly, there is confusion out there. I am sure that people accept that.

One of the issues on which I absolutely agree with Mr Allister is the cancellation of medical procedures. I am sure that we all have constituents who have had medical procedures cancelled or delayed. That is devastating for people. The mother of a girl I grew up with went to hospital in March complaining of pains in her stomach. They thought that it might be her gallbladder, but it turned out that it was stomach cancer. It is all well and good for us to have abstract conversations, but there are real people suffering real effects. That is why it is important that we move as quickly as possible to give our people the capacity to earn and support themselves and to give our Government the capacity, through rates and taxes, to deliver public services and reform.

I will finish on this point. There was criticism of the health service. We all know that, as things stand and without reform, the Department of Health will consume more and more of the block grant. It already consumes over £50 of every £100 that the Government have. Once this is out of the way, we will all have to be courageous. When Mr Swann became Health Minister, one of the things that I said was that he should be given political cover to take through the Bengoa recommendations. The easiest thing for him to do would be to say, "I need more money", and the easiest thing for the other parties to do would be to say, "We need health reform". We need to be brave and not allow parochial or sectional interest in that area.

Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): I am grateful for Members' contributions; they have certainly been comprehensive. When I saw that the Business Committee had allocated until 6.30 pm for the debate, I thought that it was being extremely generous. However, it seems that we have gone beyond that, as Members have certainly made the most of the time that has been made available to them.

I want to address the substantive points raised by Members. First, however, I will address the issue that nearly all Members raised during the debate: the process that we find ourselves in and taking through regulations that were put in place a number of weeks ago but which we are only now having the opportunity to discuss.

Members will be aware that the Assembly had agreed to that process and that regulations would be made and that they would then be subject to debate and an affirmative vote in the Assembly. It is right that Members get the opportunity to do that as early as possible. However, under the current system, a number of measures have to be

taken first. The regulations have to go to the Examiner of Statutory Rules, then to the Committee, and then to the Business Committee to get time on the Floor.

I understand why the Health Committee has written to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister to ask them to look again at the process. We are following the process, and we are following it properly, and I am sure that Members would not like it if we took out certain elements of the process that is in place. However, the First Minister and deputy First Minister share Members' concerns about the length of time that it is taking for regulations to come to the Assembly. They have said that they are content to review that so that they can come to the House in a more timely manner. I hope that Members accept that the Executive Office recognised that there was an issue in that regard; Ministers made themselves available for questions when the Ad Hoc Committee met, and it now provides written ministerial statements and, where possible, statements to the Assembly so that Members have the opportunity to question Ministers about the changes that have been made. Nevertheless, it is a less than acceptable situation in which we find ourselves, and I hope that it can be changed.

Mr McGrath is no longer in his place, but he raised a number of issues around compliance. That is very important; if we do not have compliance with the regulations, we will not get the desired outcome. I recognise how important that is. I appreciate that he recognised the work that has been done already in regard to communication. I think that we have seen greater adherence to the regulations over the past number of weeks because of the additional communications that the Executive have put in place. I put on record our appreciation of all the partners that have worked with us over the past number of weeks. We have had extensive engagement with local government, retail, hospitality and church leaders. We are Zoomed out. We wanted to engage, and it has helped with communications in particular.

Another issue that Mr McGrath and many others raised was that of leaks. Obviously, that should not be happening. Decisions should be made in the Executive, and, once made, should, in the first instance, where possible, come before the Assembly. I can say only that I am not responsible for those leaks; I assure the House of that. I hope that all Members who raised that issue will also raise it with their Executive Ministers, so that they understand the strength of feeling in that regard.

Mr Gildernew and Mr Stalford, who is no longer in his place, wanted information about the current estimate of R. It currently sits between 0.6 and 0.9 and is most likely to be 0.7. The current estimate of R is definitely below 1. It is important to note that that is what we had sought to achieve. I am pleased that we have that now and that hospital admissions have begun to decline slowly over the past week. They remain relatively high, but the number of COVID hospital patients should begin to decline further in the next week, although that is expected to be slow and will depend on hospital discharge.

One of the good news stories in the second wave is that fewer people are dying as a result of the virus, but that requires them to go from ICU back into the general wards again. The pressure is still there because more people

are living. Significant challenges are still there, but we are heading in the right direction.

Pam Cameron raised a number of issues. She expressed concerns about the distress of families who have a loved one dying in hospital. In order to reduce that distress for families and support decision-making for staff in circumstances in which end-of-life care is being provided, the Department of Health has issued updated guidance that recognises end-of-life care as being an exceptional circumstance in which restricted visitation to a patient will be permitted, regardless of the regional alert-level at the time. That will apply to ministers of religion; we know how important it is in those final moments of life to have a minister or someone from your faith community with you. At all times, we want to balance the public health and infection control guidance with the need for compassionate care at the end of life.

The Member mentioned that there is a threat to life from COVID. She is absolutely right, but there is also a threat to life from other illnesses. That has been very well illustrated by a number of Members today, particularly Mr Allister, who gave us that heartbreaking account of what had happened to the young woman in his constituency. There is no other word for it: it is just absolutely heartbreaking that that lady did not have the treatment for a time. Our hearts go out to all the people who find themselves in that situation, because it is not an isolated incident. I thank the Member for bringing that to the Floor and for reminding us all of the many challenges, not just COVID, that exist in healthcare.

Mr Gildernew: Will the junior Minister give way?

Mr Lyons: I am more than happy to give way to the Member.

Mr Gildernew: First, I apologise to you, a LeasCheann Comhairle, and to the House for my phone going off earlier. I thank the Minister for the information that he has given and for the undertaking that there will be a review of the processes involved. Will he raise with his Executive colleagues the need for the basic pieces of information that Committees are seeking to apply their scrutiny to be available and for officials who come to Committee to have basic information such as the R number at any given time or the impact of measures on it? That would provide not only the Committees with the opportunity to carry out their scrutiny role but the public with the confidence that the measures that are being taken are necessary and are best-positioned to deal with the virus.

Mr Lyons: The Member has certainly put his views on the record. I will also pass that on and get my officials to pass that on to the Department of Health. I advise him that we get that information only once a week. Getting it daily is not as useful as getting the bigger picture over a seven-day period. I think that it is important that not only members of the Executive but Members of the Assembly, especially those who have a role in the scrutiny of the Department of Health, have that information. I have no problem in passing that message on to the Minister.

I also want to associate myself with Pam Cameron's comments about the impact that the virus is having on wider society, on people, on the economy and, as she said, on the fabric of society. I do not think that that is hyperbole. This virus has the potential to change so much of how we live our lives, how we interact and our relationships. It is

having a big impact, and she is absolutely right that we must break the cycle of lockdown. I will speak more to that later.

Steve Aiken, who has also left the Chamber, mentioned the need for a vaccine and the good news that has come out today. That is to be welcomed. It gives us hope for the future. However, it should not make us complacent, and it should not make us think that this will be a solution. We are still a way away from that, so we should not let our guard down. I also agree with what he said about the importance, as I stated, of the Assembly hearing about the decisions that are made first and that they do not go out via the media.

Paula Bradshaw raised the issue of whether it should be a requirement for individuals to wear a face covering in all indoor settings. That has been considered; however, I am told that evidence suggests that, when there is a prolonged close contact between individuals, cloth face coverings will not offer effective protections and that, therefore, extending the regulation to require blanket wearing of coverings would not be justified. There is an inconsistency, she said, in requiring junior pupils to wear face masks on public and home-to-school transport but not in retail settings. That matter, I can inform the Member, will be discussed when the face coverings working group next meets. I note that the social distancing that has become a feature of the retail environment is not possible on public transport, and we need to keep that in mind.

Jonathan Buckley raised a number of issues. He is not in the House at this moment. I am informed that the risks of infection associated with the hospitality industry and the impact of restrictions on the hospitality industry are well known and recognised by the Executive.

Finding a way through those difficult issues does not involve easy answers, and, until there is a vaccine, we will continue to seek an effective way through. It is right to thank those in the hospitality sector who have spent so much time engaging with us over the last number of weeks. We appreciate that and will continue to engage with the sector.

6.45 pm

We then had Pat Sheehan, who is in his place. The more things change, the more they stay the same: no matter how often the Member is told to stick to the regulations at hand, he always likes to give his current assessment of where things are. He was certainly comprehensive in his assessment today. Perhaps contact-tracing capacity is a subject for a further Assembly debate. There has been a significant increase in the pressures faced by the service, including a threefold increase in the number of new cases notified to CTS on Friday 2 October. The number went from 300 to 900, so that was significant. We understand the pressures, and the Public Health Agency has now introduced mitigations such as the introduction of the new texting and digital self-trace platform.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Lyons: I really should not, but I will.

Mr Sheehan: It is important to point out that, when the chief executive of the PHA attended the Health Committee a few weeks ago, she initially told us that the modelling had been carried out by Ian Young, the Chief Scientific Adviser,

and his team. She then recanted that for some reason. She said that the modelling estimated that the maximum number of positive cases would be 300 and that was the basis on which the PHA had recruited contact tracers. Now, we were getting 1,000 cases a day at that time. The numbers whom the PHA was thinking of recruiting were a serious underestimation, even for 300, but, given that we were getting 1,000 positive cases a day, as I said, the sums did not add up. It was a woeful underestimation of what was coming at us.

Mr Lyons: That is not a matter for the regulations that are before us today, but I appreciate the fact that the Member has raised the issue. I can inform him that Department of Health and PHA colleagues are working on options for contact tracing in Northern Ireland. Options are being considered, including a hybrid model with a focus on digital solutions to deliver early messages to contacts and cases that includes more advanced analytics to help to enable a more targeted input from expert health professionals to risk assess and deal with more complex cases, clusters and outbreaks. That work is being progressed at pace as we aim to optimise the current window afforded by the Executive's interventions and the consequential short-term impact expected on virus transmission. I hope that that is of some use to the Member today, but I do not doubt that he will find other avenues to raise this further. I understand the importance of the subject.

Gary Middleton rightly raised a number of issues, and I will answer one in particular about churches. I am proud of the fact that we have kept churches open in Northern Ireland, and I very much hope that that will continue to be the case. I understand the importance of worship to so many people. They want to be able to come together and worship, and corporate public worship is an important part of so many people's religion. I understand how important worship is for many older people in our society who do not have the interaction, perhaps, that others can have in the work environment. The Executive recognise the importance of that, and it is only right that churches remain open. I believe that churches are safe. If Members want to see an example of a church opening safely, they are more than welcome to come to my church. I extend that invitation, although there are many other reasons that Members might find it beneficial. It is important that we allow people to meet in that way and recognise the right of people to express their faith and religion.

Martina Anderson made comments about two of her friends who ended up in Altnagelvin. It brings home to us the fact that the virus is among us, it is real and it impacts on people whom we know. It is important that we recognise that. I will pick up on a couple of other points that she made. First, financial support for businesses is extremely important. The Executive are continually looking at the grants and support schemes that are available. I am concerned about the time that it takes to get money out. A number of colleagues have expressed similar concerns, and I have had many complaints from constituents. It should be an absolute priority for the Department of Finance because people do not have any other source of income. It is really important that the money gets to them as soon as possible. I hope that the Member is aware that the issue of payments to people who are self-isolating is also being considered.

Cara Hunter made comments about mental health. It is important that we recognise the impact on people in Northern Ireland. She also made comments about communication, which is important. We have ramped up communication well, and we need to continue to do that.

Mr Chambers made a number of comments. A theme throughout the contributions from the Ulster Unionist Party was the importance of listening to the experts. We have always said that we will listen to what the experts have to say and to the advice that they give. However, as Dr McBride and Professor Young have said, they are there to advise; they are not the decision-makers. It is the Executive — the Ministers — who make decisions, and Dr McBride and Professor Young would not want it any other way. It is important that we do not look at this from a purely health point of view. In no way do I dismiss or downplay the importance of this as a health issue, but, as an Executive, we have a responsibility to look at the economy as a whole, to look at education and to look at all the other aspects of life that are so important. That is why we take the recommendations and listen to the advice of the Chief Medical Officer, the Chief Scientific Adviser and others, but we also have to listen to what other Ministers and stakeholders say. That is why none of this is easy. It all has to be done in the round.

I want to pick up on a few comments. One particular comment was from Sinead McLaughlin, who tried to portray our saying that we needed to live with the virus as being in some way irresponsible. She implied that, by saying that we need to live with the virus, we are saying, "Let it run rampant across the place, and we will just get on with things". We also heard that from Gerry Carroll. That is not what we mean at all, and I hope that the Member for Foyle recognises that. That is not what we want to happen. We are not throwing caution to the wind. What we mean when we say that we want to live with the virus is that we want to live with it and suppress it at the same time, which is, I believe, possible, if we make sure that mitigations are in place. We have done it in a number of sectors, and some sectors have really stepped up to the mark. Churches have stepped up to the mark. People are looking at how they can operate their businesses and hold the gatherings and events that they want to take place while making sure that they adhere to the basic science: social distancing, where possible; the wearing of face coverings; and good hygiene — all of those simple messages. How can we put in those protections so that we can make sure that businesses and life can carry on in as normal a way as possible? It is not sustainable, as Mrs Cameron and others said, to go in and out of lockdowns, interventions or whatever.

We have to look at how we can be COVID-secure. I thank the hospitality sector and the retail sector for the work that they have done on that so far and for looking at how they can improve standards in the businesses that they operate. We have to look at testing and tracing and at contact tracing, as Mr Sheehan mentioned. We need to look at what can be done to expand hospital capacity. We need to take all those things in the round, including testing, and think about how we can take them and build them in to make sure that we are living with the virus. That is not to say that we do not think that it is real or we do not need to take proper precautions. I think that it is possible, and that is what we should want to do. I will touch more on that later.

Mr Butler raised a number of issues. I think that I covered what he said about the CMO and the CSA. It is not a matter of whether we trust them; it is about taking their advice along with everything else and coming to a solution to the problems that we face. I have endorsed what he said about churches as well. He said that children should be encouraged to wear a face covering on school buses. Whilst the evidence shows that masks can be important in confined settings such as indoors and on buses, we have not required them to be worn outdoors. Children waiting for the bus should maintain appropriate social distancing. That is the right thing to do at this moment in time.

We had a few more comments from other Members. Mr Nesbitt raised a common theme, which was that we should not listen to anybody other than the medical experts in the Department of Health. I have a lot of time and a lot of respect for our CMO and our CSA, but it is wrong for us to say to other medical professionals and other advisers, "If you are saying anything that is contrary to what we hear, we do not want to hear from you". We live in a free society, and I welcome the fact that other people want to contribute to the debate. They should have the right to contribute to the debate without being shut down. If we are convinced of the scientific evidence and of our position, we should welcome interactions with and interventions from other people. That is not something that we should be afraid of, and I do not want us to go down a route where people are censored because of what they have to say. That would be entirely the wrong route to go down.

Pat Catney made a number of comments about what is being planned by the Executive or what may come from the Executive. I do not know what is coming for the simple reason that, I think, the Executive are meeting now and I am here with you fine people instead. I am not able to provide him with any clarity on what may or may not be being discussed at this time. However, I have said that it is important that, whenever decisions are made, they are placed on the record in the Chamber and in this place.

Mr Allister raised points about the process. I have addressed those already and agree that this is not the way that we want to do things. I agree with him wholeheartedly that we should not be afraid to hear other points of view.

Mr Carroll raised concerns about the process that we have here for the regulations that are coming in. He loves to have a go at Stormont and at the power, control and supposed secrecy that there is here, but it is Mr Carroll who wants an ever more powerful state that goes into every aspect of our life. That was evidenced by what he said today. I cannot understand his aversion to economic freedom and to people who want to do things for themselves and his continual rants about capitalism. There is not much more that can be said to that. Some people have said that others have tried to sectarianise COVID; it seems that Mr Carroll wants to bring in socialism at every opportunity as the solution to all of —.

Mr Carroll: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Lyons: We are probably going to hear the same old nonsense, but I will give way to him.

Mr Carroll: There is nothing wrong with wanting to expand the state, especially the NHS, as many people, including him, I am sure, clapped for it during the pandemic. That is certainly not my definition of socialism, and I am happy to

give him a full definition of that some time in the Chamber if the Speaker allows.

7.00 pm

Mr Lyons: Of course, the Member does not want just to expand the NHS, does he? He wants more government control in every aspect of our lives. We have seen what socialism does, and I am happy to stand here and support economic freedom, because economic freedom is what brings prosperity to people. We have only to look at some of the regimes that he would support to see what socialism does.

Mr Carroll: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Lyons: The Member has nothing to say that is of any value or adds anything to this conversation.

Mr Givan: I thank the junior Minister for giving way. As he is addressing Mr Carroll, can he advise him that you are not meant to put your mask under your chin or touch it? You are meant to take the mask off appropriately, and he sends out a very dangerous message to the wider public in the way in which he is not wearing the mask appropriately.

Mr Speaker: We are getting to a point where this is starting to become a farce. Can we get back to business? I invite the junior Minister to conclude the debate.

Mr Lyons: I thank the Member for his intervention. It is important that we lead by example in this place.

Mr Carroll also mentioned Mr Wilson. As the Member of Parliament for East Antrim, Mr Wilson is free to express his views. It seems, however, that he lives rent-free in Mr Carroll's head. I advise Mr Carroll not to get caught up in what others say or do. It is not always good to be obsessed in that way.

I have missed out Mr Stalford. I agree with the points that he made and hope that I have answered his question in relation to the R number.

I want to acknowledge how difficult these regulations have been for so many people. For some, they are a minor nuisance or inconvenience, but I recognise that, for so many more, the regulations are having a major impact on their life. I understand that they are keeping people away from their families, having an as-yet-unquantified impact on people's well-being and causing huge uncertainty and worry for many about their jobs and businesses. Like many other Members, I have heard from those who have built up their businesses over many years and spent energy, effort and thousands of hours trying to build them up. Some have now depleted their savings and are worried about their survival. That is why it is so important that we do everything in our power to make sure that we get out of this cycle of lockdowns.

I am pleased to report that good progress has been made through our interaction with retail, hospitality, faith leaders, local government and key players to ensure that we can get to a place where we live with COVID in a way that does not require the type of intervention that the Assembly is discussing today. Whilst effective, the interventions are far too blunt a tool for the problem that we face. It is simple and straightforward to tell people to stay away from work, stay at home and not do the things that we are so used to doing. It is straightforward, but it is not realistic for us to do it any longer. We can and must do better, because there is so much at stake. However, it is only right that

we acknowledge the sacrifice of so many. That sacrifice has paid off. I want to say thank you to the majority who abide by the rules. You have caused the R rate to fall. Transmission is falling, and hospital admissions are falling. It is therefore inevitable that ICU admissions will fall, and deaths will fall, too.

It is certainly the case that, all too often, politicians and experts seem to bring a message of doom. It is certainly true that we find ourselves in a difficult time, and this is no time for complacency. However, I have no doubt that we will get beyond this difficult winter and that 2021 will be a much better year than 2020. We will get better at living with this, we will find a vaccine and life will get back to normal. However, in the meantime, we need to adapt, get smarter and get better so that we can live through COVID.

It is important that we recognise our healthcare professionals at this time. They are deserving of so much praise. Over the weekend, I spoke to a nurse who works in an ICU ward. It is really difficult for them. They are finding it tough. They are under strain. Having done their jobs so valiantly through the first wave, they are now under pressure once more. I am incredibly grateful for all that they have done. I know that it may sound trite and clichéd to say so, but I highlight that so that the public will be aware and so that those who are not taking it seriously might think twice. I say to them: your actions have an impact and could lead to increased pressure on our doctors and nurses, who are already getting it tight.

I am grateful for the contributions that Members made today. There is much for us to take away, not least on the process that we find ourselves going through today. If I have missed any issues in the debate, I will, of course, write to Members.

We all have a responsibility to curb the spread of the virus. The most important thing that we can say, and this is the advice that we are getting from our medical experts, is to do the simple things. It is about maintaining social distancing and good hand hygiene, wearing a face covering, self-isolating if we experience symptoms, downloading the app and complying with all the restrictions in place.

It is certainly the case that none of us likes these restrictions or wants them to be in place for any longer than they have to be, but we are informed that this is what we need to see happen at this time, so, reluctantly, I commend these regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Speaker: The motion has already been debated.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Speaker: The motion has already been debated.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Mr Speaker: The motion has already been debated.

Resolved:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved. — [Mr Lyons (Junior Minister, The Executive Office).]

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Members. Please take your ease for a moment or two.

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

Private Members' Business

Manufacturing Sector during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Dr Aiken: I beg to move

That this Assembly recognises the vital role played by our local manufacturing sector in sustaining and growing our economy; further recognises the huge pressures on our manufacturing sector during the COVID-19 pandemic; commends employers and workers in the manufacturing sector who continue to persevere in the most adverse of economic conditions, with limited financial support; notes with concern the potential job losses in the manufacturing sector; calls on the Minister for the Economy to detail the short- to medium-term support measures that will be put in place to support the manufacturing sector through the COVID-19 pandemic; and further calls on her to produce the long-overdue manufacturing strategy to help the long-term recovery of, and growth within, the sector.

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

Dr Aiken: Before I enter into my remarks on the motion, I wish to express my sympathy with the 700 workers who will shortly lose their jobs with Caterpillar in Larne, and also those many manufacturing workers who have lost their jobs in the bus and coach building sector, aerospace, high-tech low-volume fabrication, the maritime outfitting and repair sectors, agribusiness support, and, indeed, all those who, until recently, supported what was a growing, agile and adaptive manufacturing base, which contributed about 14% of GDP and which has — I use the future tense — hopefully, to grow much larger, to 20% or even beyond, but can do so only if it is given the right support.

We first raised the issue three years ago, when, in the Assembly, we debated with the then Economy Minister, who has gone on to pastures new, that we needed to spend approximately 2% of R&D on manufacturing. We needed to seek angel seed funding, create a start-up nation culture and build on our acknowledged areas of global expertise; areas that we could help to nurture to get us to that goal of 20% manufacturing. We then wanted a change in the culture of how Invest Northern Ireland focused on bringing business in, but needed to shift towards incubating small and medium-sized sectors to allow them to grow. We also wanted the economy to be fully driven by our greatest natural resource: our people. For that, rather than disinvesting in the higher and further education sectors, we needed to join with them to create that spark, desire and ecosystem of entrepreneurship that we had here at the turn of the last century.

That was when Belfast and its surrounding areas were an industrial and technological powerhouse. We had the combined push of academia, banking, business and politicians, who joined together to make Ulster the economic hub that it was. It was that synergy, which,

quite frankly, did not come from politicians, that created a successful economy.

It came from those who were fully invested in what they were doing and were unafraid to make difficult choices and sacrifices. However, that spirit of entrepreneurship has been hindered rather than nurtured. With all the crises that our economy has faced, it has now been saddled with the twin impacts of COVID and an uncertain post-Brexit world.

7.15 pm

While much has changed in manufacturing over the past 100 years, with reductions in shipbuilding and the development of man-made fibres, machinery and machine tools, elements of manufacturing have remained, and, indeed, thrived. They have done that by understanding fully their markets, finding niche technologies that they can utilise, building on a skilled and adaptable workforce and tapping into a higher and further education sector that can refresh ideas. The fact that companies have managed to do that in the face of what, over the past decade or so, has been a studied disinterest from government in much of what they do, a banking sector that is more interested in fuelling property speculation, and a rating system, coupled with a monopolistic energy supplier, that has sapped the desire for growth, is testament to what they could, and should, achieve.

In reviewing what we asked for three years ago, it is worth reiterating the main points and asking whether they are still appropriate. Three years ago, in a cross-cutting manufacturing strategy, we asked for a commitment to provide investment funding for Northern Ireland companies rather than a focus on FDI; the creation of a strategic investment culture that wants to invest for the long and medium term, rather than short-termism or, worse, subsidy mining; competitive energy prices with efficient utilities and an electricity market and regulator that works for the customer; the nurturing of our education sector, particularly by building our R&D base through helping to promote STEM, and to stop disinvesting in our universities; a longer-term commitment on derating and the simplifying and speeding up of planning rules and regulations; and, above all, the placing of prosperity based on manufacturing at the centre of our Programme for Government.

Regrettably, none of those objectives has been achieved, but we as a party would argue strongly that each of those issues remains germane, and, at the height of the COVID pandemic, even more appropriate. We are faced with a manufacturing industry that is disappearing, never to return, unless action is taken now. We need to take additional measures.

With the global downturn, we have to preserve as much as we can in some sectors, such as aerospace. That needs pressure from our Government to award contracts, especially from the Ministry of Defence, and to allow new and emerging areas of technology to be pushed ahead. We will also have to work closely with employers and unions to see if we can be more innovative in the use of business-support grants and loans.

We also need to change the culture of the Civil Service. The fact that the acting permanent secretary of the Economy Department thought that it is probably OK for some firms to fail because they would have failed anyway

is beyond reprehensible. As we have said many times, right now, businesses need cash. They do not need more consultants to tell them the time with their own watch. They need help, and they need it now.

I also want to talk about the excluded and why it is important that we utilise some of the remaining half a billion pounds, which will go back to Treasury if we do not spend it, to help them. We all know who they are and why we need to help them. The question is this: what is holding the Department back? We have had eight months to build a support package for them, so why have we not done so?

We are also proposing a new Programme for Government for next April — a programme that, at best, has a year to run. Anyone who believes that we should be advocating another tome of 42 outcomes and hundreds of subclauses does not think that that is a good idea. As we attempt to pull ourselves back together, as our companies come out of the furlough period, we need to be able to work on that. We should go back to creating and delivering a strategy that works.

Minister, let us commit to putting our economy, especially our workers, first. Let us create a Programme for Government that has two or three deliverables that work, particularly towards the economy. Let us listen to our businesses, workers and unions, and, where we can, let us get cash and resources to those who need them. Let us try to help them rather than hinder them. I commend the motion to the House.

Mr Middleton: I thank the Member for tabling the motion. It is, of course, very timely given the fact of the huge blow to the jobs at Caterpillar and the fact that the debate follows on from the discussions regarding the regulations and the impact that the additional restrictions have had on the economy. It is timely and welcome that we can discuss our manufacturing industry.

Manufacturing must be at the forefront of rebuilding our economy in Northern Ireland post COVID-19. The manufacturing sector sustains hundreds of thousands of jobs right across our Province and many millions of pounds worth of extra economic activity in other sectors in the supply chain. It is clear that, when manufacturing grows, the whole economy grows with it. From food processing and pharmaceuticals to aeronautical technology and new and emerging tech, like artificial intelligence and machine learning, Northern Ireland punches well above its weight when it comes to producing world-class products and services.

COVID-19 has had a devastating impact, not only on our economy but on those across the globe. However, it has been heartening to see so many of our local companies, particularly in the manufacturing sector, innovating and adapting their production. Some 600 local manufacturers repurposed, in whole or in part, to meet the challenges of the public health emergency. They are to be congratulated on the way in which they have adapted. There are so many real examples out there of businesses that adapted and stepped up to the mark. The question that has to be asked — it has been asked by other commentators in the public domain — is this: if the manufacturing sector had not been there during the pandemic, where would we have been? I think that we would have been in a much more difficult place. The sector stepped up when we needed it most. We need to develop and to build on that. We need to develop

our local supply chains and government procurement to ensure that we can source our quality products in Northern Ireland. That will, of course, be of benefit to our health service, as we continue to coexist with the virus, and to our economy.

It is also important that the Executive and Economy Minister continue to look at ways to support the sector at this difficult time and in the short- and medium-term. It has been clear from the outset of this new Assembly that the Economy Minister has put manufacturing as one of her top four priorities. The Minister will, no doubt, play a leading role in trying to deliver higher-paying jobs, a highly skilled workforce and a more regionally balanced economy, which is, of course, important to us all. That will be a huge challenge. Prior to the extension of the furlough scheme, Manufacturing NI made it clear that one in three jobs in the manufacturing industry was at risk. That was at the end of October. Thankfully, furlough has been extended and there is a bit more safety there, but, again, we cannot get to that cliff edge over the next couple of months.

We acknowledge and support the idea and premise of a specific medium-term strategy for manufacturing in Northern Ireland. However, we also need to consider whether this would be better served in a wider, holistic approach to driving forward growth across all sectors, while creating synergies where appropriate. Other cross-departmental and, indeed, national issues will also need to be addressed. One such example, which I have raised before, is around the apprenticeship levy. We also need to look at how city deals can be harnessed to present new opportunities for support.

There are many strong advanced manufacturing and engineering opportunities that would help to support the future growth and development of the sector. We support a joined-up and UK-wide approach to supporting and getting the best from our manufacturing industries. Going forward, we want to support those emerging and growing sectors to innovate and drive growth.

Northern Ireland is a place of excellence in manufacturing and in research and development. That has, again, been demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Success requires innovation, and the Minister has made it clear that she will seek to help manufacturing businesses by investing in skills development, robotics and specialist machinery to allow the sector to maintain its competitiveness and to grow. Of course, that is also a priority for us as a party.

Dr Archibald: I, too, welcome the opportunity to contribute to this important debate. I also send my solidarity to the workers and families of those facing job losses at Caterpillar and other companies that have faced a similar fate recently.

The latest Ulster Bank purchasing managers' index (PMI) published today paints a bleak picture: it has the economy in the North contracting by 15% this year. That shows the scale of the economic challenge that we face as a result of the COVID-19 health crisis. The manufacturing sector here comprises many indigenous businesses that are highly innovative, employing thousands of people, and that, as well as playing a vital role in our local and island economy, have a strong export presence. The manufacturing sector is diverse, but all the businesses in it have been impacted negatively, to a greater or lesser extent, by COVID-19.

Statistics published in September show a quarterly decrease in production of 14.9% and a decrease over the year of 22.2%. Some manufacturing businesses have faced vastly reduced demand, while others have faced consistent or even increased demands and had to deal with the necessary implementation of social distancing and hygiene measures.

In the short term, some supports have been provided to the sector in the form of direct job support from the British Treasury and the Executive. Those have been vital to prevent wide-scale job losses and business failures. The furlough scheme in particular has been crucial, and Mr Middleton highlighted its particular importance to the manufacturing sector. The official statistics on the job retention scheme published in October show that, of the total number of employees furloughed in the manufacturing sector, 63% were fully furloughed and only 37% were partially furloughed while working some hours. That shows the disastrous impact that ending the furlough scheme and moving to the job support scheme, which requires a minimum number of hours to be worked by employees, would have had on manufacturing, resulting in many, many redundancies. The extension of the furlough scheme until March is welcome, but it is due to be reviewed in January. It is vital that there is planning now to support sectors such as manufacturing that have a skilled workforce, because it is likely that, once demand begins to resume as the economy opens up, they will need those workers. We need to continue to make the case that, in line with the approach adopted in other European states, they should be supported in keeping the connection with those workers and avoiding unnecessary redundancies.

The support from the Executive — the rates holiday and the inclusion of some small manufacturers in the business grant scheme — has also been crucial. However, I again make the case to the Minister that there are other small manufacturers that, simply due to the nature of their work, have larger premises and were therefore excluded from that support. I ask that she look again at providing some vital cash flow support to those small businesses.

As we all know, the fragility of global supply chains was laid bare at the beginning of the pandemic when we had difficulty securing PPE. At that time, local companies stepped up to the challenge and diversified their operations. In my constituency of East Derry, companies such as Paragon Health in Ballykelly, Hutchinson Engineering in Kilrea and Armstrong Medical in Coleraine are among those that have played an important role in supporting our health service and society in general through the production of PPE and other items. However, there is a barrier to those companies being awarded government contracts in that tenders are evaluated on price alone, meaning that those contracts will likely be awarded to companies in other countries where those products have traditionally been sourced, due to their lower prices because they have bigger economies of scale, with no consideration to the need for security of supply or the local economic recovery. That needs to be addressed to give those local companies that have successfully diversified the chance to be competitive in that process. Across this island, there are opportunities to collaborate and cooperate to develop a thriving sector that creates and sustains employment, so I ask the Minister to work with her Executive colleagues to address the issues with procurement.

Last year, looking to the medium term, Sinn Féin published its consultation document, 'Inclusive and Sustainable Growth', which proposes that economic development should be based on creating good jobs, improving productivity, addressing regional imbalances and decarbonising our economy. We advocate taking a sectoral approach that would see a mapping exercise of our economy for major sectors such as manufacturing, conducting an analysis of those sectors and their needs and developing an action plan for them. To achieve an effective action plan requires partnership working. We therefore propose the creation of sectoral partnerships involving industry, academia, government and trade unions. Skills will play an important part in any economic strategy, and the skills strategy needs to be advanced alongside —

Ms Dillon: Will the Member give way?

Dr Archibald: Yes, sure. Go ahead.

7.30 pm

Ms Dillon: On skills, does the Member agree that we need to encourage more women to go into the engineering and manufacturing industries?

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

Dr Archibald: Thank you.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Just in time.

Dr Archibald: Just in time. Thanks, Linda.

I absolutely agree. Addressing diversity and increasing the uptake of STEM subjects by girls remain key. That is a hobby horse of mine. I could talk about it for quite some time, but I will move on.

In June, we published our economic recovery strategy, which proposes four principles for recovery: supporting workers and their families; supporting businesses to create and sustain jobs; a just transition through a green new deal; and giving the Executive the tools to resource recovery. The economic recovery strategy should link strategically with other Executive priorities and strategies, including, but certainly not limited to, major infrastructure projects, the anti-poverty strategy, skills development and, of course, climate action. It must have a focus on dealing with the outworkings of Brexit and building on the opportunities of an all-island economy.

Ms McLaughlin: I welcome the opportunity to support the motion. If anyone had forgotten that we have a crisis in manufacturing in Northern Ireland, the loss of 700 jobs at Caterpillar should remind them, in the worst possible way.

Any economy will struggle when it loses large numbers of manufacturing jobs; Northern Ireland's more than most. While our neighbours in Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland have a largely service-based economy, we have not. We, to a much larger extent, are a manufacturing economy. More than 70% of Northern Ireland's external sales are manufactured goods. That compares with less than half of exports for the UK as a whole.

We are facing new pressures in manufacturing. Much of our manufacturing is in food. Thanks to the politicians who misleadingly promoted Brexit, our food industry is facing a crisis of its own. Less than two months from the impact of

a head-on crash, we do not even know the details of that crisis. It is essential that we focus increasingly on high-value manufacturing. We cannot compete on cost with all countries, but we must compete on quality. For businesses such as Caterpillar, and many other large and small manufacturers, success is based on skills, productivity and innovation. Those areas are where we have serious challenges.

My party realises that we have a real problem in our education system. While it provides a strong pipeline of grammar-school pupils who go on to university, many of them to Great Britain, never to return, it fails to inspire many pupils who do not go to a grammar school. The system fails to give confidence and aspiration to pupils who often have the potential to develop the practical skills needed by our manufacturers. If we are to build the skills needed for the future, we have to connect better with pupils who may feel alienated and discarded by the schools system. By doing better for those pupils, we will do better for our manufacturers, economy and society.

Strong skills feed into productivity, but productivity is about more than skills. It is also about innovation, and that is where the city deals come in. The SDLP has been pushing for and demanding those for many years, usually without the support of other parties. The city deals in Derry and Belfast can provide the innovation needed for a new generation of manufacturing. I hope, for example, that the Derry city deal will provide a manufacturing base for medical products and treatments. I hope that the Belfast city deal will provide an impetus for the capital city as a base for advanced manufacturing.

DUP members on the Economy Committee complained last week that, in standing up for my city, I was, in some way, doing down Belfast. I want both cities to be world class and successful.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for taking an intervention. I would also like to see both cities doing well. However, I do not want to see Mid Ulster and everything between those two cities losing out.

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

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you. I take your point absolutely. We are small, and we want all areas of Northern Ireland to rise together and to be successful as one.

We can be partners in progress, not in competition over the breadcrumbs. I hope that the city deals will provide an innovative basis for a new generation of manufacturing. However, we also need to invest massively and quickly in our infrastructure. Some of that will come from the public purse, but much of it will come from the private sector. Our road network is poor, which means that it takes longer to get goods to market. We need to improve our transport connectivity and our water network in order to enable new factory builds.

I urge Minister Dodds to accelerate progress on the energy strategy and the roll-out of the digital network. I also urge her to ensure that Invest NI works with local industry in order to enable businesses to exploit the opportunities from the Northern Ireland protocol. I have been told by some business leaders that there is an apparent reluctance by Invest NI to work with companies in order to seize any opportunities that may be created by our unique

relationship with the EU and GB. This is not a time to be reluctant to work with any business.

There are new opportunities as well as new challenges. However, unless we work and look to the future and build, we are at risk of losing large numbers of well-paid jobs, particularly in our manufacturing sector, which has a very proud history of excellence and a proven track record in our region. Let us support and protect them.

Mr Dickson: I welcome the opportunity to speak about our manufacturing sector, because it has a vital part to play in our economy. I want to take the time to highlight those who work in it.

COVID-19 has had a major impact on all our lives. Back in March, much of society ground to a halt. That included much, but certainly not all, of the manufacturing sector. However, damage has also been done by the decreased demands for certain goods and the disruption of global supply chains. I commend our workers in the manufacturing sector, our trade unions and the businesses themselves. Despite challenging circumstances, they have helped to keep factories running and supply chains have proved more resilient as time has moved on, and I hope that the extension of the furlough scheme will help to alleviate pressures on the sector. I just wish that it had not been announced at the eleventh hour.

The Health and Safety Executive has its part to play in advising on and enforcing health and safety at manufacturing sites, particularly, but not exclusively, in food processing, where a whole new level of additional safety measures had to be added because of COVID-19. We must ensure that that organisation is properly resourced.

I want to note, with sadness, the news coming out of Caterpillar in Larne last week. As referred to in an earlier discussion in the Chamber, the loss of 700 jobs, many of which will be in my constituency of East Antrim, is a devastating blow to workers and their families.

We are also aware of the concerns that surround Bombardier, which is one of Northern Ireland's key employers, supporting well-paid jobs not just in the Belfast region but across the Province. I am happy to see that Spirit AeroSystems has taken over the business, and I hope that that will secure an extremely valuable linchpin in our economy, because it employs so many from our constituencies.

Where do we go from here in supporting and expanding our manufacturing sector into the future? We need a direction, and that is where a manufacturing strategy comes in. I have previously asked the Minister questions on strategies, which we are waiting for the Department for the Economy to develop, including an industrial strategy, only to be told that work has stopped on them due to the need to respond to COVID-19. That is simply not acceptable. If anything, those long-term strategies are needed more than ever as part of the COVID-19 response in order to guide our way to recovery. I hope that the Minister will take note and will work with the Department in order to resume substantial work on an Executive-endorsed comprehensive and integrated strategy.

There are so many opportunities out there for manufacturing in Northern Ireland, especially with green and advanced manufacturing opportunities. We need a

Minister and the wider Executive to press for a UK-wide revolution in green technologies funding, and we need to fully energise that sector.

The business support interventions that we are making now should not be haphazard and reactionary. They should be planned and visionary, and we should be using them to achieve coherent goals in rebuilding our economy. Manufacturing, with the well-paid and skilled jobs that it brings, has the potential to build and support our supply chains, which have to be a key part in all of this.

Finally, I want to note what might be described as the elephant in the room: Brexit. Brexit is very unlikely to be positive for our local manufacturing industries, so I find it strange that it has not been noted in the motion. The protocol itself is a response to the regrettable decision of the United Kingdom Government to pursue a hard Brexit and cut themselves off from our closest trading partners and our biggest single market. It is not perfect, but it is better than a hard border. The Executive need to push the UK Government and the EU to negotiate a comprehensive agreement with the lightest of touch and checks on goods crossing the Irish Sea. This can be done. In the meantime, our Minister needs to get on with implementing those parts of the protocol that fall within her Department, producing strategies to meet the challenges that COVID-19 and Brexit bring to our manufacturing sector. These are challenging times indeed. We now have less than two months.

Mr Dunne: Our manufacturing sector has been the very backbone of our economy for many years. With our mixture of a very highly skilled, innovative and educated workforce and a rich industrial and entrepreneurial heritage, we have a very proud and capable sector that we all want to see develop and be more competitive in the future. The manufacturing sector, like almost every other sector, has been heavily impacted by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While the strategy is important, now is the time to ensure that the Economy Department is able to be responsive and agile to the opportunities and challenges facing this sector, such as we heard today with the loss of jobs at Caterpillar.

The motion rightly commends employers and workers within the manufacturing sector who have continued to work through the many challenges facing us, not least the very many who are unable to work remotely from their normal workplace due to the nature of their work. The recently completed acquisition of Bombardier by Spirit AeroSystems brings some reason for optimism for this long-established and valued company by safeguarding its significant employment of over 3,000 employees right across Northern Ireland.

Manufacturing supports many jobs right through the supply chain, from those who service the equipment and supply components to the delivery services and the many subcontractors supported by the sector. Creating the right conditions to improve our economic competitiveness and building on our export markets are key to truly developing this sector. Invest NI must continue to support our local manufacturers in the European and global markets. This is rightly a focus of the 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy' medium-term plan that our Minister published in June. The Economy Minister and I recently visited the Denroy Group in Bangor. I was delighted that, only three weeks ago, it announced a recruitment drive for 120 staff over the

next six months. The Denroy Group has demonstrated its ability to diversify within its business with the production of innovative masks for the health sector. It is a very valuable local employer in my North Down constituency.

I welcome the planned city deals and growth deals that were mentioned earlier. That investment in a number of advanced manufacturing projects will be most welcome. The projects envisage investment in excess of £130 million right across Northern Ireland. I know that a significant amount of work has been done and is ongoing with our local councils to ensure delivery of these exciting and innovative projects.

Developing skills and apprenticeships for our young people through our universities and colleges is vital to a sustainable future and to ensuring that the right skills are in place for employers.

7.45 pm

There are also significant opportunities for research and development and for the development of new products and equipment right across the manufacturing sectors, including our agri-food sector, our aerospace and defence industries and the quarrying sector, which is also a significant employer. It is worth remembering that 70% of manufacturing happens outside Belfast, and that highlights the regional spread of the manufacturing sector throughout Northern Ireland.

Some of the key challenges facing our manufacturing sector include energy costs, rates, relatively high wages and having to compete in a very high quality and competitive global market. We also need to get, as has been mentioned, the right infrastructure and connectivity in place by investing in our roads and in the rest of our transport network and by ensuring that Northern Ireland is digitally connected to the rest of the world through greater broadband and better mobile phone coverage, particularly in rural areas.

I know that the Minister very much recognises the value of our local manufacturing sector, and I know that she will continue to ensure that it gets the support that it requires to allow it to grow and become even more competitive in the future.

Ms Dillon: Members will not be surprised to hear that this is an issue of great concern to me. I am sure that the Minister will not be surprised either, because I have raised it on a number of occasions. I have pointed out that the engineering and manufacturing industry needs to be supported — not it alone — during this particularly difficult time, but there also needs to be a sustainable and future-proofed economic strategy across all our sectors, and it needs to happen through proper consultation and working closely with businesses. No Minister, no civil servant and no one in Invest NI has a complete understanding of what each sector requires in order to get the most out of its business, and we are strangling our economy by not engaging appropriately with those sectors.

Mid Ulster District Council took a very proactive approach by engaging with all sectors in developing the economic development plan for the district. In fact, one of my very first engagements as the first chairperson of the new Mid Ulster District Council in 2015 was to launch the economic development plan. We did that here in Parliament Buildings in the Long Gallery, because we recognised the need to be

part of an economic strategy coming from the Department in conjunction with all other Departments.

A healthy economy creates a healthy society with better education and life outcomes. The Department could do worse than to take a leaf out of Mid Ulster District Council's book on the best way in which to do that, because the council has engaged with sectors to establish how it can best support and develop the businesses. It has also engaged with the schools and further education colleges to ensure that the skills required by businesses are being developed and supported. Our MP, Francie Molloy, has led a campaign to call for an engineering centre of excellence in mid-Ulster, and that would massively —

Ms Sheerin: Will the Member give way?

Ms Dillon: Yes.

Ms Sheerin: I have written to the Minister about this, but does the Member agree with me that we should use the skills barometer for the skills strategy and include a centre of excellence for engineering in mid-Ulster as part of our strategy?

Ms Dillon: Absolutely.

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

Ms Dillon: Go raibh maith agat. It would future-proof the skills base and provide good and well-paid jobs, and it is something that the industry has said that it would welcome and that it needs.

Businesses, educationalists and the council have worked together to achieve the best possible economic strategy for the council district. I have had good feedback on the Department's apprenticeship recovery programme from those in the industry and from training providers. The model of engaging with industry and academia partners clearly works well, and I encourage the Minister to use models of best practice when developing a future skills strategy.

We tabled an amendment to the motion on the need to improve infrastructure as part of the economic strategy. Although the amendment was not accepted by the Speaker's Office, I call on the Minister to address that issue as part of her response to the motion.

The council, the MP and the MLAs have again had to be the driving force in delivering this in our constituency, and although we are happy to do this, and it is our job to do so, it would be a much easier task if there were an effective overall strategy to link up with. The council has had to provide business parks where Invest NI has failed to do so, and we have had to fight to get power supply for expanding businesses.

One of the identified key constraints stifling the economic growth of mid-Ulster is the lack of industrial and economic lands for growing businesses. The problem is particularly acute in Dungannon and can be clearly demonstrated in Granville industrial estate, one of the busiest and most economically successful of its kind across the North. The lack of service sites in mid-Ulster has a significant impact on the ability of operating businesses to grow and deliver investment and job creation in the local area.

Invest NI needs to take forward the development of new sites urgently to address business need in mid-Ulster. I

can cite examples of businesses being advised to move their premises to Belfast if they needed additional power supply, better broadband or bigger premises. It is simply not an acceptable strategy to move businesses out of an area where they have a skilled workforce and their suppliers are based.

I ask the Minister to work with her Executive colleague Nichola Mallon on that point, as it is recognised that there is a need for significant investment in mid-Ulster's road infrastructure; for example, in progressing the Cookstown and Dungannon bypasses. Infrastructure is the essential foundation for businesses to deliver employment, growth and economic prosperity. The area boasts a world-class, high-growth cluster that manufactures at least 40% of the world's mobile-crushing and screening equipment. That cluster needs to be protected, supported and developed.

Manufacturing has been identified as a sector with a higher risk of pandemic-related recession, and large numbers of staff have been furloughed or laid off. Therefore, immediate and direct intervention is critical. We have asked DFE to take the lead in establishing a mid-Ulster manufacturing task force comprising key public and private stakeholders to protect the sector's economic and employment base.

We have the largest business base outside Belfast, and the area is recognised as the entrepreneurial capital of the North for business starts. Mid-Ulster has higher productivity per head than the average figure for the North. Given the importance and contribution of mid-Ulster to the economy, Mid Ulster District Council believes that Invest NI should establish an office presence in the area, particularly at a time when businesses of all sizes face unprecedented challenges from COVID-19 and Brexit. I commend the businesses in mid-Ulster for working with us to keep their businesses there. I call on the Department to give them the required support, which has been sadly lacking to date.

Several Members spoke about R&D and its importance. My question is this: where will the support for R&D come from in the absence of European funding? I have heard nothing to give me confidence that that support will be replaced.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Members, I want to raise two points. First, during his contribution, Mr Dunne was not near a microphone. I think that it will be recorded in Hansard, Gordon, but I do not know if it will be on the audio. Could Members who participate in debates make sure that they are near a microphone?

Secondly, earlier in the proceedings, Mr Deputy Speaker Beggs reprimanded Ms Pam Cameron for veering quite close to questioning whether the Speaker was right in refusing to accept an amendment. I am sure that the Member was not questioning the Speaker's judgement on the amendment. I know that she would not do that, but she came a bit close to the wire.

Mr O'Dowd: I am sorry that Mr Dunne's contribution was not recorded for posterity.

Looking at the notes on the debate, I asked myself, "What is manufacturing? What is that sector?". It is easier to say what is not manufacturing than what is manufacturing. That is because our economy is very reliant on large, medium and small manufacturing plants. I joined the

Committee for the Economy this term. It is my first term on it, and I have found it very interesting. However, some of the strategies that have been brought forward are very high level. Many of our manufacturing businesses are small and medium-sized enterprises, and I often ask myself, "What has that policy or strategy got to do with the work that is going on in companies that employ 20 to 50 people?". Those companies may have started with a couple of people working in a shed and have developed into manufacturing businesses, some of which are exporting. I often wonder whether the strategies that we bring forward are of any relevance to those people. One of the points that I make constantly to the Department — I make it again to the Minister — is that our strategies have to be relevant to the employers and employees out there. As I said, sometimes they are not.

My colleague Linda referred to Invest NI. To many small and medium-sized enterprises, Invest NI is a Belfast-based promotional company with which they have no relationship. Despite reaching out to Invest NI or trying their best to engage with it, they always run into barriers. Invest NI will tell them many reasons why they are not relevant to its strategies, but those companies then feel alienated and will perhaps turn their back on the opportunities that, perhaps, exist. I appeal to the Minister to ensure that any strategies that are brought forward, particularly by Invest NI, are made relevant to where the jobs are.

The economy is changing. The global economy has taken a massive hit as a result of COVID-19. Foreign direct investment will not be as readily available as it once was, and we have to protect what we have. We have to protect and invest in the small and medium enterprises that we have while the global economy stabilises and we all work out what direction it is going in. The new American Administration will have a different attitude from the previous one on global trading. They will have to establish relationships with China and all the other major global players. Let us make sure that we are well placed. To be well placed, you have to have the proper skills in place.

I welcome the skills strategy that has come forward. It has been warmly welcomed by our colleges, in particular, and our employers. It has to be relevant to our employers and employees. Our colleges can be the poor relations of our universities. A lot of that is to do with the perception of what is a good job or career. As I said, many of our small manufacturers have developed from three or four people working together to become companies that employ 20, 40 or 50 people and could be involved in exporting. We need to promote the courses that are available in our colleges, whether they are engineering or manufacturing courses. We need to promote those as being worthwhile careers. We also have to give our colleges the ability to react to a changing economy. The Economy Committee has heard reports that our colleges feel constrained by, strangely enough, the number of awarding bodies out there — I think that there are 60 or 70. Our colleges cannot respond quickly to the changing dynamics of our economy. That is particularly relevant in mid-Ulster and my constituency, which are crying out for engineers, manufacturers, welders and all the people those companies need to build the equipment that we export across the world.

I appeal to the Minister to ensure that our colleges are given the freedom to react quickly to the changes in the economy, that we promote the trades that are needed in

our manufacturing industry and that Invest NI is relevant to all our businesses and is not seen as a body that operates in Belfast and does trips around the world. If we bring all those points together, we will ensure that our manufacturing industry moves forward successfully.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I was enjoying the Member's contribution so much that I did not realise that he had gone over time.

Mr Catney: I thank Mr Stewart, Dr Aiken and Mr Robbie Butler for tabling the motion. Robbie will know of the great manufacturing tradition that we are lucky to have in my area, going back to our linen industry, which was famous all over the world. Lisburn was built on manufacturing. Many families owe their livelihood to it. It is an industry that has worked hard through the burning of Lisburn, the terrible impact of the Troubles and the economic uncertainty that we have faced over the past number of years. Now, COVID presents a new danger. It has an impact on supply lines, which reduces the availability of raw materials. It restricts manufacturing processes, as workers are unable to come together as they used to in a safe way, and it impacts on demand as end users are not operating or do not have the same opportunities to buy as they used to.

Many manufacturers have been able to adapt, be that in how they operate to allow business to continue while keeping workers safe or how they have adapted to make in-demand products, such as PPE, which has already been mentioned. When our supply chains for those vital products were less than certain, the innovation and willingness of those companies to change quickly was incredible. I have spoken to many companies that were uncertain of how they should best act and am extremely glad that they did.

8.00 pm

However, there are many who, due to the nature of their business, have not been able to operate, while not being able to avail themselves of some of the support put forward by the Executive. We already have too many job losses, but what scares me is not only the immediate impact of this pandemic but that the recession that will follow will cast a shadow far into 2021 and beyond. Any failure to act will lead to countless more job losses in the future — jobs of highly skilled workers that, I fear, we will never get back.

That could be compounded by our restrictions on being able to spend on capital public projects, which many manufacturers rely on. That is why it is clear that a robust support package must be put in place for the industry. I say "the industry", but, of course, our manufacturing industry is extremely varied, and any support packages must take that into account. We cannot make the mistake again of announcing support packages with gaps that leave out certain businesses and certain employers. The Minister for the Economy must speak to the industry. I know that you have done, and I know that you will engage, Minister.

The main pressures for the coming year must be identified, and support must be put in place on that basis. I know from speaking to many businesses that they are willing to work with us and to adapt as best they can, but that is impossible without support. We also need to be clear that difficulties for the manufacturing industry existed before

COVID and will exist long after. Ministers and MLAs are very good at attending photo opportunities at the opening of new businesses, but that rings hollow if we cannot come up with a long-term strategy to grow the sector. We need a plan to grow our skilled worker base, to build the infrastructure and broadband capabilities and to facilitate the sector, and we need to look ahead to new technologies and new areas like green manufacturing that can future-proof our industries while protecting workers, their livelihoods and their world-class skills.

Mr Chambers: It feels a bit like Groundhog Day. My mind goes back to 6 June 2016, which was quite a historic day in that the first formal opposition motion was brought to this Chamber since 1972. It was supported by Mr Allister, the SDLP, Alliance and the Ulster Unionist Party. It was also the first motion brought in during that mandate. It called on the then Minister for the Economy, Simon Hamilton, to commission a manufacturing strategy.

The economy of Northern Ireland — indeed, as I have to reference, that of Belfast, as well — really was built on heavy manufacturing. As a proud son of east Belfast, I remember places like the ropeworks, Shorts, Sirocco Works, the Tab factory, Mackie's, Harland and Wolff and many manufacturers of linen products. I also remember watching thousands of men on cycles coming up the street where I lived, every night, as they came home from work at the shipyard. That was them coming home only to one part of Belfast; that must have been replicated throughout Belfast. Those big hitters spawned a number of smaller manufacturing units that supplied the big boys with components. Some of them were based in barns and were in tin huts up back alleyways, but they were feeding off the big manufacturing companies and were providing employment. Maybe that was for small numbers of people, but, nonetheless, it was employment.

In 2015, there were over 85,000 direct jobs in the manufacturing sector, 10% of Northern Ireland's total employment at that point. In 2019, 1,790 jobs were lost in the manufacturing sector, which represented 59% of all job losses in Northern Ireland in that year. Wrightbus was a jewel in our manufacturing crown, and that lost 1,200 employees in 2019. It is easy to dismiss all those figures as mere statistics, but what are the stories behind the statistics? They are breadwinners. They are providing for families. They are paying off mortgages. They are providing a quality of life for their family. They have lost that, and who suffers? It is not only the breadwinner in the family but the small corner shop, the bakeries and — dare I say it? — even the pubs suffer on payday when jobs are lost.

More importantly, it is also about the loss of skills, which we cannot afford to lose, but we do. When those places close, the skills go with them. Engineering skills were traditionally passed on over generations, and all that has gone. Shipyard workers and other manufacturing workers may not have been well educated, but they could solve any engineering problem that was put in front of them.

Was an opportunity lost in June 2016 when Sinn Féin and the DUP voted down a proposed manufacturing strategy, preferring to bury it in an all-embracing economy strategy? Where is that strategy today? I have looked at the transcript of that debate, and Simon Hamilton said:

“There is something of a perception that Northern Ireland's manufacturing sector is in the doldrums.” —

[Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 115, p46, col 1].

Maybe he was implying that our motion suggested that, but that was certainly not the case. My party wanted to increase the manufacturing sector's contribution to the economy. My party feels that, if the strategy had been put in place at that time, we may not have avoided some of the job losses but we would have been better placed to confront the job losses and do something about it. Simon said:

“I would not for a second suggest that the sector is not challenged, but it is not in the crisis that some suggest.” — *[Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 115, p46, col 1].*

The sector is now heading into a crisis. I have to acknowledge that there are lots of manufacturing companies all over the country that are doing really well and providing good employment. However, manufacturing is in a little bit of a crisis. Simon also said:

“Our region's strong manufacturing heritage remains intact.” — *[Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 115, p47, col 2].*

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Sorry, the Member's time is up.

Mr Chambers: OK. Thank you very much, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): I have listened with interest to the debate today and welcome this opportunity to respond. I will start, as I did earlier in the Chamber today, by saying how disappointed I was to learn last week that Caterpillar is considering transferring some of its Larne-based operations out of Northern Ireland, with a potential loss of 700 jobs. Any redundancies that may arise from this announcement are deeply regrettable and, of course, devastating for the individuals and families involved. I know that the House will agree with me on this issue.

However, I have confidence in Northern Ireland's capabilities and that the Caterpillar operation will continue to be a key contributor to the manufacturing and engineering base here. Invest NI and the relevant Departments will work with the management and staff who have been affected to provide the appropriate support. We hope that we can work with Caterpillar globally to look at its footprint across the world to see whether other operations could come to Northern Ireland.

The manufacturing sector remains at the very heart of business and industry here, generating around £6.4 billion to the local economy and accounting for over 11% of employees. This has been a challenging time for our business community, and I am proud of the perseverance and resilience displayed throughout the crisis, particularly in the manufacturing sector where many businesses have innovated and pivoted to continue to succeed in these difficult times. My colleague Gordon Dunne referred to our visit to Denroy, and that company is an inspiring example of innovation in the face of the COVID challenge. There are other examples such as Huhtamaki and Bloc Blinds, and there are many other companies across Northern Ireland that have responded in these challenging and difficult times.

Manufacturing will continue to play a significant role in the Northern Ireland economy. It will be a key sector in driving our economic recovery. Its success remains a priority for my Department. That said, I fully recognise the pressures that face the sector at present. The level of support put in place to assist businesses, including those in the manufacturing sector, by the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive is unprecedented. The support ranges from government furlough and self-employment support schemes to the business support grant schemes and rates holiday delivered by the Executive. Over 42,000 jobs in the manufacturing sector have been supported by the furlough scheme, almost half of which are in the eligible sector.

A Member: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Dodds: I am sorry. I have a lot to get through, and I want to respond to a lot of the comments that were made.

Around 2,000 self-employed workers in the industry have availed themselves of the second self-employment income support scheme.

I am aware that many firms are reporting lower demand — that is despite the fact that demand was up in the weeks prior to the circuit breaker — and describing the impact that this is having on workers returning from furlough. Therefore, I welcome the Chancellor of the Exchequer's announcement that he will extend the job retention and self-employed schemes until March 2021 and April 2021 respectively. Executive colleagues and I have been calling for those schemes to be extended. This decision will continue to protect jobs and livelihoods in the months to come. It is particularly important for sectors such as manufacturing that have difficult to replace skills. It is important to retain those skills until the markets recover, which they will.

At least 65% of all manufacturing businesses were eligible for support under the £10,000 business support grant or the £5,000 microbusiness hardship fund. As well as the business rates holiday for part of the year, our manufacturers benefit each year from industrial derating, which is normally worth around £60 million to the sector. Indeed, I would support an extension of this for the remainder of the year as an important means of delivering immediate help to the sector.

My Department has also identified — in many cases, it now delivers — a range of schemes to assist manufacturing businesses to adapt to the combined challenges of COVID-19 and EU exit. The schemes support innovation; apprenticeships; skills; supply chains; product resilience and diversification; access to finance for early-stage businesses; and business and financial planning. My Department continues to look at what further interventions may be necessary to assist Northern Ireland businesses, including those in the manufacturing sector, to recover from the impact of the pandemic.

Recently, I met with companies in the aerospace sector, mainly those in the supply chain of the larger aerospace companies here. I have asked my officials to explore with that sector what can be done to increase the help that it gets. It has been hit so significantly by COVID-19 that it will require a significant tail of help to recover from the pandemic. I agree with the proposer of the motion that further financial support and the better procurement of defence contracts would be of immediate help to the

aerospace sector, where many of our companies carry out a dual role.

I also welcome the planned city and growth deal investment in a number of advanced manufacturing projects. The projects envisage investment in excess of £130 million across Northern Ireland. They present a real opportunity to significantly scale up capabilities and increase the profile of manufacturing across the UK and make Northern Ireland a powerhouse of advanced manufacturing. That is where I see the possibility and, indeed, every opportunity for those great companies in mid-Ulster, for example, to take advantage of the growth deal. There is around £260 million in that particular growth deal, and much of it will be used to help manufacturing and infrastructure.

I have also been working with the AERA Minister to advance the agri-food sector, identifying need and driving forward the industry in the face of the twin challenges of Brexit and COVID. I will say to my colleague from Londonderry that helping the agri-food sector with those challenges has nothing to do with the promotion of Brexit, which I see as a valid democratic choice by people, but has everything to do with the promotion of the protocol, which will significantly impact and act as a barrier between us and those companies and their main market in the rest of the United Kingdom.

8.15 pm

It is my view that there is no need for a stand-alone manufacturing strategy. Manufacturing is a key component of the Northern Ireland economy. Indeed, I identified advanced manufacturing as a key growth area in my 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy' document. While I appreciated Mr Chambers's amble through the 2016 debate, the reality is that, in the midst of a COVID pandemic, we have to take specific actions in the here and now alongside building the strategies that will help to move us forward.

I, along with Executive colleagues, am doing all that I can to address the significant challenges that COVID-19 continues to present to our economy. It is a very quickly evolving situation, and we must retain maximum flexibility in order to adapt to the frequent changes in the virus spread and the public health advice. As I said, we must also find a way of living with the virus that negates this cycle of lockdown, which costs jobs and businesses.

It is reckoned that the four-week restrictions on the Northern Ireland economy will have a hit on output of around £400 million. As the Chair of the Economy Committee indicated, that hit to output overall in Northern Ireland across the year is around 15%. The whole economy, not just manufacturing, will find itself in an incredibly significant and difficult situation. The best way that government can help is to create an open and free economy and environment that supports technology and enables manufacturing companies to move forward with policies and support that are tailored to their specific needs and, indeed, to the needs of the whole economy.

I also recognise the importance of supporting companies to invest in research and development and innovation. Companies that innovate are more productive, more resilient in a crisis and more likely to grow. Our innovation accreditation scheme has so far helped over 500 firms

to proactively assess their innovation capability and to access interventions that can help them to improve their innovation performance.

We are seeing a significant increase in companies seeking to bring forward R&D projects through Invest NI's grant for innovations and innovation vouchers. They are an excellent way to help small companies to access research capabilities from universities and colleges.

Work is ongoing in my Department, Invest NI and MATRIX, which is the Northern Ireland science industry panel, to develop the medium- and long-term steps that are necessary for recovery from the challenge of COVID-19 and for return to growth. Advanced manufacturing, materials and engineering are critical to that strategic policy.

In June, I published 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy', which provides a framework for how we can build a more competitive, inclusive and greener economy that delivers higher-paying jobs. It recognises that, in addition to skills, there must be a focus on high-potential sectors, including advanced manufacturing. Building on that work, a new economic strategy will recognise the significance of manufacturing to the local economy and will set a clear direction for ensuring that the full range of appropriate policy instruments are in place to support the sector. Those include a pipeline of talent to meet the skills that are needed in the sector now and in the future; investment in economic infrastructure; a supportive environment for innovation and research and development; business growth; and support measures with assistance from market development and exporting. Supporting those enablers is even more important in the wake of COVID-19.

I agree that economic recovery, and recovery for the manufacturing sector, is not just for the Department for the Economy but for all the Departments right across the Executive. The Department for Infrastructure will be key to that. Road and rail connectivity are key enablers of economic growth, but so too is digital connectivity, and I am happy to report that the procurement for Project Stratum is almost complete and ready to launch. That will be a key enabler of competitiveness for the whole economy, particularly in rural areas of Northern Ireland, in the years to come.

Rebuilding our economy will be possible only if we accept that more needs to be done. I will of course be making further representations to our Government for further support measures for the economy in the wake of Brexit. I outlined some of those challenges earlier today.

In conclusion, I thank Members for their contributions to the debate and assure the House that I am committed to supporting our businesses and our citizens through this very difficult time. The spirit and tone of this debate will be welcomed by those listening. I look forward to working with you all in the next number of weeks and months to ensure that our economy is on the best possible footing that we can make it, so that we can help people with the challenges that they face.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Roy Beggs to wind up the debate and conclude on the motion. He has 10 minutes.

Mr Beggs: Local manufacturing has a vital role to play. As others have indicated, there has been growth in the

service sector and in digital technology, but we should not forget about the importance of manufacturing strategies and the manufacturing sector.

Diversity brings about increased security. We should not put all our eggs in one basket. My East Antrim constituency has suffered particularly, along with the Mid and East Antrim Borough Council area, with the loss of a significant number of manufacturing jobs over the past years. Many Members mentioned Caterpillar, where approximately 2,000 jobs have been lost over the past decade. Schrader Electronics has closed its base in Carrickfergus. At one stage, there were 400 jobs there but, in the end, the 270 remaining jobs were recently announced as losses or transfers to its other plant. There were also losses at Michelin, JTI and Wrightbus. Thankfully, a business is growing again from the ashes of Wrightbus, and I hope that it prospers.

All of that shows me that there is a need for a manufacturing strategy to help sustain and grow businesses. We need to address what government can do to assist. The motion talks about looking at what we can do in the short term, as well as what might happen in the longer term. It also indicates the importance of manufacturing and the pressures that are on it during this time of COVID.

I acknowledge that there has been, thankfully, a reprieve for many who might otherwise have experienced redundancy, with the Chancellor announcing just recently a more flexible and continuing furlough scheme. It is regrettable that it came so very late, and some may even have lost their jobs, although I hope that the opportunity to engage in the scheme will not have been lost. It is important that we keep work teams together in the hope that we can get through this and that manufacturing, and business generally, can continue.

There has been huge pressure on our businesses during COVID. Many businesses had to shut down until appropriate mitigation could be put in to protect workers. That has resulted in a loss of efficiency, in some instances, but it has allowed the businesses to continue. I thank the Health and Safety Executive for the guidance it gave during that period, allowing significantly safer working practices to be adopted.

Businesses have experienced disruption to their supply base. Just today, I was talking to a local retailer, and he indicated that there are still difficulties in sourcing some supplies. It is strange how, if it is missing, even one small component can shut down a production line. That particularly adversely affects the car industry, with its lean manufacturing and just-in-time manufacturing. It is important that everyone stay afloat and be aware of the difficulties and that delays can cost.

In reference to that, Steve Aiken and Stewart Dickson mentioned the dangers of Brexit. Equally, delays in the movement of goods either coming into Northern Ireland or being exported to our main market, whether that be Great Britain or other parts of the EU, will significantly adversely affect our businesses. I hope that Members will take the issue seriously and stop grandstanding about the argument over whether Brexit was right or wrong. It is coming on 1 January, and we have to learn to live with it.

In case some Members have not seen it, I draw their attention to a report out just last week from the National

Audit Office titled 'The UK border: preparedness for the end of the transition period'. There are some very concerning comments in it about how we are really not prepared for it. The report states that implementing the protocol is very high risk because of the scale and changes required and the time available. It adds:

"The government has left itself little time to mobilise its new Trader Support Service (TSS) and there is still a high risk that traders will not be ready."

To get you used to it, some of the new terminology includes "goods vehicle movement service" (GVMS), "customs declaration service" (CDS), "trader support service" (TSS), and "customs handling of import and export freight" (CHIEF). That is what businesses have to learn to live with, and the sooner that we make their life easier, the better. I hope that all sides will stop grandstanding and lobby the UK Government and the EU for a reasonable accommodation so that our economy can continue here and fewer businesses will experience difficulties.

I now turn to comments made by Members during the debate. I welcome the general and widespread recognition expressed from all sides of the importance of the manufacturing industry. I noted at the end the Minister voicing her opposition to a manufacturing strategy. Given the recent loss of manufacturing jobs and the pressures on the industry, I was surprised to hear that. I hope, however, that all other Members will recognise the importance of the manufacturing industry and support the motion.

Sinead McLaughlin and Gordon Dunne highlighted the importance of city deals and how they might encourage innovation. Indeed, the Minister highlighted the importance of innovation, R&D and the new innovation vouchers that are available. It is important that there be research and development and an improvement in what our companies produce in order that we can sustain employment in the long term.

A number of Members mentioned the fragility of the supply chain during COVID. Caoimhe Archibald, Gary Middleton, Gordon Dunne and Pat Catney all highlighted the fragility that was there, but they also highlighted the flexibility that the manufacturing industry showed and the entrepreneurial spirit that is still there. They spoke about how many of the businesses turned to meeting the urgent health needs of the country by providing vital services and producing vital products to help us battle COVID. There is much that can be done, and I welcome the fact that industry was flexible and able to improve.

Other Members made a range of comments during the debate. Steve Aiken highlighted his disappointment at the fact that many of the valid points that were raised three years ago are still valid today and have not been addressed. Admittedly, Ministers were not in place for much of that period, but for probably about a year of it they were. The rest of the time, it was civil servants. It is disappointing that we still need to speed up planning decisions, that manufacturing is still not the centre of policy and that we still need a strategy to encourage investment.

8.30 pm

A number of Members highlighted aviation in particular. It has certainly been one of our blue-ribbon sectors and has

brought high-value employment and jobs. Many supporting companies feed into its supply chains, and its products are made to a very high standard. There is, generally, good value, good money and good employment. It is important that that continues into the future. As Steve suggested, perhaps the defence industry should look at how it could sustain local aviation, so that, when the cycle moves round and demand grows again, those skills and jobs are still there and can respond. It is important that that is the case.

Members made other valid points that were worthy of mention. There are hundreds of thousands of jobs directly in manufacturing. Equally, many others are involved in its supply chains, and there is a knock-on effect for those businesses.

I see that time rolls on, so I will draw my comments to a close. Regrettably, there have already been significant job losses in manufacturing, so it is important that we protect the remaining jobs. I hope that the Assembly will back our motion to do so. I hope that those who oppose it have the grace to do so quietly and allow the motion to be passed. It is important that we support the manufacturing industry. I hope that Members will support the motion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly recognises the vital role played by our local manufacturing sector in sustaining and growing our economy; further recognises the huge pressures on our manufacturing sector during the COVID-19 pandemic; commends employers and workers in the manufacturing sector who continue to persevere in the most adverse of economic conditions, with limited financial support; notes with concern the potential job losses in the manufacturing sector; calls on the Minister for the Economy to detail the short- to medium-term support measures that will be put in place to support the manufacturing sector through the COVID-19 pandemic; and further calls on her to produce the long-overdue manufacturing strategy to help the long-term recovery of, and growth within, the sector.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Your prayer was answered: the Ayes have it. Given some of the rumours that were circulating in the Building, Members will be delighted to know that the next item on the agenda is the Adjournment.

Adjourned at 8.32 pm.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 10 November 2020

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

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Speaker's Business

Mr Speaker: Members, before we commence today's business, I want to take the opportunity to remind Members about our procedures and conventions on Speaker's decisions, particularly that Speaker's decisions are final and that it is not in order to challenge them.

Over the last few months, we have seen a significant increase in requests from Members, especially, for questions for urgent oral answer and amendments. I do not take those decisions lightly and can assure Members that, since we returned in January, I have spent many hours with officials considering all those matters. I take account of a wide range of factors, including the criteria, the level of business in the House and the other opportunities that Members have to raise those matters. Mostly, Members seek to raise important matters, but I am responsible for deciding whether it is necessary to provide additional time to them on any given day.

I have been concerned at a trend in the last days and weeks of Members seeking to breach the procedures and to question decisions of the Chair in the Chamber and particularly on social media. I advise Members that I am considering how to deal with that matter. I do not want to stand on ceremony or to suppress people's obvious enthusiasm to raise important matters, but those matters are beginning to prey heavily on our minds, and I want to consider and reflect on how I approach them in the days and weeks ahead.

Ministerial Statement

British-Irish Council Summit: 6 November 2020

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the First Minister and deputy First Minister that they wish to make a statement. Before I call the First Minister, I remind Members that, in the light of social distancing being observed by parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members still have to make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called but can do that by rising in their place as well as notifying the Business Office or Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their question. This is not an opportunity for debate and long introductions should not be entered into.

Mrs Foster (The First Minister): In accordance with the requirements of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I wish to make the following statement on the thirty-fourth summit meeting of the British-Irish Council (BIC), which took place in virtual format on Friday 6 November 2020. The deputy First Minister, Minister Dodds, Minister Murphy, Minister Ní Chuilín and I attended the summit, and they have agreed that I make the statement on their behalf.

The Scottish Government hosted the summit, and the heads of the delegations were welcomed by the First Minister of Scotland, the Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP. The Welsh Government delegation was led by the First Minister, the Rt Hon Mark Drakeford MS. The United Kingdom Government was led by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP. The Government of Guernsey was led by the Chief Minister, Deputy Peter Ferbrache. The Government of Jersey was led by the Chief Minister, Senator John Le Fondré. The Irish Government was led by the Prime Minister, Micheál Martin TD. The Isle of Man Government delegation was led by the Chief Minister, Hon Howard Quayle MHK. The full list of the delegates who attended the summit is attached to the copy of the statement that was provided to Members.

This was the first summit meeting of the Council since it met in Dublin in November 2019. It is also the first meeting attended by Ministers of the Northern Ireland Executive since 2016. So, although we have had frequent engagement with UK, Scottish and Welsh Ministers this year concerning COVID-19, we welcomed the opportunity to re-engage with Ministers from the other Administrations.

Since the Dublin summit, the COVID-19 global pandemic has, of course, emerged to dominate the agendas of all

Administrations. Ministers used the meeting to discuss the impact that it has had on their countries and the interventions that they have made to protect the health of their people and to support their economies. All Administrations have experienced a significant economic impact, which has set back many of the gains that were made over the previous decade. COVID has also had, and will continue to have, a long-term impact on our communities, particularly on the young and other groups who were already experiencing economic and social disadvantage.

The Council discussed the vision, priorities and opportunities that are required to drive economic recovery while living with the virus, and there is a shared view that this recovery must not just be used to return to the status quo, but rather, and drawing from our experience, to improve what we do in areas such as social disadvantage, well-being and the digital and green economies. It also discussed areas where Administrations could usefully learn from the experiences of other Administrations, and there was a commitment to continuing dialogue between us to share information and best practice. The Council mandated the secretariat to keep under review the actions of each Administration to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, particularly on economic equality, and to consider how further dialogue might take place on the question of travel, both within the common travel area and further afield.

The Council welcomed the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive since the last British-Irish Council summit in Dublin in November 2019, and the deputy First Minister and I recorded our commitment to continue to work collaboratively with our neighbours on a North/South and east-west basis. The agenda also provided an opportunity to discuss current political developments. The focus of that discussion was the future relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union. The UK Government provided an update on the continuing discussions with the European Commission, including on the Northern Ireland protocol. All Administrations are conscious of the impending end of the transition period and emphasised the need for a successful conclusion to the negotiations. We, once again, registered our determination to achieve the most favourable outcome for Northern Ireland.

The Council noted the secretariat's 2019-2020 end-of-year report and its 2020-21 mid-year report. It also welcomed the publication of its annual report for 2019-2020, which can be viewed on the British-Irish Council's website at britishirishcouncil.org.

As the final item of business, the Council noted that the next BIC summit will be hosted by the Northern Ireland Executive in 2021. We look forward to welcoming member Administrations here and, I hope, in person. The date for the meeting will be agreed in due course.

In conclusion, it is scarcely surprising that the summit was dominated by COVID and Brexit, but despite any differences in opinion and perspective that may exist, it revealed a real determination to work together to face our common challenges and demonstrated the value of the British-Irish Council as a forum for doing so.

Mr McGrath (The Chairperson of the Committee for The Executive Office): I thank the First Minister for bringing this statement to the House. It is welcome to,

once again, see the North represented at the British-Irish Council meetings, and I think that it is fantastic that we will be hosting the British-Irish Council meeting in 2021 — hopefully not virtually — and there is undoubtedly much that we can teach, and learn from, each other.

If this issue was discussed at the meeting, I hope that the First Minister can update us on how the other Administrations are progressing their COVID economic responses to affected industries, similar to those in our hospitality and close-contact sectors, and whether they are supporting them in a timely manner and providing them with clarity rather than confusion, as is the case here. Is she aware of whether those Administrations have elected representatives in senior roles sending out contradictory messages or, indeed, verbally attacking their senior health professionals, and others leaking information to the press?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. We very much look forward to welcoming our colleagues from across the other seven Administrations to Northern Ireland next year. I hope that it will be in person, and it will most likely happen in June next year. We hope that that can happen in a meaningful way and that, given the year that is in it, we will also be able to have some wrap-around events at the British-Irish Council.

The Member asked about the ongoing restrictions that many Administrations have had to put in place. I refer him to what happened in the Republic of Ireland and the reaction of some members of the Government down there to their health specialists. We are all dealing with very difficult situations. We will have an Executive meeting later today, and I very much hope that consensus can be achieved. We are in a five-party coalition. Many Administrations across the United Kingdom and the other Administrations in the BIC do not have to deal with differing political philosophies and ways forward, but we will work together. We have a determination to work together to find a solution, and that, hopefully, will happen today.

Mr Stalford: The First Minister will know that one of the key areas of growth in the Northern Ireland economy over recent times has been in the creative industries. Can she provide an update on the work of the British-Irish Council in expanding creative industries across these regions?

Mrs Foster: Indeed, it is important to put on record that, while the British-Irish Council summit takes place only once or sometimes twice a year, there are ongoing work streams that do a lot of good work. The environmental sector met just last week, and the AERA Minister attended. We take the lead in some of the work sector activities, such as collaborative spatial planning, housing and transport.

You are absolutely right about the creative industries. It is one of the newest industries in Northern Ireland, and, as you know, before COVID-19, we were doing very well in it. We take a full part in the creative industries work stream in the British-Irish Council. That work has continued, even with the pandemic ongoing. The engagement has been a really good opportunity to share information on funding and on how the restrictions are impacting the creative industries. Some filming has continued in Northern Ireland. 'Line of Duty', for example, has continued to film, and I commend those involved with that for dealing with the restrictions and with all the things to keep everybody safe during that time. It just shows that, if there is a

determination, we can continue in that sector. We look forward to continuing the work in the creative industries sectoral working group and, indeed, all the sectoral working groups. Again, we are sharing information and learning from one another, which is a good way in which to use the British-Irish Council, and, if we can, we intend to use it more.

Ms Anderson: Go raibh maith agat, Minister, for the statement. You said that Brexit was one of the items that was discussed at length. Given that a no-deal future relationship would be the worst outcome for citizens and for businesses, what discussions took place at the BIC on addressing the growing prospects of a no deal, particularly its impact across these islands?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. Indeed, we had an update from Michael Gove on the negotiations. The deputy First Minister and I stressed the need for a timely resolution to the issues in order to give clarity, even at this late stage, to our businesses.

We stressed the interdependencies between the working of the protocol and the main negotiations. We are concerned, if things look good for the negotiations, about what impact that will have on us in Northern Ireland due to the protocol that has been put in place. Again, we stressed our two main objectives for the practical outworkings of the trading relationship, particularly with Great Britain, our largest market, and that the final relationship between the UK and EU should not damage, even in an unintended way, the Northern Ireland economy. We made those points clearly. There was a good discussion across the Administrations about the end of the transition period. We look forward to the end of the negotiations, hopefully towards the end of the week.

10.45 am

Dr Aiken: I thank the First Minister for her remarks, particularly those on the British-Irish Council. Did she and the deputy First Minister take the opportunity to raise the implications of the withdrawal agreement and the letter that both Ministers sent to the vice president of the European Commission the day before? In particular, if I may quote:

“with a real threat to the continuity of the supply of existing food and other products to our market unless these issues are urgently addressed and solutions found.”

Did you raise that issue at the British-Irish Council?

Mrs Foster: Yes, because we have heard a lot from people telling the United Kingdom Government to act in good faith but we need the European Union to do likewise. The European Union says that it does not want to damage Northern Ireland. If that is the case, it should, of course, come to a determination that supermarkets are not bringing across products that are at risk of going into the Republic of Ireland. These are sealed containers that come across from Great Britain into Northern Ireland for sale in Northern Ireland. We just wanted to make the point that those goods are not at risk of entering the Republic of Ireland. Therefore, that issue should be closed off as quickly as possible to give certainty to supermarkets. I am sure that the Member has heard some supermarkets express concerns about the range and price of products that they will be able to bring to Northern Ireland. So, let us

deal with that issue and get it off the table. If the European Union feels that it wants to protect Northern Ireland, there is a simple way to do that.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your statement on the meeting. Minister, you will be aware of a group of people in Northern Ireland who consider themselves to have been excluded from any business supports surrounding the COVID pandemic. You have not met them yet, and I hope that you will do so as soon as possible. Given that Scotland, Wales, the English regions and other jurisdictions have taken a great deal of action to support those people, yet nothing has been done to support them in Northern Ireland, what actions do you and the deputy First Minister plan to take,?

Mrs Foster: I think that the Member will agree that we have provided a large amount of support to businesses and individuals across Northern Ireland. Again, I put on record that we are pleased that the furlough scheme will continue until the end of March. That is very helpful to us as we try to battle through the COVID-19 pandemic, as is the granting of an extra £400 million in Barnett consequential. That, too, will assist us in the fight against COVID and in addressing the need to support businesses and people finding it difficult at present.

The Member raises an issue about people who have fallen through the cracks. As I understand it, now that we have extra funding, the Economy Minister is putting forward a paper that looks at all of that and at how to deal with some of those issues. We understand that a lot of people have been missed, and we are trying to create schemes to help them. I hope that we will have news for the Member and, indeed, the House, in due course.

Mr Robinson: I thank the First Minister for her statement. What progress is being made in the environmental work sector?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. As I indicated, the environmental sectoral work stream met in the week before the full summit meeting.

There is an aim to launch a new British Standards Institution (BSI) specification on plastic pellets — plastic is one of the main environmental threats, as we all know — by 2020-21, so we hope that that will come forward soon. Solutions for the collection and recycling of end-of-life fishing gear from the main fishing ports are being developed, and it is planned to run webinars on blue carbon evidence, research and management for adaption and resilience and mitigation of climate change. A whole range of practical issues are being discussed across the Administrations. That shows the strength of cooperation, of sharing of information and of working together in the British-Irish Council that I hope to see more of as we mature into what I hope will be the normal run of things.

Post-Brexit, for me, the British-Irish Council is very important. It allows us to speak with our colleagues not only in the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland but in the smaller jurisdictions of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man, who we have not had the opportunity to meet because the Assembly was down for a number of years. I very much welcome that ongoing sharing of information and collaboration that can now take place through the good offices of the British-Irish Council.

Mr O'Dowd: I thank the Minister for her answers thus far. I welcome the statement on the British-Irish Council, which is an important institution of the Good Friday Agreement. It is important that there is cooperation and mutual understanding across these islands.

The Minister covered some of the implications of COVID, such as the health and economic issues, but if we are going to have an economic recovery from COVID, one of the important things will be that our Executive have fiscal powers. Was there any discussion at the BIC about the devolution of fiscal powers to institutions such as the Assembly?

Mrs Foster: As I understand it, the Finance Minister is quite keen to set up a fiscal commission to look at those issues. He will have to seek cross-party agreement in the Executive, and, as such, there has been no paper brought forward thus far. The amount of fiscal help that we have received from Westminster over the past year has been quite staggering: £2.8 billion has come to us to help in the fight against COVID. That, again, underlines for me the importance of our relationship with the rest of the United Kingdom, and we look forward to continuing that good working relationship.

Mr Dunne: I thank the First Minister for her statement. In relation to the British-Irish Council, are there lessons to be learned from across the various Administrations in the management of COVID-19 and economic recovery?

Mrs Foster: The fact that we are able to share what has worked in each of the different Administrations has been very useful. I was very taken by something that is happening in Jersey — I accept that they have a much smaller population than some of the Administrations — where they have a scheme where they give all their citizens a £100 pre-paid MasterCard. You cannot spend it online; you have to spend it locally in shops and restaurants. It is a way to help to boost the local economy, and I thought that that was a very good way to do that. I know that the Economy Minister has been looking at the idea of voucher schemes, particularly for our hard-hit hospitality and tourism sectors. It is good to hear of ideas and schemes that are working across different Administrations and to learn from and adapt those and to perhaps introduce them in Northern Ireland.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for her statement and her answers thus far. Will the Minister confirm whether there was any discussion at the British-Irish Council about the importance of promoting inclusion and equality of outcome as a core element in our COVID recovery planning across these islands?

Mrs Foster: There was a discussion that COVID pointed out difficulties for different sectors in our communities right across the eight Administrations and that we do not want to go back to the status quo. We want to build on the experiences of dealing with COVID and to look at equality of opportunity right across these islands. That is very important and is something that we will continue to work through in the Council.

Mr O'Toole: I thank the First Ministers for bringing the report. I must say that the detail, particularly on Brexit, is pretty thin gruel, though we have become used to that in the Assembly. In the statement, there are more words devoted to introductions and telling us who was at the meeting than there are to Brexit.

Can I ask the First Minister precisely what was discussed? What work streams will the British-Irish Council take forward, both before the end of the year and afterwards? I agree that that institution is critical to relations going forward. Can I also ask her specifically about the issue of crime, justice and security cooperation? That is critical across these islands. It is critical that we get the right outcome of, ideally, access to the European arrest warrant on a North/South basis and on an east-west basis across Britain and Ireland. Was that discussed and, if it was not, why not?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question. Maybe the Member misunderstands the role of the British-Irish Council. It is not to negotiate our leaving the European Union or, indeed, the end of the transition period; it is to share experiences from Jersey, Guernsey, the Isle of Man, the four Administrations in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. It is certainly not to deal solely with our leaving the European Union. Despite that, of course, it was recognised that the end of the transition period was a big moment. When we have clarity in the negotiations that are taking place between the United Kingdom and the European Union, we can move forward together and work collaboratively. It is important that we use the British-Irish Council to continue those relationships, and I am sure that it will do so.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the First Minister for her statement. We have heard some ideas around boosting the economy. Can the First Minister update us on whether any further novel or innovative ideas for boosting economic activity came up during the discussions with other Administrations?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. We had a good discussion on economic recovery. Of course, there were common themes of varying degrees across the eight Administrations, including supporting and creating jobs, the need to have a green recovery, improving community spaces and, of course, prioritising well-being. Digital inclusion, cybersecurity and areas like that are, of course, very much part of the agenda of the British-Irish Council, as indeed are some of the new technologies that are coming forward. For example, we want to push very strongly the importance of having a hydrogen hub in Northern Ireland. We can share ideas and learn lessons from other Administrations, particularly Scotland, in relation to how they have moved forward on the green agenda as well.

Mr Nesbitt: I note that, in her concluding paragraph, the Minister referred to “differences in opinion and perspective”: what was the most challenging thing that she heard?

Mrs Foster: I do not think that it will come as any surprise to the Member that there are those of us who have different opinions on Brexit and the advantages and, for others, the disadvantages of leaving the European superstate. We continue to have different opinions on that. However, for those of us coming from a Northern Ireland perspective, whilst we have different opinions on that issue, it is vital that we do all that we can to protect businesses and citizens in Northern Ireland so that they can continue to have the choice that they currently have. That is critical.

Ms Sheerin: Minister, thank you for your statement. Considering our reliance in 2020 on social media and the use of digital technology to advertise public health guidance in the context of COVID-19, can the Minister advise whether there was consideration at the British-Irish Council of a digital inclusion strategy to end rural poverty around information technology and broadband provision? That exacerbates the social exclusion of rural dwellers, particularly in the context of COVID-19.

11.00 am

Mrs Foster: Yes, absolutely. The BIC digital inclusion work stream absolutely recognises the rapid pace of technological change amongst all our members. Of course, the size and scale of our membership is very different, but, sometimes, smaller Administrations — it is nice for a Northern Ireland Minister to be able to say that — at the table can come up with innovative ways forward.

We are looking forward to that continuing discussion. The Department of Finance in Northern Ireland leads the discussion at the BIC work stream on digital inclusion. In the past year, the unit has been working in collaboration with several additional organisations, focusing on those hard-to-reach groups and communities with the aim of increasing internet usage by 1% annually across the BIC area. The oncoming Project Stratum, which the Department for the Economy is bringing forward, will be a real game changer for us in Northern Ireland. I represent Fermanagh and South Tyrone, and the project will allow people there to have that digital inclusion. We have realised this year, through COVID-19, how important digital inclusion is so that people can get online and do all the things that they need to do, whether that be work, education or, indeed, just socialising.

Ms Ennis: It was reported from the British-Irish Council summit that the First Minister stated that the COVID virus would be with us for some time. On that basis, does she accept that further interventions to protect public health may be required in the period ahead, including greater collaboration and coordination among the health agencies on these islands and between these islands to stem the spread of the virus?

Mrs Foster: I am very much on record as saying that we need to continue to recognise that the virus is here and that we have to live with that fact going into 2021. Of course, we have good cooperation across the United Kingdom and, indeed, with our neighbours in the Republic of Ireland. I spoke with Micheál Martin at the weekend about the threat that has appeared from mink farming in Denmark, and we should all be concerned about that. We do not have any mink farms in Northern Ireland — they have been banned since 2002 — but there are three mink farms in the Republic of Ireland, so I want to be assured about them. As well as that, the Minister of Health has written to his counterpart in the Republic of Ireland about the need for us to have information on travellers from Denmark, so that, if people come to Northern Ireland from Denmark through the Republic of Ireland, we know that and can enforce quarantine for 14 days if they are resident here. The United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, has said that, unless you are a citizen of Northern Ireland, you should not come from Denmark into the United Kingdom, because we want to protect ourselves from the new strain that has appeared. I note this morning that the World

Health Organization has said that it is concerned about the new strain, which has appeared in six countries to date. We should be alert to that, and we need to take all precautions to make sure that it does not come to Northern Ireland.

Mr McNulty: I thank the First Minister for her statement. A major issue has arisen in recent weeks because of the checks in relation to COVID restrictions at the border by an Garda Síochána on the A1/M1 near Jonesborough. They happen almost daily and cause considerable delays and huge frustration for key workers: healthcare workers, construction workers, IT workers and businesspeople, all of whom are working hard to keep our all-island economy afloat. Was that matter raised at the meeting? If this is an issue during COVID, we in border communities will be very worried about how things may turn out in the event of a no-deal scenario in 2021. Will she undertake to write to the Garda Commissioner to raise that issue of deep concern?

Mrs Foster: Operational gardaí issues are, of course, a matter for the commissioner in the Republic of Ireland. The gardaí take whatever actions they feel are necessary to protect their citizens and to make sure that the COVID regulations are policed properly. I commend the gardaí on their very visible presence in the Republic of Ireland and the way in which they have been ensuring that their residents and citizens abide by the restrictions. That is so important. We have heard a lot from Members about the need to protect citizens from this terrible virus, and it looks to me as if the Garda Commissioner is taking that very seriously.

Mr Beattie: I thank the First Minister for her statement and for making it in a timely manner. That is important. I also thank her for her full answers.

Given that Christmas is so important to all of the economy and there is always added movement of people over the festive period and looking at the factors that we are drawing from what is being done in other areas, is there any way that there will be a harmonisation of the COVID-19 approach in all jurisdictions over that period?

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for his question; it is a hugely important issue. Many people travel during the Christmas period to see their loved ones across the British Isles, and therefore it is important that we continue to have those conversations. We have them when we meet Michael Gove and the Scottish and Welsh Administrations in our regular quads. We also need to take into account the citizens moving from the Republic of Ireland into Northern Ireland and vice versa and from the other smaller Administrations. There is an absolute need to have clarity between all the Administrations on travel, not just for family and friends but for students. We need to be able to have our young people coming home at Christmas. In Northern Ireland, a lot of young people come home at weekends, and I know that that has caused difficulty. I commend our young people for choosing to remain at home and do their work online or to stay in Belfast, Londonderry or Coleraine. They will, however, want to go home at Christmas, so there is a need for us to find solutions for that. I am committed to finding a solution to that, along with colleagues in all the other Administrations.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for her statement. In it, she says:

“The Council discussed the vision, priorities and opportunities which are required to drive economic recovery while living with the virus”.

Will the First Minister share with us the vision for Northern Ireland that her five-party Executive have agreed so far? Wider society, much of which is on its knees waiting for a plan, desperately needs to know.

Mrs Foster: I thank the Member for her question. I agree that we need a clear exit strategy on these issues. It is important that people are aware of how we will live with the virus. I do not believe that we can continually go into circuit breakers or lockdowns — call them what you will. You cannot keep turning on and off the economy. You will go back on one occasion, and there will be nothing left. People will not have jobs; they will not be able to support their families; and they will fall into destitution and poverty, which, in itself, has its own health outcomes — mental health and issues with poverty. There is a need for us to find a way forward, and I hope that we can work in collaboration to find it

There was good news yesterday about a vaccine, and I welcome the fact that Pfizer and BioNTech are making great advances on one. Of course, we also need to make sure that we have an appropriate test, trace, isolate and support system in place. I pay tribute to those who are working on that system for the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland people. The capacity in our health service needs to be ready. Every winter, we face problems with capacity in our health service, but, this year, we know that there are additional problems because of COVID-19.

There is much work to do, and we are committed to having an exit strategy and communicating it. Businesses have been through so much this year. I empathise with them in relation to everything that has happened to them. We will continue to do all that we can to assist them.

Mr Allister: I welcome the expedition with which the statement was brought to the House. It is such a contrast to the feet-dragging on many other statements, particularly those on North/South meetings.

I take the First Minister back to the issue of flights from Denmark. It is an issue now about Denmark, but it has long existed, because Dublin has been a back-door entry point to the rest of the United Kingdom. Was that problem discussed at the Council, and was any shape of a resolution found to it?

Can she shed any further light on how our centenary next year will be marked at the British-Irish Council?

Mrs Foster: The issue around mink and Denmark came to light only after the Council meeting. The Council was on Friday, and it was only late on Friday and early on Saturday that we were made aware of the problem. I immediately contacted our Agriculture Minister, who was able to tell me that there were no mink farms in Northern Ireland and had not been, as I said, since 2002. I then contacted Micheál Martin about it.

Regrettably, there is an ongoing issue — the Minister of Health has raised it on many occasions — around the fact that we do not have the information coming forward on travel locator forms for people who come in to Dublin and

then come up to Northern Ireland. We need to have that information. We will continue to press on those points.

As the Member knows, the centenary forum continues to meet. We hope that it will be a very meaningful commemoration and celebration next year. I am pleased that the British-Irish Council is coming to Northern Ireland in our centenary year. We should use it as an opportunity to tell the story of all that is good about Northern Ireland, including our industry. We look forward to doing all of that.

Mr Carroll: The First Minister said that we should not just return to the status quo after the virus: I absolutely agree. The First Minister also mentioned tackling social disadvantage. What discussions were had at the Council about a COVID wealth tax to tackle inequality, given that billionaires have increased their wealth during the crisis by £25 billion? We are definitely not all in it together. What work is being done to tackle the astronomical wealth gap that exists on these islands?

Mrs Foster: There was no discussion about a “wealth tax”, but there was a determination to help all those who have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. That determination is shared across all of the Administrations. We look forward to the continuing work to deal with that issue.

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

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

11.15 am

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 3) Bill: Final Stage

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

That the Budget (No. 3) Bill [NIA 09/17-22] do now pass.

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

Mr Murphy: Today's Final Stage debate concludes this part of the legislative process for the 2020-21 financial year. As I explained at the Second Stage debate, following the unusual step that we had to take by passing a further Vote on Account before the summer, the financial position now allows us to pass this Budget (No. 3) Bill together with the Main Estimates, which were agreed on 19 October. This provides the legislative authority for the expenditure of the Departments and other bodies for the remainder of this financial year.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that financial circumstances this year have been unprecedented. The Executive have acted quickly to provide funding, not only to deal with the health impact of the pandemic but to respond to the economic impact. We are continuing to plan and respond to the situation, and Members will be aware that I have made a series of announcements over the past seven months as the Executive have agreed further allocations.

My most recent announcement on the outcome of the October monitoring round on 29 October brings to over £2.3 billion the allocations that have been made to Departments by the Executive. That includes almost £1 billion of additional in-year funding for the Department of Health to ensure that our doctors, nurses and other medical staff have the resources that they need in the fight against this health emergency. It also includes over £428 million to the Department for the Economy to directly support businesses and the further and higher education sectors.

Almost £200 million has been allocated to the Department for Communities to support those most disadvantaged in our communities, as well as to provide support for the voluntary and community sector and the sports, arts and culture sectors. Over £180 million has gone to the Department for Infrastructure to ensure that our transport networks can continue to operate, including not only Translink but also our airports and seaports and our taxi and private coach and bus industries. The allocations to Infrastructure are also supporting Northern Ireland Water as it adapts to the changes in demand from its customers and consumers. Almost £180 million has gone to the Department of Education to support our schools and to continue to safely deliver education for our children and young people and to provide free school meals.

The Bill provides the legislative authority for that expenditure. I remind Members that, as well as authorising the expenditure in this current financial year, the Bill

regularises the excess expenditure incurred by some Departments in the 2016-17 financial year, which came about because it was not possible for the Assembly to pass the spring Supplementary Estimates at the end of that year.

My Department has continued to engage with all other Departments to ensure that the Executive have an up-to-date picture of the pressures that they face and how the available resources are being used. As the situation develops further and the Executive make further decisions, as is likely, on the allocations of resources, I will bring these back to the Assembly through the spring Supplementary Estimates and a subsequent Budget Bill at the end of the financial year.

I wish to express my gratitude once again to the Finance Committee, which acknowledged the unique circumstances in which we found ourselves this year and agreed to accelerated passage. I thank all the departmental scrutiny Committees and, indeed, all Members for the level of scrutiny that they have been able to bring to this process.

To conclude, this is the Final Stage of the legislative process for this Bill. I now look forward to hearing any final thoughts from Members on this important legislation.

Dr Aiken (The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance): I thank the Minister for his comments so far. As previously outlined, the Bill makes provision for the balance of cash and resources required to reflect the departmental spending plans in the 2020-21 Main Estimates. As I indicated during the previous debate, the Committee agreed, under Standing Order 42(2), to grant accelerated passage to the Budget Bill on the basis of having been consulted appropriately on the expenditure provisions in the Bill. As we progress through this mandate, it is important that all Departments engage constructively with the Assembly Committees, particularly in relation to budgetary matters.

As I alluded to during the Second Stage debate, the Committee identified an inconsistency of approach by the Department of Finance surrounding the approvals for spending under sole authority. These are the now quite infamous black box items. Whilst acknowledging the Minister's recognition of the inconsistency during the debate, it serves as a reminder to us all that scrutiny adds real value and, therefore, requires all Committees to question, probe and challenge existing processes and practices to improve transparency and drive improvements to ensure high levels of accountability.

However, for that to be a continual process, reform of our existing systems needs to be delivered through initiatives such as the Department of Finance's current review of the financial process, which aims to provide a simplified read-across of the information in the Budget, Estimates and accounts. The review needs to be complemented by a memorandum of understanding (MOU), which aims to safeguard the information sought by the Assembly when undertaking its scrutiny. That work is continuing and will require consideration by the Executive and the Assembly once the draft procedures are developed, worked through and reflected in a draft version of the memorandum of understanding.

During the Second Stage debate, my Committee colleague Matthew O'Toole highlighted the need for long-term

improvements to our Budget process, which should be underpinned by internationally recognised key principles. At various times, the Committee has heard about the need to move towards a fiscal council, and we need details about that sooner rather than later. I note the First Minister's remarks today when she said that a paper on a fiscal council has not yet come before the Executive.

I will move to the outcome of the review of the financial process being conducted by the Department of Finance and the MOUs being developed between the Department and the Committee for Finance. That process seeks to provide a single consistent approach to requesting, presenting and analysing budgetary information to support the scrutiny role of the Assembly. Of course, a memorandum of understanding can be put in place only on an agreed process. We also need commitments from Departments, Committees, the Executive and the Assembly to adhere to that process to enable us to participate fully in providing a timely, open and transparent financial process that lends itself to full accountability for the expenditure of public finances.

The Committee is interested in the role of arm's-length bodies and their financial accountability, responsibility and reporting procedures. At the Committee's meeting on 7 October 2020, it agreed to seek details of all bids that had been submitted by Departments during this financial year. The response date was extended to four weeks to take account of the recess period, and Departments were asked to provide this information by 6 November — last Friday. It is, therefore, disappointing to note that, to date, responses have been received from only five of our nine Departments. The remaining four Departments did not provide a suitable reason for the delay, request an extension or acknowledge that the deadline had been missed.

I take this opportunity to recognise the efforts of the Departments that have furnished the Committee with the information within the requested timescale. However, I will also highlight the Departments with outstanding responses. Whereas the Department of Health can be forgiven for not necessarily having its responses through in time, I cannot believe that the Executive Office, the Department for Communities and the Department of Justice have any excuse whatsoever. That is not acceptable, particularly when the extended response time is taken into account and when the requested information should be easy for departmental financial divisions to access and, therefore, readily available to the Committee. We must do better.

As we look ahead to the remainder of the financial year, a key challenge will be the effective deployment of all available resources received through our normal settlement and the additional COVID-19 funding to ensure that it is focused on the areas of most need and where it can bring the greatest benefit. We are aware of the additional £400 million of Barnett consequentials that came within the last two weeks and, added to likely outcomes, that shows the ability to have up to £0.5 billion available. However, that money needs to be spent before the end of the financial year, which is a significant challenge for our Departments.

The Committee would like there to be a focus on improving the Executive's utilisation of the allocation of financial transactions capital (FTC). As the Chairperson of the

Committee for Communities said during the Second Stage debate, the reclassification of registered housing associations will provide a much-needed opportunity to utilise more of our allocation, which we must do. Whilst this is to be welcomed, we need to recognise the need for a more sustainable strategy to maximise the opportunities that FTC can bring in delivering positive outcomes for our society. We have had this opportunity for a considerable time but not managed to utilise it effectively, at any stage.

The Committee is generally supportive of the Minister's approach of seeking further flexibility from HM Treasury. However, Committee members want to ensure that any flexibility is used appropriately and only where absolutely necessary. I would appreciate the Minister's undertaking to keep the Committee fully informed of any developments as soon as they are known and updating it on any proposals that he may have to avail himself of such flexibility when the time comes. In the meantime, on behalf of the Committee for Finance, I support the Bill.

Mr Frew: This is the last legislative stage of the financial process that is the Budget Bill. With a Budget (No. 3) Bill, we are in strangely unique times. I have not seen one before in my time. In what has been a very traumatic year for the financial process, I have certain sympathies for the Department and the officials. However, in light of the evidence that we have gleaned and the experiences that we have lived through over this last traumatic year, it is absolutely clear that things need to change.

At Second Stage, I asked the Finance Minister where in the Bill was the support for hairdressers, the self-employed, entrepreneurs and people on their own who were trying to scrape a living to provide for their families after the Executive closed them down. He said, "It is all here. It is all in this Bill." It must be still in the Bill, because there are people and businesses in my constituency who have not seen a pin from it. They have had no support from the Executive or the Finance Minister since the day and hour that they were closed down. They were closed down abruptly without any indication of when, how or why they should do so. Since then, we have seen the evidence that led to their closure, and, boy, that is so flimsy. I met those businesses the week after, and even this week, and they just cannot understand it. It is beyond anger now.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the Member for giving way. I represent the same constituency and have the same businesses coming to me. That is why I am writing to the Minister responsible for providing financial support — the Economy Minister. I am extremely disappointed in her performance to date in supplying those businesses with grants and getting money out to them quickly.

Mr Frew: I am very disappointed, too, that a party in the House can hold on to money that it did not need and which was not even meant for it. The party held on to that much-needed finance for months without alerting the authorities, bringing it to the attention of the Finance Committee or even declaring an interest to the various Committees. That is shameful. When businesses are crying out for anything — anything — that is absolutely shameful.

Mr Butler: I thank the Member for giving way. He paints a stark picture for businesses. There are a lot of pressures on businesses, and we heard some of those mentioned on the radio this morning. Does the Member agree that the calculation is based not simply on the scientific modelling

but on the fact that our R rate is rising and more people are dying due to COVID? The Executive do not work on the basis of a single figure, which may be presented as 0.5 or 0.1; they take into account the rising rates, the rising threat to health and the increasing number of deaths in our population.

11.30 am

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for his intervention again. I know that he made an intervention last night during my colleague Jonny Buckley's speech on the very same issue. My answer is the same as Jonny Buckley's. Of course this is a very dangerous disease. Of course we are in the midst of a great pandemic.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I ask Members to face the Chair to ensure that the sound is picked up.

Mr Frew: Of course we need to address those issues and make it safe for those people and those businesses to operate, but closing them down was never the answer. Closing them down so that they cannot operate is never the answer. Not allowing people to earn a living to provide for their families was never the answer.

When you look at the evidence for the decisions that were taken and at some of the sectors that were closed down, you will see that there was absolutely no justification for the Executive to make the decisions that they did. Those business owners are still scratching their head asking, "Why has my business been closed down? The Executive forced me to invest hundreds and sometimes thousands of pounds on safety measures to keep me, my staff and my customers safe. Why did the Executive close us down?". That is what I hear when I meet the businesses.

It is beyond anger, as I said. It is just pure frustration, and, in many cases, it is just hopelessness now. Yet here we have an Executive that cannot even agree on the exit strategy and the opening of those businesses that were promised that they would be opened this week. That is an absolutely shameful position to be in.

A number of weeks ago, when we were discussing the Bill, I rhymed off to the Minister all those sectors that needed support, and the Finance Minister gave me the commitment that the support is in the Bill. It is here. It is what we were passing. Where is that money now? Where is that funding? Where is that support that was promised? It is not just on the Department for the Economy or the Minister for the Economy; it is Land and Property Services (LPS) that administers the scheme.

LPS was tremendous the first time round. It put money out to businesses on a system that was designed to bring money in, not to push money out. Of course, mistakes were always going to be made, and I will never be hard on LPS for those mistakes, simply because the speed with which it got that money down the first time round was immense. It was tremendous.

Mr Catney: I thank the Member for giving way. Does the Member agree with me that the Chair and members of the Finance Committee wrote to LPS thanking it for its work and its quick response? These are horrific times, and that was the reason for doing that. We are not attacking it, and I hope that it does not come across like that. I thought that it did a tremendous job.

Mr Frew: A tremendous job it did. I echo the sentiments of my colleague Pat. He is absolutely right. The effort, the tremendous work and the coordination and communication with MLAs was immense. It was perfect. It was brilliant. It was really good. You could have gone from the top to the bottom of the organisation and you would have got the same, concise, clear answer in a speedy manner. It did tremendous work. However, it is now three weeks since businesses were forced to close just like that, abruptly, without any warning, so why are they still crying out for that support, little as it is? Let us face it. They have not received one bean; not one penny. They have employees asking them, "What shift will I do on Friday? What hours do I have to work on Saturday?". We have business owners asking, "Do I bring my supply chain in? Do I order all that food? Do I fill my freezer?".

This is unbelievable. This is a tremendously harsh time for businesses, yet this Executive are doing an act of vandalism to those businesses. It is an act of vandalism to be unable to tell a business, on a Tuesday, that it can open up for sure on the Friday, fill its fridges and freezers, bring in its stock or pay its supply line. All these businesses have no idea. That is no way to run a business, and it is no way to run the Executive. It is an absolute disgrace — an absolute farce — that we are letting down so many people who earn a decent living, provide employment to our people and are being let down by the hour this week, without any knowledge of what they are going to do next week. It is an absolute disgrace.

Here we have a Finance Minister who wants more fiscal powers. Really? Do you think, Mr Deputy Speaker, that I would stand here as an MLA and want to support and vote more fiscal powers for this Executive and this Finance Minister? Is that where we are at? No, I will not support more fiscal powers coming down to the Executive, when they cannot even spend the Barnett consequential moneys that we have received from our sovereign Parliament. We are going to find it tough to spend that money. It is perverse that I am speaking about money sitting at the centre, and yet, out there in the real world, businesses cannot employ their people, provide a living, open their shop floor, cut somebody's hair, provide a meal or sell a coffee, despite all the investment that they have put in. They are an absolute farce of an Executive. It makes a mockery of the Budget Bill and process. More fiscal powers? Are we having a laugh? Go and ask a business, any business, that has been forced to close down whether the Executive should have more fiscal powers. The answer, every time, will be, "No way, no chance."

One thing I have learnt about the process is this scary thing. Look at the decisions that have been taken by the Executive over the past eight months; yesterday was a typical scenario. The Assembly, which should really be the seat of power, was asked to approve regulations that are coming to an end and have had their impact. They have destroyed businesses and lives. People will die because of the decisions the Executive took. Should we have more fiscal powers? No. Should we have more democratic accountability on a finance process? Absolutely yes. It is not good enough to usurp the power and will of the House, or to bypass it. Whilst I understand the reasons why the Finance Committee gives accelerated passage to a Budget Bill, to hasten the process, we should not compromise on scrutiny in return for that acceleration.

What do I mean by that? I do not know that the Finance Committee's role should really be about what pound goes where and that sort of thing. The minutiae of that would bog it down. However, the monitoring rounds are an important cycle in the Budget sequence. We have seen their importance clearly, through this Budget Bill and this process. I see the Budget process as two-yearly. There is the year in which you produce a Budget, which then comes into force in April, but then you have the in-year work, where you move around that money in monitoring rounds. That is critical, especially if we get to the point where we have multi-year Budgets.

Here is the thing, however. If we get to multi-year budgets and have monitoring rounds in-year, they become very important, because, with the best will in the world, you can have the best financial advisers in your Department, but they do not have a crystal ball. It is therefore very hard to predict what will happen in three years' time, so that flexibility must come with a three-year Budget, but scrutiny must also be enhanced.

The Chairperson of the Finance Committee talked about the fiscal council and the memorandum of understanding. When the Finance Minister was on the Finance Committee, he identified not having the memorandum of understanding as being a problem and pushed for it, and I thank him for that work. Surely he should see that there is a democratic deficit in the way in which we do a Budget, because it is an excepted matter. There is a duty on the Finance Minister to provide a Budget to this Assembly, and that is it. There is so much more that the Assembly needs to see on budgetary and financial matters, however. I am talking not just about having a memorandum of understanding but about having deep, meaningful reform. I am talking about reform that will make the Assembly the place where the power resides. By that, I mean that Departments take an inconsistent approach to bringing their information to the Committees. Some are late with it, which is unforgivable. Some provide scant information to their Committee, and, let us face it, sometimes Committees have other priorities. Sometimes the financial side of things does not get the time and scrutiny that it should.

We have problems. We should all see that, and, if we do not, we are blind. What, as an Assembly, can we do to fix those problems? Codes do not work: quite clearly they do not. I do not believe that a memorandum of understanding would work either. It would just not be strong enough. The Finance Committee can produce a series of platforms and produce pro formas that Committees and Departments can fill in. That has helped to a certain degree, but it has helped identify the weaknesses. It has helped us see the holes in the system.

That is why I say that we need statutory reform. We need laws in this place that place statutory duties on the Finance Minister and on all other Ministers to bring information to their Committee in proper time and information that serves its function. That information would then be scrutinised. It would then go into a centralised system whereby we all, as an Assembly, could see and scrutinise that work. When we got to monitoring rounds, they would then become vitally important, if they are not already important, of course.

It is not good enough that the Assembly rubber-stamp or vote on something for which the Executive have decided to move money around. With the democratic deficit that we

already have in this place, I say that the Assembly should perhaps have that say and agree to pass the monitoring rounds. We do at the spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) stage, which is in February, and thus after the event, so why not allow the Assembly to vote to pass the monitoring rounds? In that way, we, as MLAs and as an Assembly, have a say. In that way, we can ensure that the Executive take cognisance of what our Committees have to say and what the Finance Committee has to say. That is the way forward.

One thing that I have learnt in my time as an MLA, and since I came back to this place, is this: there is a lot that we get right, but there is a lot that we get wrong. We cannot abide by that. Where we see problems, we should fix them. We need to repair, we need to fix and we need to resolve. Fiscal powers? Not a chance. There is not a chance that I will support more fiscal powers for an Executive that have made decisions this month to destroy livelihoods and jobs and to ruin businesses. There is no chance. I ain't going there. Maybe I will be persuaded. It is up to the Minister to persuade the House. I ain't seen anything yet. I say this to the Finance Minister: get that money to those people. Last week and the week before it was the time to do it. Do not leave those businesses hanging any longer. Some of them are already gone; some will not reopen. This is a record month for redundancies.

11.45 am

Do not get me wrong: I do not blame the Executive for all of it; it was caused by the pandemic. However, when people needed the Executive to support and help them in the midst of this cruel pandemic, in which people are dying, what have the Executive done? They have destroyed livelihoods and businesses by the decisions that they have taken. They need to change step; they need to go out into the real world and see the suffering in it. Will the Budget help those people? Money has been lying at the centre for months. There are business owners lying at home, not knowing what to tell their employees about Friday. It is shameful.

Mr McGuigan: I thank the independent — sorry, DUP — Member for North Antrim for giving way once again. I take exception to the tone of his remarks and the accusations that he has levelled at the Executive, which, in my view, are doing their very best. The Member talks about destroying lives and livelihoods, but I caution him and suggest that he take a walk round Antrim Area Hospital, Causeway Hospital or the hospitals in this city to see for himself the impact of the pandemic on lives and livelihoods.

With regard to the finance Bill — which, halfway through the Member's contribution, I forgot we were actually discussing — it is the job of the Finance Minister to provide money and resources to his Executive colleagues. I repeat that the accusation that the Member has levelled most about destroying businesses is one that he should take up with his party colleague in the Department for the Economy.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Before the Member responds, I want to draw the debate back to the Budget (No. 3) Bill.

Mr Frew: Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker. If only the thought police mattered. This is a place of challenge. That is

what the Assembly is meant to be; it is how it is meant to function. I say to the Member that I know the real world out there. I see the people who go into hospital; I see the people who need operations but cannot get them; I see the people who have been on waiting lists for years and will, now, have to wait further years. I know how the pandemic has affected families because it has affected my family. My very brother had it. Even today, my sister has it. I will not take any lectures about the real world from Members across the House. I will not. However, I will plead with the Member to walk with me around Ballymena, Ballymoney, Ballycastle, and every village and art and part in between, and he will see real struggling and suffering. That is not of those people's own making; it is because they cannot make a living. They cannot earn a pound; they cannot get benefits. They are waiting on compensation from the Executive, the very Executive that closed them down. They cannot see that compensation, they do not have it in their bank accounts, and they cannot spend it.

I suggest that the furlough scheme is the game changer and the only thing that has kept most of those businesses afloat. However, the furlough scheme came from Westminster. What have the Executive offered? Nothing but pain and suffering in these past three weeks. Where is the money? Where is the funding? Where is the support for people? They cannot see it or feel it. Now, they do not even know whether they are opening on Friday. That is a shame and disgrace.

Dr Archibald: It is striking that, since we last discussed the Budget a couple of weeks ago, the financial picture for the Executive has changed yet again. An additional £400 million has been allocated to help with COVID pressures, which, of course, is very welcome, but that money has to be administered. Although there are plenty of pots that it could go into, there is a challenge in making sure that it is spent effectively before the end of the financial year.

Since we last debated the Bill, funding has been allocated to the Economy and Infrastructure Ministers for business support schemes for businesses that have been impacted by the restrictions, for newly self-employed people and for the taxi and coach sectors. The supports for the newly self-employed and the taxi and coach sectors have, in particular, been long awaited. Since that money has been allocated, I have been contacted nearly every day — I am sure that other MLAs have been as well — about when those people can expect those schemes to open. I talk to business people every day, Mr Frew. I met some bus tour operators yesterday, and there is real frustration out there. We all get that. I know that it is not in the remit of the Finance Minister, but, once funding is allocated for schemes, it is important that those schemes get the money out to people as quickly as possible. Similarly, with the supports for those who are impacted by the restrictions, we still await the opening of the scheme for businesses in supply chains. The restrictions are due to end later this week, and many businesses have not yet received that support. Under normal circumstances, businesses may have had reserves, but those reserves are much depleted and debts are mounting. That support needs to go out speedily.

We have asked a lot from people, and, when restrictions — the very necessary restrictions — are introduced to protect lives, financial support schemes need to be forthcoming. We all know the challenges that Departments face and

the pressures that they are under, and we recognise the work that staff have put in, but the Finance Minister has allocated the funding, and Ministers and Departments need to step up that delivery, because businesses, jobs and livelihoods depend on it.

Minister, I know that you have voiced support on many occasions for giving support to those who have been excluded from previous schemes. While we await the newly self-employed scheme, we know that there are still groups of individuals and businesses that have missed out. Local newspapers are one such example and another is travel agents. I know that representatives of travel agents met Ministers last week, and, hopefully, we will see some support for that sector soon. Travel agents have highlighted to us the fact that they have had to provide refunds and things like that. The Economy Minister was asked about that yesterday, and she said that she recognised the need for support and was looking at it. She also referenced the fact that travel agents have been able to avail themselves of other supports. However, it is important to remember that, as with every group, there are anomalies. Not all travel agents work from an office; some are self-employed and work from home. They also need to be considered in whatever support is brought forward.

A number of schemes have been announced over recent weeks, and those have addressed some of the gaps, but there is now a need to address and evaluate what gaps remain with the support that has been offered. Some remain excluded after all these months, and we need to try to address those gaps. I ask the Minister to look at that in conjunction with Executive colleagues, so that bids can be made, speedily, to the Department of Finance to allocate the funding that remains at the centre to further supports.

I commend the Minister on his efforts to make the case on behalf of the Executive to extend the furlough scheme. Albeit that it was extended belatedly, that is very much welcomed. We know that there will be a review in January, so we need to continue to make the case so that businesses can keep in contact with their workforces. That is particularly the case with sectors in which there are skilled workforces that are furloughed and may need to gear up quickly once the economy reopens and conditions improve. We need to make that case now and ensure that that support remains for those businesses.

Another issue that I would like to raise with the Minister — I know that he has been sympathetic to it, previously — is support for our students and young people, who have had a very tough year. A few months ago, the Executive allocated additional support for the student hardship fund. That was important, particularly for those young people who were trapped in rental contracts for houses that they are not using and still having to pay household bills but do not have the normal opportunities for part-time employment in cafes, pubs and shops that are all operating at a much reduced capacity. They continue to face difficult financial circumstances, and we will continue to monitor the support that is in that pot. We have raised that issue with the Economy Minister and will continue to highlight it, but it may need to be looked at again in the time ahead.

My colleague John O'Dowd has called for support for the mental health and well-being of our young people and students. It has been a very stressful year for those young people, particularly those who have gone into first year at university or college and who had the issue with grades

in August. Now, at a time that should be a really positive experience for a young person, they face great uncertainty and, in some cases, isolation and the worry of dealing with self-isolation and family worries. As with all of society, there will be a great toll on mental health, and we have called for the Economy and Health Ministers to look at what support might be needed with regard to that, and that will likely need to be resourced.

We know that restrictions have a huge toll on the economy and our way of life. The Executive have indicated that it is, obviously, their intention to build capacity in our trace, trace and protect system as part of the strategy to move away from these circuit-breaker-type interventions. Investment in the health system will be required to develop that capacity in the test and trace operations, and support will be required for individuals to enable them to self-isolate. I welcome the discretionary support grant that the Minister for Communities has put in place. However, I am still hearing from workers who, when they have to self-isolate, are being told by employers that they should take leave — in some cases that is unpaid leave — and they are only entitled to statutory sick pay. I have raised the issue with the Economy Minister to see if anything additional can be done to support those people. I have also raised the need for guidance for employers and workers. We understand the impact that COVID has on businesses, but, again, it is vital that workers and families have incomes and that people are not being forced to choose between their health and putting food on the table.

This has been a tumultuous time for our society, and the economic fallout continues. While we are, obviously, right now continuing to mitigate the worst impacts, there is a need to look towards and to plan for economic recovery. Obviously, that needs to be led by the Department for the Economy, but it must have a truly cross-departmental approach to it. In that context, it is disappointing that the British Chancellor moved to set only a one-year Budget, because the type of planning and investment for that recovery is going to have to be multi-year to address the major challenges that we face, along with the structural issues in our economy, which have resulted in the lowest productivity in these islands, and that will not be a quick fix.

I said in the previous debate, and I think that it is worth repeating, that there needs to be a focus for Invest NI, as our economic development agency, on the economy as a whole. We had a debate yesterday evening about the manufacturing sector, and I have seen, in recent days, the particular hit that that has had. So, there is a need for support to start up and build capacity in our local businesses, and that is as well as tackling regional inequalities and supporting the decarbonisation of our economy. The supports that are being made available to businesses need to be developed in partnership with businesses to ensure that they are practical and are delivering what is required, and that is something that we will continue to raise with Invest NI and the Department for the Economy.

There is also a need for Invest NI and DFE to support businesses as they prepare to deal with the outworkings of Brexit. I know that the Minister is continuing to press the British Treasury on the need for funding for Brexit preparations and the replacement for our various EU programme funds. The lack of detail and information about the shared prosperity fund and how it will be delivered is

constantly being raised with us through the Committee for the Economy and at other engagements. I ask the Minister to comment on any further discussions that he has had with the British Treasury on that particular issue.

Finally, I refer to the representations that the Minister has made to the British Government around additional borrowing powers and flexibilities, because that is going to be crucial in giving the Executive the ability to shape the recovery. I look forward to hearing further details on the forthcoming fiscal commission, which the Minister intends to establish, as part of that broader conversation about economic and fiscal powers. I look forward to persuading Mr Frew on its merits because, in some ways, we are hamstrung by the dribs and drabs of money from the British Treasury and by the one-year Budget. It is really important that we have that ability to plan our investment, our spending and the way in which we pay for things. I will leave it there.

Mr O'Toole: Today is the Final Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill. During this year, financial legislation has been something like the proverbial London bus. We waited for three years to vote on a Budget, while this place was not here, and during this year we have had three, one after another. Of course, the spending that we are legally authorising has to happen. I am glad that it is happening, as we need to keep public services functioning and, particularly, as has already been rehearsed well, to help us through the maelstrom of COVID-19 and the end of the Brexit transition period.

However, we again find ourselves in the position of authorising spending with very little meaningful scrutiny of whether funding is being correctly prioritised or how it helps to deliver against any agreed strategic priorities. That is, in part, because we have very little by way of a strategy. There is something slightly futile about standing up to hold an Executive's finance plans to account when there is not really any overall plan to speak of.

12.00 noon

We have heard from some today about the need for individual allocations in individual areas. I share many of the concerns, and I share the desire to increase allocations to those who have been excluded so far from financial support. We need support for students and for our water infrastructure. There is a long list of areas where allocations are essential, including in the local newspaper industry, as Caoimhe Archibald just mentioned. I have been pushing on that subject for a long time. I want all those allocations to be made, but, if we are just talking about allocations in a piecemeal way, it is very difficult to judge the Executive's or the Department's overall performance in delivering a financial plan that makes sense.

Of course, the allocations that have been made in response to the crisis are welcome. They have been made in response to the acute, unprecedented crisis of COVID. I again put on the record that the SDLP welcomes much of the work done by individual civil servants and organisations in Northern Ireland to get money out quickly to businesses. I might add, in parenthesis, that it would have been good had certain organisations been as quick in returning money that they had received in error. As I said, although I welcome the hard work done by all those institutions and civil servants, it is not unreasonable for us to state

that there have been profound issues with the Executive's overall performance in prioritising spending and delivering to the Northern Ireland public a coherent plan for how money would be spent to deal with the unprecedented crises. As I said, the allocations that have been made in response to COVID and the looming Brexit crisis are welcome. The Executive are not responsible for either of those issues, albeit one of the parties in the Executive had something of a hand in delivering one of them.

I should add that the Executive should be taking, as I said, much more public ownership of the effort to protect our economy and our society from the worst effects of Brexit. We saw the First Minister and deputy First Minister here today delivering a statement on the British-Irish Council. Again, it was slightly light on detail about what the Executive Office is doing to prepare our economy for Brexit, and that is not new.

It would be one thing if, in handling the immediate-term crises, the Executive were acting robustly in making allocations in a timely and coherent way. Unfortunately, they are not. Decisions are being made haphazardly, including with the current debate over whether and how to extend COVID restrictions. There are no easy answers to the extraordinarily complex policy challenges thrown up by COVID-19 and its knock-on effects. Policymakers everywhere are trying to find ways to balance carefully the challenges of virus control with the myriad economic and social consequences that managing the virus has caused.

I acknowledge much of what Paul Frew said. The problem is that, from listening to his remarks, you could be forgiven for thinking that there was not a virus. I recognise what he said about close family members suffering from the virus; I am not saying that he is taking it lightly. Unfortunately, we do not live in a world where there are perfect solutions to protecting absolutely every sector of the economy when we need to keep a virus suppressed. There was, I am afraid, no way in which we could have left economic activity unchanged a month ago. Had we done so, we would have seen the virus run riot.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. I think that I acknowledged in my speech that it is a deadly virus and that we need to take measures to protect people. Does the Member realise that the Executive persuaded and incentivised businesses to put in safety measures — barriers, shields, face masks, gowns and safety equipment — and that some even went as far as putting in motion-sensor lighting so that people would not have to touch light switches, which came to an investment of thousands of pounds? Does the Member accept that it was criminal to tell those businesses that they then had to close?

Mr O'Toole: I agree with the Member that businesses have been extremely poorly treated in many ways. They have had abysmal communication and very little clarity from the Executive overall. They should have had more support, and they should have had it more quickly. I will, however, say, gently, to the Member that, if he knows anyone in the biggest party in the Executive, perhaps he could write a letter to them. I do not know whether he knows anyone in a big party: perhaps the First Minister or the Economy Minister? I encourage him to write to those people because I share many of his concerns. Businesses have been poorly treated and communicated with, albeit that restrictions were necessary when the virus numbers were getting out of control in Northern Ireland, we were in

severe danger of our health system being overwhelmed, and there simply was not a scenario in which we could leave everything open.

Policymakers everywhere are having to find ways to carefully balance virus control with the economic damage and myriad other societal consequences. Long after we have a COVID vaccine, and our lives have returned to something approaching normal, there will be myriad societal consequences that we have to deal with and for which the Minister will have to make allocations. It is a tragic and, in part, unavoidable truth that, as individual MLAs with constituents and, more broadly, as an Assembly, we will have to deal with many unintended and unavoidable consequences. However, in Northern Ireland, while we are facing these challenges, as is everywhere else, in working out how we come to a rational outcome, rather than balancing the needs of epidemic control and economic mitigation, we seem, unfortunately, to be trying to find ways of balancing public health, economic damage and what Edwin Poots wants.

As it is with COVID-19 regulations, so it is all too often with our spending allocations. Rather than matching our spending to a set of agreed priorities, such as those in a Programme for Government, we have all too often been improvising and ad-libbing. I acknowledge that some of that, in the circumstances, is inevitable, but not all of it.

This virus came to these shores at, I believe, the end of January/early February. We began our period of restrictions in early to mid-March. We have now had nine or 10 months of this virus being the biggest issue facing us. It is understandable that there has been a fast-paced and occasionally frenetic response. However, that does not explain everything about the ad-libbed and disjointed nature of that response.

In the absence of an agreed Programme for Government, our financial allocations process — our Budget process — becomes the de facto strategic policymaking tool for the entire Executive. Given that we do not have an agreed Programme for Government — the Minister has been more positive and optimistic about this than me — it seems, I am afraid, pretty unlikely that, about 18 months out from the end of this mandate, we will get one now. It would be great if we did, but it seems more likely that we will not.

I will give an example of how many allocations in our Budget processes in the past year were ad-libbed and fairly incoherent. If you go back to the Budget document that was produced in March, you will see that many of the chapters relating to individual Departments referred to Programme for Government headings. In the bizarre situation where we did not have an agreed Programme for Government, some Departments' introductory preambles, which, presumably, they had sent to the Department of Finance in a pro forma way, listed their 2016 draft Programme for Government outcomes as headings that they were matching their spending priorities to. That is, clearly, to use a slightly wonkish term, a suboptimal situation. We need to do better.

As I said, it is unlikely that we will have a new Programme for Government before the end of the mandate. However, that does not mean that we have to continue to proceed without a real, clear and joined-up indication from not just the Finance Minister but the entire Executive of the plan to which allocations are being made.

That includes in quite a big way — this is something that we and, I know, other parties have called for today — much more clarity from the Economy Department about what it sees as the interventions that it needs to make over the medium and long term for our economic recovery and the longer-term rebuilding of our economy.

A former senior special adviser for the DUP famously described the process of government between the two bigger parties — I do not want to make this about the two big parties, but there is a relevant point here — as being akin to a “sausage machine”. Unfortunately, too often recently we have seen evidence of that old sausage machine being cranked back into action. It took more than two months, for example, for a £29 million Barnett consequential that was announced for the arts to finally be allocated to the sector. When it was announced, it was of course welcomed, but too often we are welcoming funding without any sense of prioritisation or, indeed, a clear sense of where that money is going once it has been allocated. We have headline announcements, but we then have very little detail.

The other day in the Public Accounts Committee, which I sit on, we were taking evidence on an allocation that had been made to the University of Ulster, where, essentially, an FTC loan was turned into a capital spending allocation. That might be a correct conversion of an allocation, as it were, that was made, but when it was made we got very little clarity from the Finance Minister or the Economy Department about the context and exactly why that allocation was being made in the way that it was. It was not as transparent as it could be, and that kind of thing needs to improve.

Mr Humphrey: Will the Member give way?

Mr O’Toole: Yes. I will give way.

Mr Humphrey: It is important that, since the Member invoked the evidence that we took at the PAC —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Order. Will the Member speak into the microphone so that Hansard can pick up what is being said?

Mr Humphrey: It is important that, since the Member invoked the evidence that we took at the PAC last week, he then mentioned the Finance Minister and the Economy Minister, neither of whom gave evidence to the Committee. He may have heard that at another Committee, but he did not hear it at the Public Accounts Committee. I want that to be put on the record for the House.

Mr O’Toole: I am happy to acknowledge what the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee said. I should say that I am referring to when the allocation was made earlier this year. My comment is that there could have been more clarity about that, not the evidence that was given to a Committee by either Minister.

Without prioritisation and certainly without a Programme for Government or anything approaching it, we are robbing the public, not just MLAs, of any real opportunity to judge how well the Executive are doing. That includes my party and all of us — I do not mean all of us; there are a few non-Executive MLAs here, and Mr Allister would probably have asked for an intervention if I had not made that clear. Simply acting as a transmission mechanism for funds with some interruption for arguing about allocations is not what this place was set up to do.

Aneurin Bevan, the Labour Minister who founded the NHS, which we have all rightly been talking about over the last number of months, said:

“The language of priorities is the religion of Socialism”.

It should be the religion of power-sharing too, because without agreed priorities, whatever our ideological or constitutional inclinations are, it is hard to get very much done.

I will ask the Finance Minister this: before our next Budget Bill or Estimates debate, can we please have some kind of strategic document to judge our plans against? It would also be helpful to hear from him specifically on the £2.3 billion total in allocations that has been made because of COVID. Can he clarify whether that includes the additional, I think, £400 million that was announced last week? It would be helpful to clarify whether an additional Barnett consequential came from the UK Treasury.

I recognise that the fairly contemptuous attitude of the UK Treasury to the devolved Administrations has not helped the task for him or his officials when preparing spending plans. We would be in a better position to produce a credible long-term strategy for this place if there was a longer-term Budget. Others referred to that. In the ‘New Decade, New Approach’ document, there was widespread agreement. There is agreement throughout this place that we need to move to a system of multi-year Budgets. Clearly, the Treasury’s decision to cancel the spending review that was due this year has thrown that into some jeopardy.

In Northern Ireland specifically, we face an unusually acute short term, with weeks and months of profound, but at least partly, predictable challenge. We know that our businesses will face huge disruption on 1 January, whatever the outcome of the EU-UK trade talks. We know that there is a bewildering range of knock-on effects in areas from law enforcement to cross-border healthcare to agriculture. We know that we will be managing the public health and economic impacts of COVID-19 for months, even if there is now some hope that a vaccine may be deployed amongst our vulnerable population sooner rather than later.

12.15 pm

We face all of these things in the immediate months. All of them are, at least to some extent, known. We know that spending is happening to prepare for Brexit, but we do not know how it is being prioritised or what the greatest need is, based on a reasonable worst-case scenario. We know that hundreds of millions is being held for the health service, but we do not know the volume of it that is directly contingent on the path of the virus or how much of it is mapped against transformation plans. It would be helpful to understand exactly how the Executive are planning to approach the next few months based on those two great challenges.

Some, including Paul Frew, have talked about the need for an exit plan and exit strategy in relation to restrictions. We certainly need an exit strategy in relation to this virus overall. We are seeing signs of hope. We need to give businesses, workers and people clarity. We cannot give them exact clarity over when people’s lives will be back to normal and when they will be able to jump on a

plane or go to a football match. However, we should be able to do our best to sit down and think about the next six months and what the key challenges are. They are pretty overwhelming. I have a suspicion sometimes that, unfortunately, some of these discussions do not happen and some of this work is not done simply because the challenge feels too overwhelming. I respect that; I can understand that. There is a pretty overwhelming, daunting task facing our Executive with both COVID and Brexit, but we owe it to people here.

We also owe it to them to be public about it. Lots of this work is going on, but MLAs are not even told, let alone the broader public. There is nothing stopping us from producing some sort of spending plan for the months ahead. This is not a long-term, multi-year Budget. This is about clarity for people, businesses and workers in Northern Ireland for the next three to six months about how outstanding money to the end of this financial year is being prioritised to get us through the acute challenges of COVID and Brexit — the Samson and Goliath, if you like, of the weeks and months ahead. Otherwise, we will simply be coming back to demean ourselves and this Assembly by debating a Budget Bill and Estimates which most people have barely read and allocations that have simply been spat out after haggling matches at the Executive.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Toole: Yes, I will give way.

Mr Frew: I am interested in what the Member has to say. Does the Member agree with me, albeit it is a very primitive thought at present, that we should be looking at some sort of statutory duty being placed on Ministers to come to the House with regard to the financial process?

Mr O'Toole: There is obviously already a statutory duty for the Finance Minister to come. I should say that, in many ways, the Finance Minister has been very good in coming to the Assembly a lot. The problem is the overall level of detail that we have had from the Executive on how priorities are matched to what the Finance Minister is announcing. We have not had enough clarity. I ask for specific updates from the Finance Minister on the flexibilities that he asked the UK Treasury for, many of which I support. I also ask for clarity on where we are with borrowing this year. As many of us have said, we are in a situation where borrowing costs are lower than they have ever been. Lots of us have rightly talked over the last number of years about the impact of austerity on this place. The global economic consensus is that we have moved away from the age of austerity now. No one in the International Monetary Fund or the economics profession anywhere is telling Governments to worry about their precise level of debt or deficit this year. They are saying, "Spend more money". That includes this devolved Administration.

I agree with the Finance Minister when it comes to pressing for more powers, and I disagree with Mr Frew when it comes to his scepticism around how we spend money. It has been made clear by Westminster and Whitehall's approach to managing this virus that the public policy priority will always be not just England but the south of England, where most Tory MPs are. That is a blunt, hard truth. I am not unfamiliar with a lot of the priorities of Whitehall and Westminster, so you can take it from me

that, bluntly, the priorities will always be in the south of England.

That is part of the reason that, whatever our constitutional perspective, we need more flexibility here, so I ask the Finance Minister for an update on the fiscal council and the fiscal commission, which are two slightly different things. One is a specific commitment in NDNA, while the other is a slightly more forward-looking, one-off commission. I also ask him for specific updates on the allocations for Brexit. Is there a global allocation that the Executive or his Department have earmarked for Brexit preparedness? How much delta is there between outcomes?

Finally, I ask the Finance Minister, as I said, to work with Executive colleagues, particularly, to be blunt, the Economy Minister, and to think about how we can have a three- to six-month plan or statement to the Assembly — something — about how we are matching the allocations in our financial plans to the big challenges that we face in the months to come.

Mr Muir: As we consider and vote on the Budget (No. 3) Bill's Final Stage, it is important to reflect on the unprecedented circumstances that Northern Ireland's public finances have faced this year. We continue to live through a global pandemic that endangers lives and livelihoods. We have a health and social care system that is under unprecedented and incredible strain, coupled with the worst economic downturn in history, with many businesses closing for good, resulting in jobs lost and workers in search of support and re-employment.

I look at the COVID-19 dashboard on the Department of Health website every day. Today, there are 426 confirmed COVID-19 inpatients and 55 people in intensive care. Those are stark statistics, and we should be grateful forever to the staff who are caring for people in hospital. Coupled with those statistics is the grief and suffering endured by those who have lost loved ones during the pandemic. There has been lots of talk about the evidence base for decisions, but the figures for confirmed inpatients, those in intensive care and those who have passed away is plenty of evidence.

Although an additional £2.8 billion in Barnett consequentials has flowed to the Northern Ireland Executive, the scale of the damage inflicted by COVID-19 means that it has been impossible to protect every person, every community, every business and every organisation from its impact. To date, Departments have taken many actions to assist. Those are to be welcomed, and I thank the officials for the work undertaken. Some initiatives have been bold and ambitious and have made a real difference, whereas others have been limited and slow, leaving many feeling frustrated, ignored and tipped into financial ruin.

As we endure the second wave and look towards a potential vaccine, it is important that lessons be learned and everything be done to better support people across Northern Ireland to get through the awful experience that is COVID-19. To do that, we must ensure that moneys are made available and well spent. The granting of additional financial flexibilities to the Northern Ireland Executive by Her Majesty's Treasury is essential, whether they be new borrowing powers for resource expenditure or the ability to carry over capital and resource funds into the next financial year. Although more Barnett consequentials have been made available in recent weeks, local Departments

have been demonstrating a slowness in delivering support on the ground. We really need the power to be able to carry over funds into the next financial year. To have to surrender those moneys back to Treasury would be an unforgivable scandal when so many are in need right across Northern Ireland.

Providing moneys to spend is vital, but arguably of more importance is ensuring that every single penny is well spent. That is why I again raise the issue of a fiscal council. A commitment in page 12 of 'New Decade, New Approach' states that the purpose of such a council is to:

"assess and report on the sustainability of the Executive's finances and spending proposals."

At a time that we are spending billions more than was envisaged when the New Decade, New Approach deal was struck, it is imperative that the fiscal council be established without any more delay. Failure to get a fiscal council in place before we start another budgetary process would be wrong and a matter of real concern. In closing, I therefore ask the Finance Minister this: what is the reason for the delay and what are the definitive, confirmed timescales for recruiting members, making appointments and getting the council up and running?

The Alliance Party will support the Bill today, but, with over £800 million wasted every year to the cost of division, we can ill afford to continue without the oversight and reform that is needed as we look to the current and future needs to support and rebuild our communities, our economy and our public services over the months and years ahead.

Mrs Cameron: The passing of the Budget Bill is a lengthy process and, by the time the Final Stage is reached, most of us have probably covered the issues that are of importance to us. For fear of repetition, I will, therefore, keep my remarks short.

I have sat through debates on the passage of the Budget Bill, and, indeed, through many other debates. Throughout each debate, we see a recurring theme in Members' contributions: the need to transform our health service. Never has that been more acute than it is now in the wake of the devastation that COVID-19 has had on our health service, and the ticking time bomb that awaits us due to the interventions that have been missed. That should tell us that the time for talking has long gone and that the time to transform our health service is now.

We face a cancer crisis, a diabetes crisis, a heart crisis and a mental health crisis. Those are a few crises among the many in the health service. Add to them our longstanding failure to address the needs of those with autism and other disabilities. If we are honest, we will admit that we cannot do what needs to be done without a radical change in how we do things. We have the Bengoa report and the political endorsement of it. I take on board the comments of Members in the past. I think that it was the Member for South Down Mr Wells who, rightly, said that a problem always arises when it comes to closing a local hospital, for instance, and then we, as public representatives, lose our nerve. That is not always the case. I remember well that my colleague Edwin Poots reduced A&E in his constituency when he was Health Minister. That took guts, and guts is what we need to have at this time. We need to have a serious public conversation based on facts, not populism or playing to the gallery.

The Budget does not go anywhere near to addressing the needs of our health service. The needs of an older population will further stretch the purse strings, but we cannot ignore that need; we need to meet it. COVID-19 has changed everything, but if any good is to come from it, let it be that it is the catalyst for change that saves our health service before it is too late. I end my comments there.

Mr Gildernew: I have already addressed the Assembly on the Health Committee's considerations, so I will not go over those comments again today. I make these remarks in my role as Sinn Féin health spokesperson.

The backdrop to our discussion today on the Budget is an unprecedented health crisis with which we continue to struggle. We face the economic uncertainties that have been brought about by the pandemic and by the instability that is hurtling towards us in the form of Brexit. We are not in a good place — there is no question about that — but we could make progress towards a better place if we had the political will.

The pandemic has afforded us lessons that we will, hopefully, learn from. First, we learned how much we depend on what we formerly categorised as low-skilled workers: those who sell us our groceries; serve our food; drive our buses; clean our buildings; and, crucially, form part of the system that delivers health and social care from the ground up. Surely, part of the lesson, apart from the gratitude that we should and, undoubtedly, do feel, is that those workers deserve better working conditions and fair pay. Those who staff the front lines are the most needed and valuable workers in our communities.

Any economy planning must address the deep infrastructural inequalities west of the Bann. Connectivity is regarded by many as an essential utility — a basic utility in any modern society — and we need to provide it across all areas of the North. During the COVID-19 crisis, we learned of students who could not access learning materials because they did not have the broadband access. There are 97,000 poorly served premises across the North, largely in rural Fermanagh, Tyrone and south Derry.

Poor broadband and mobile-data services continue to marginalise our rural communities and create another deep inequality in our society. If that is not addressed, it will contribute to increasing problems in dealing with health and the use of technology that could provide benefit in the areas of health and the economy. Students, patients, businesses and families who live in rural communities are entitled to, and must have, equal access to technology as their success is vital to sustaining those rural areas.

12.30 pm

Many sacrifices have been made during the pandemic by our health and social care workers, to whom we are indebted. It is not enough to applaud on a Thursday evening, even though they are richly deserving of applause; we need to make every effort to rebuild our health and social care system, to recruit substantial and appropriate numbers of health professionals and to pay them fair wages. I once again urge the Minister of Health to address the issue of strike pay for health and social care staff. That money has been allocated by the Finance Minister; it should be paid immediately to provide staff with the recognition of our appreciation for their efforts on

behalf of us all, during and prior to the COVID pandemic, and in recognition of the serious staffing concerns that their strike action highlighted. That remains a key area of concern that adds to pressure on staff each and every day.

As we navigate our way through the COVID-19 pandemic, we have been challenged by the deep structural problems in our economy and, in particular, in our health and social care system. We must now invest in and resource a properly functioning public health system that is able to deal with the pandemic. That will require investment in find, test, trace, isolate and support systems to a level that will operate at any given time and will be able to flex to meet the needs of positive cases that we see in the community in order to build in the protections for the health system.

The structural difficulties did not start with COVID-19, but they have been cruelly exposed by it. They are a consequence of deep Tory cuts to the NHS over time. When the pandemic arrived, the devastation was worsened by the catastrophic cuts that we have all been talking about for 10 years and which, cruelly, came home to roost. Those are the same cuts that have caused workforce shortages, a lack of equipment and a crumbling health and social care system that is barely fit for purpose. We now urgently need to invest in and rebuild an effective public health system. That will require longer-term planning, transformation and longer-term funding. In that respect, I, too, am disappointed at the retraction from the commitment to longer-term planning; health, in particular, requires longer-term planning and budgeting to allow it to transform and deliver the service.

Surely the lesson of COVID is that we must endeavour to do things differently. Perhaps, for a moment, we should be more optimistic and look at where society is now as a blank canvas, where we can be creative, thoughtful and humane in the policy decisions that we make from this point and build in the lessons and the understanding of inequality that we have developed as a result of everything in recent times. Although we do not have all the money that we would like to have, surely we owe it to our communities to create a new, more equal society by addressing the deep inequalities that confront us every day and returning hope for the future to all our people, but especially our young people, who have suffered so much at this time. Austerity is not the way forward. We must now invest in our people's education, health, prosperity and well-being for the future and return that hope for the future to all of our communities and, in particular, our young people.

Mr McAleer (The Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): During the debate on the Supply resolution, I outlined some of the work that the Committee has undertaken throughout the year on the DAERA budget. I also articulated some of the Committee's main concerns, including the cost of EU exit and the cost to the agri-food industry of COVID-19. It is those aspects that I will focus on today. I will take the opportunity to update the Assembly on the latest financial information on the EU exit and COVID-19.

I will start by referring to the additional agri-food COVID-19 funding that DAERA bid for and was successful in obtaining. We have every reason to be very proud of the agri-food industry; it has kept operating and kept the food supply chain going seamlessly during the worst of the lockdown and in to this new phase. We have every

confidence that it will continue to do that in the coming months.

We have an industry here that produces the highest-quality food, which is exported all over the world. It has also been supplying the hospitality and catering industries, and that aspect has taken the direct hit.

The DAERA Minister made a bid and received an additional £25 million for the agri-food sector, and this was with the full support of the Committee; in fact, we in the Committee held a mini-inquiry to help to inform the Minister and the Department about how the farmers and, indeed, the stakeholders wanted to see the money spent. After our quick call for evidence, we heard from a large number of farmers and rural sector groups about what was happening in their businesses and what support was needed.

There are two schemes for the distribution of the £25 million. The first, making up the bulk of the money, went to dairy, beef, sheep and potato farmers and accounts for £21.4 million. The dairy sector got up to £11 million, while the beef sector got £7 million. That scheme is closed. The Committee was clear with the Department that it wanted to see the funding targeted at those most in need and who had suffered the most loss and that it would be equitable in its distribution. Some members still have concerns about funding for beef cattle and about whether enough was given to sheep farmers. However, we are well aware that we are not out of the woods yet when it comes to the financial impact on our farmers. Further support may be needed in this financial year.

The second scheme is aimed at the ornamental horticulture sector, and it accounts for around £1.6 million. That sector produces many of our vegetables, soft fruits and garden plants. When the secondary legislation came to the AERA Committee to provide the authority for the Department to spend the money, the Committee had concerns with the requirement for those businesses to be VAT-registered. The ornamental horticulture sector has lots of small businesses, and many are not VAT-registered and, therefore, are not eligible for the scheme. I am glad to say that the Committee made strong representation to DAERA on that aspect and the requirement for VAT registration has been removed. That funding scheme was recently opened, and it closes on 15 November. Applications are now being received by DAERA.

There is residual funding from the £25 million of £3.6 million, plus there has been a reprioritisation within the Department of another £3.6 million. That funding is being held by DAERA for potential allocations of support should COVID continue to throw up challenges in the coming months. Other COVID funding has been allocated, including an additional £145,000 for environmental NGOs, and that was allocated in September.

The fishing industry has also received funding to support it through the crisis. The Committee recently wrote to the Department to get an update on that funding. We considered that update at our meeting last week and noted that, in April, £1.32 million had been paid to 171 vessels under the fishing support scheme. Under the aquaculture scheme, the vast majority of the money, around £125,000, has been paid.

There is a further scheme — the extended fishing support scheme — for trawlers and dredgers. It is a tie-up scheme. It is to support the sector to help with the continuation

of depressed markets and prices for landings of fish. Under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) programme, £1.3 million has been allocated, and that was launched on 5 October, with the first payments expected in December. During the period from 19 October to 27 November, 38 vessels will be tied up, and a further 23, to date, will be tied up from 16 November to 31 December.

Finally, there will be a fixed cost scheme for static fishers, with an allocation of £390,000, and the Committee will consider the SL1 on the scheme at our next meeting. We also understand that there will be a scheme for the Lough Neagh eel fishermen. It has not been launched yet, but the Committee understands that it will be funded under the EMFF, and the Minister is still considering the scheme's eligibility criteria.

The Main Estimates and Supply resolution will also show that £3.8 million of COVID funding has been allocated to waste. Most of that was to help local authorities cope with the closure of public amenity sites during lockdown, with the resulting increase in fly-tipping. A further bid of £11.4 million for the period from July to March 2021 was approved in September. That funding will help to support the additional cost of implementing social-distancing measures and ensure that staff across the council are able to fulfil crucial waste-management roles in a safe manner. The Minister of Finance announced the allocation on 24 September as part of the Executive's COVID-19 allocations of £165 million, which will see a funding injection for business, infrastructure, culture, schools and councils.

Some £2 million has been allocated by the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) programme to support the Department for Communities revitalisation programme.

I will now move on to the next major area of financial concern to which the Committee has recently turned its attention: the financial impact to DAERA of the preparation and delivery of EU exit at the end of the transition period. It also covers the contingency planning that DAERA is doing for the possibility of a no-deal outcome. The AERA Committee is getting regular written and oral briefings on the preparations, which, as most Members know, are essential to allow us to trade with Britain and to ensure that food can be brought in for our population. For Members who want information or details, I refer them to the Hansard report of the oral briefing that we received on 5 November from the DAERA permanent secretary and his senior team.

On the EU withdrawal Act and the protocol, DAERA is required to implement the EU official controls regulation. That includes sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) checks on regulated goods arriving at points of entry into this jurisdiction. The preparedness work includes physical facilities, IT systems and staff training. It also requires the reprioritisation of DAERA work programme and the staff resource required to deliver official controls post transition. We know that, in connection with EU exit, DAERA has recently activated its major emergency response plan and has indicated that it will not be able to deliver a full-day service on day one after exit.

DAERA recently awarded major contracts to three companies for the new inspection facilities to be built at Larne harbour, Belfast harbour and Warrenpoint harbour. Contractors have been asked to deliver the design

and build on the required facilities and the contingency arrangements.

I asked the Department about the staffing arrangements that needed to be put in place to deal with EU exit. We know that a recruitment process is ongoing, and the Department has increased its staffing capacity from 2,900 to around 3,200. It is estimated that, to operate 24/7 at Larne and Belfast, 25 vets, 75 port inspectors and 12 administration staff will be needed to undertake the required work. In addition to that, local authorities estimate that they will require some 30 additional environmental health officers, 18 plant officers and three fish officers. The Committee has been informed that most of the local authority staff are in place, but DAERA is still recruiting or redeploying staff from other business areas.

The Chief Veterinary Officer has just recruited 14 new vets, nine of whom are for the ports. He already has five in place, so that brings him to 15 of the 25 vets needed. The Committee heard welcome news from the Chief Veterinary Officer last week when he confirmed that there had been substantial and positive progress in the discussions with Queen's University and Ulster University about creating a veterinary faculty in the North. For years, many of our vets have been trained in the EU, and, unfortunately, many do not come back and continue to work overseas, which results in a brain drain. Vets are absolutely crucial in facilitating east-west trade and, indeed, maintaining the epidemiological unit of the island of Ireland. I spoke to the AERA Minister yesterday about it and wrote to the Economy Minister today for an update. It is a good news story about the possibility of having our own veterinary faculty in the North.

As I said, there is a price tag for EU exit. This year, it will cost £45 million, which includes £5 million of contingency costs. The money has come from the Treasury, and the Committee clarified that with the permanent secretary and the senior team last week. I have asked for a detailed breakdown of the costs for staffing, IT and infrastructure at the three ports of Larne, Belfast and Foyle.

Another major issue with EU exit is future funding to replace current EU funding. Members are aware that the bulk of the EU funding that comes to DAERA is paid out as direct payments to farmers. Whilst the Committee welcomes the fact that £293 million has been secured for 2020-21, it still has concerns about what will happen beyond that. The Committee is doing focused work on that aspect, and, as we start that, there will, no doubt, be a series of sessions on the future agricultural strategy, including the payment of support to farmers.

12.45 pm

I note that the Paymaster General, Penny Mordaunt MP, wrote to the devolved Administrations on 13 July confirming the British Government's manifesto commitment to maintain the current budgets for farming and fishing for the duration of the Parliament. That confirmation is a welcome starting point. However, the Committee recently received a copy of a letter on EU funding from the Minister of Finance to the Chair of the Committee for Finance. In the letter, the Finance Minister notes that, regarding replacements for agricultural funding where a guarantee has been received from the British Government, there are concerns about how elements of the funding for that guarantee have been calculated and

that it may lead to a cut in support for rural communities. The Committee has asked DAERA for clarity on that.

The Committee has also expressed concerns about replacement funding for rural development. Currently, funding derives largely from CAP pillar II. Earlier in the year, we discussed with officials the resources and capital budgets that had been set aside for the rural development programme. The Committee noted that it is intended that the replacement for EU funding for rural development will come from the Shared Prosperity Fund. The fact that there has been very little progress or clarity on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund has been raised here today, and I raised it during Question Time with the Finance Minister a number of weeks ago.

Stakeholders from rural communities indicated to DAERA that, prior to the COVID-19 crisis, they had already begun work on a new rural development policy framework, which is welcome. When I spoke informally to the Minister yesterday, he said that there would be a consultation on the new rural policy in the very near future, and we all look forward to that.

Clarity on the Shared Prosperity Fund is long overdue, but I am hopeful that the Committee will wish to examine that aspect in detail in the near future. That is all that I want to say.

Mr Catney: I thank the Department and the staff for the work that has gone into developing the Budget. I thank the Minister for coming to the Assembly, answering our questions and providing clarity on a wide range of points. I also thank him for all his help when the all-party group on fair banking was being set up in response to COVID-19. That will be used more and needed more in the future.

I agree with the Minister that MLAs treat this debate as an opportunity to highlight projects in their area for which they would like funding. I am as guilty as any: dare I mention Maze/Long Kesh? Really, this is not the stage at which to do that. I welcome his commitment to a review of the budgetary process as it will give help and clear direction on how best to input into the process. There have been delays, but, as this is such important work, I hope that the Minister will commit to making sure that there are no further delays.

I also welcome the Minister's continued work on trying to get flexibility in budgetary exchange. Given COVID and all the talk about Brexit in the last few days, it is vital that flexibility is put into our Budget so that we can deal with pressures that do not conform to a financial year. We all agree that giving back unspent money should be avoided at all costs, and I know that the Minister has the support of the Committee on that.

On the Budget itself, I hope that recent announcements on housing associations will help them to access FTC. For a long time, the lack of use of that function has been staggering, and I hope that a credible option is now available. Continual monitoring of the available COVID-related funds is needed. New announcements are welcome, but, as the Minister is aware, there are still those without support.

Continuous pressure must be put on the Treasury to solidify its commitment to meet Brexit costs.

The burden on our economy, on our agriculture sector and on our trade will be difficult enough. We will not front the bill for a Tory vanity project.

In the last debate, Minister, you made a point of monitoring the increase in the capital budget for the Department for Infrastructure and, specifically, the £15 million for Northern Ireland Water. I appreciate your point, but I am sure that you are well aware that that is far less than what is required to save our water and sewerage infrastructure. Northern Ireland Water has been to each council area describing how developments will have to be put on hold because of the issues. I hope that you will sit down with the Minister for Infrastructure as a matter of urgency to discuss what can be done.

Going forward to the next Budget, we have a number of issues that are already apparent. First, we need an announcement from the Treasury to kick off the process that is pushing any consultation period on the new Budget into the festive season. That is not ideal, and I hope that the Minister will continue to push the Treasury. We also know that a £350 million hole has been left by the New Decade, New Approach funding, which will need to be found from somewhere. Consultation with Departments must start as early as possible so that pressure can be identified and sensible decisions made. Ultimately, work must continue on a fiscal commission to give greater scrutiny into and expertise on our budgetary process. Maybe then some of the projects that we develop can begin to be checked off rather than gather dust in a report somewhere.

I sit on the Finance Committee, and the onus is on us to come forward with solutions. I thank the Minister and the Department for listening to the solutions that we try to bring forward. It is not always about scrutiny; it is about trying to help and bring forward solutions to get us to where we want to be.

Mr O'Dowd: Unfortunately, I do not think that I will have my remarks finished before the 1.00 pm break, but I will try my best to assist in moving the debate on.

I welcome the opportunity to speak on the Budget Bill. As I have said in the House before, while it is welcome that we have a Finance Minister, an Executive and an Assembly in place, our Budget Bill is unique in many ways, as we are not here today discussing a taxation policy or revenue policies; rather, we are divvying up what is, ungraciously, in my opinion, called the block grant, plus our rates and a few other earnings, among our Departments to spend in the year ahead. As an Executive, an Assembly and a society, we have to reach the stage where we have politically matured to the point where we have a Budget Bill that is based on taxation and other matters and fiscal powers, because that is where the real decisions are made.

If anyone watched 'The View' last Thursday night, they will have heard the paediatric consultant from the Royal Victoria Hospital talking about child poverty, which was quite horrific. She talked about how children on the wards stuffed toast down their nappies because they did not know when they would get their next feed at home and how children ate bowls upon bowls of cereal because they knew that, when they went home, they would not get any more food. What has brought that about? I cannot judge each case, but poverty has brought that about. What

creates poverty? Poverty is not a natural phenomenon. Poverty is created because policies, legislation and decisions have been made that ensure that trends continue. In our society, down through the decades, you can pinpoint where the trends of poverty have existed and which communities those trends exist in. There is a higher level of poverty in the Catholic community but not exclusively. There is poverty in working-class communities across this society. As an Executive, an Assembly and a society, if we want to tackle that, we should not look towards charity or food banks. Look towards policy and legislation, and redirect much-needed funds towards ensuring that we do not have children stuffing toast into their nappies to bring home with them because they do not know when they will be fed again. That is what Budgets have to be about, and that is what our Executive and our legislation have to be about. We have to eradicate poverty, and we have to give communities that have been left behind for decades, if not centuries, an opportunity to create the change that is needed.

There are ways of doing that, as I have said. Education is one of them; in fact, education is key to it. Education is key to eradicating poverty in our society. Let us make sure that we invest in our education system and that we have the community infrastructure in place to ensure that there is a strong sense of community in our society. Let us make sure that the Executive have the spending power to redirect the extra resources into those communities. I recall, as Education Minister, redirecting millions of pounds away from some schools to others to tackle educational underachievement and poverty. Quite rightly, I was challenged. We were in austere times, and I was taking money off schools that were surviving and giving it to others to make sure that they had a leg-up. Those are the difficult choices that have to be made.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I am conscious of the time. I think I have another five minutes, if that is OK. I am just waiting for the break.

That brings me on to Mr Frew's commentary. It is understandable that the debate has entered the realm of COVID, which dominates everything. The economic impact of COVID has been as devastating, in many ways, as the health impact, setting it aside, of course, that over 1,000 people have died of COVID-19, many more have been ill and many more will face the consequences of that illness for a long time. I listened with interest, when I was in my room, to Mr Frew's commentary on this. I was not sure whether I was listening to a resignation speech from the DUP or to the continued feud between him and his party leader in relation to the role of the Executive. We have COVID-19 deniers, and now, to add to that list, we have Executive deniers. Five parties in the Chamber are members of the Executive, and it is right and proper that MLAs hold the Executive to account. That is our function; that is what we are here for. However, if I was of Mr Frew's belief that the Executive have been criminal, have led to killing people and are involved in wanton vandalism against businesses, I would sit in that corner, not on a party Bench. I would get up, leave that party and sit in that corner over there. If someone solemnly believes those statements about the Executive, they have to act on it.

Mr Frew: Will the Member give way?

Mr O'Dowd: I will.

Mr Frew: Does the Member recognise that even members of the very Executive that he talks about have spoken in those terms? Even this morning, the First Minister, from this very Bench, spoke of the impact on businesses. This is not an issue in-house; it is the Assembly performing its function, using its power to hold the Executive to account. That is our job. When will the party opposite realise that its function is to challenge, not to be led like some troop through the Lobbies?

Mr O'Dowd: At no stage have I heard the First Minister refer to the Executive as being criminal, killing people or doing wanton vandalism: never. I have not heard the First Minister say, "Who is going to save us from this Executive?"

There are mixed views in the business community around what the Executive should do next. I have listened to different views in my constituency and on the air waves about what should happen next. I have met businesspeople who are angry and frustrated with the Executive. The majority of businesspeople whom I have met want the Executive to take a leading role in tackling COVID-19, to protect themselves, their families and their loved ones, but in the recognition that, on the other side of this, we have to have an economy. At the start of the pandemic, many businesses were grateful and thankful for the interventions of the Executive — the Finance Minister in particular — and the funds that were distributed. What is clearly breeding frustration in the business community at this stage is this: three weeks into the current lockdown, many of the businesses affected have not received the financial interventions that they were promised, not by the Finance Minister but by the Economy Minister. I have concerns about the record and role of the Economy Minister, even if there was not COVID-19, because there has been —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): Excuse me. I ask the Member to clarify whether he will have finished his speech in a couple of minutes. If not, we will bring him back in after the break.

Mr O'Dowd: I think that I will have to come back in after the break.

1.00 pm

There has been dithering from the Economy Minister throughout the process. She has had one eye on Westminster and one eye on what happens in the Assembly. She needs to have both eyes on our local economy to ensure that our business community is supported. I will end there for now.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): The Business Committee has arranged to meet at 1.00 pm. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be questions to the Minister of Finance. We will return to this debate at 3.30 pm, when the next scheduled Member to speak will be Mr O'Dowd resuming his speech.

The debate stood suspended.

The sitting was suspended at 1.01 pm.

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

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Questions 2, in the name of Alex Easton, and 11, in the name of John Blair, have been grouped.

RHI Inquiry: Recommendations

1. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the work of the Executive Subcommittee on Reform following the RHI Inquiry, on the implementation of the renewable heat incentive (RHI) inquiry report recommendations. (AQO 1053/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): In line with the NDNA commitment, the Executive subcommittee on reform was established to consider the recommendations of the RHI report in full and to oversee their implementation. The subcommittee met for the first time in July 2020 and was scheduled to meet again on 5 November. That meeting was postponed and will be rearranged in the coming weeks.

The report's recommendations have been brigaded under seven key themes, and at the next meeting the subcommittee will hear from each theme lead. The leads will outline the significant work that has already been done and present for approval an action plan detailing the work ahead. The Executive subcommittee plans to bring a full report on the actions taken and proposed for each recommendation to the full Executive and Assembly before the Christmas recess.

Ms Armstrong: Can the Minister provide an update on the independent panel set up to examine the role of civil servants in the RHI scheme, and on the independent panel that is to be established to investigate breaches of the ministerial code?

Mr Murphy: With regard to the panel's work to look into the disciplinary process, some of those cases have been concluded, some have been stayed, either due to legal action or ill health, and some are ongoing, with their time frames to be confirmed. I am limited in what I can say about that process because there is ongoing litigation that seeks to challenge it. As I said, four cases have been heard and concluded, four have been stayed, either due to legal action or ill health, and two are ongoing. Legal correspondence has been received in respect of one of those cases. Therefore, as I said, I am very limited in what I can say in relation to them. Nonetheless, I would like to see them concluded as quickly as possible. I hope that whatever legal issues are involved are resolved as quickly as possible to bring this chapter to a close.

Mr McGuigan: Can the Minister provide an update on the RHI scheme itself as per commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement?

Mr Murphy: There was a commitment to bring the RHI scheme to a close. Of course, that is the responsibility of the Department for the Economy. I know that the Minister for the Economy has brought discussion of the issue to the Executive on a number of occasions. Like, I am sure, many other Ministers, I share an ambition to see the scheme closed. Of course, there are outstanding issues to be addressed as a consequence of that, and I look forward to hearing the Economy Minister's propositions for them.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Minister for his answers so far. Can he update the House on whether the delay in the founding of the RHI committee and its work has led to the delay in recruitment to senior positions, such as head of the Civil Service? I understand that, at the moment, we are also still waiting for new permanent secretaries to be appointed or to go through the process for Justice, Education and Economy.

Mr Murphy: No, there is no relationship between the two issues at all.

Mr O'Toole: Further to his answers about the Executive subcommittee and panel meetings, can the Minister confirm whether any discussion or consideration has been given to underpinning any of the reforms in legislation? Thus far, the Executive are insistent that reforms should go through via codes and guidance. Can the Minister also tell the House whether any members of his party referred themselves to the Commissioner for Standards in relation to business assistance schemes?

Mr Murphy: First, it is not a matter of the Executive's being insistent: the work informing the RHI subcommittee was conducted by the five parties over a long period, in which the Member's party was a participant. The recommendations that the Executive and their subcommittee are following through come from that area of work, in which the Member's party was a participant. If the Member is advocating a different approach with regard to legislation now, that is a departure from what his party had agreed all along on the matter.

I have no idea whether anyone has been referred, or has referred themselves, to the Commissioner for Standards.

COVID-19: Centrally Held Funding

2. **Mr Easton** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the COVID-19-related funding being held centrally. (AQO 1054/17-22)

11. **Mr Blair** asked the Minister of Finance what financial reserves are available to fund future economic interventions needed as a result of changes to the public health regulations. (AQO 1063/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Following the October monitoring round, the Executive held £100.6 million in reserve. Last Thursday, 5 November, the Executive were informed by Treasury that we would receive an additional £400 million.

COVID-19 continues to present many challenges, and the Executive will consider how to best use that £500 million for targeted support in the coming weeks and months.

In addition, the following funding is also held centrally: £0.4 million is being held for transfer to the Department for Transport in England for the ferry operator scheme; £6 million is being held pending the finalisation of the bus, coach and taxi support scheme; £22.9 million is being

held for further sectoral support and for any unforeseen PPE requirements; and £60 million is being held pending the Department for the Economy's development of COVID restrictions business support measures.

Mr Easton: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that all funding is not held centrally and that it gets out to the Departments, especially Health and Finance, so that we can tackle the COVID-19 pandemic? Can the Minister also tell us what he is doing to ensure that none of that money gets handed back to the Treasury?

Mr Murphy: Some £600 million was ring-fenced for Health and held for a time — probably since the end of the summer and into early autumn — and Health was assessing how much of that it could spend. It has come back to the Executive in the last number of weeks to say that it will spend, roughly, £524 million of that. That left an additional amount of money, then, to go into a central pot for the Executive. All of that money was allocated in the last week or two, with £100 million being held in reserve in case further interventions were necessary; the Executive considered that prudent, and it was my recommendation to them. We learned only last Thursday that we have an additional £400 million. I am partly drifting into today's debate on the Budget Bill, but we have been getting a drip feed of allocations, which we are trying to respond to. If we had had a full sense of the entire £2.8 billion at the start of the year, it would have allowed us to plan much better, but we have been on a drip feed.

The greatest sin of all is not spending some of the money. Of course, there will be a challenge ahead. We learned only last Thursday that we have an additional amount of money. We were holding some back. Along with some of the other areas that I have outlined, that amounts to roughly £0.5 billion that we need to spend in the time ahead. I want to see schemes brought forward, money on the ground as quickly as we can possibly get it there, and that money being directed where it is needed. Of course, as I said, Health has already taken a share of the money, which it has said that it needs for the rest of the financial year.

Mr Blair: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can the Minister provide an update on whether there is likely to be increased borrowing powers for the Northern Ireland Executive to try to tackle COVID-19 and to assist in recovery measures?

Mr Murphy: I think that the first priority will be to spend the money that we have. As I said, we were operating, until last Thursday morning, on the basis that we had set aside an additional £100 million to look at unforeseen circumstances in the rest of the financial year and that has now been bumped up to almost £0.5 billion. The priority will be to spend that. We have, along with Scotland and Wales, been pressing the Treasury for, in principle, flexibilities around borrowing, carry over, the conversion of capital to resource — all those issues. We have not yet had confirmation of any agreement on all that. However, I think that the Executive's priority will be to spend the money that we have and to look for, in principle, flexibilities around a range of other matters.

Mr Allister: To know that there is £0.5 billion at the centre is discomfiting in one sense for many businesses that are on their uppers and have not been able to access money.

However, more specifically, the businesses that were closed down three weeks ago, and which were expecting to open again this week, were promised money. I am sure that I am not the only MLA to be in receipt of multiple representations from such businesses, which ask the simple question, "Where is it?". So, on their behalf, I ask, "Where is it?".

Mr Murphy: My Department is responsible for rolling out the Land and Property Services (LPS) scheme. The issue over the last number of weeks has been the fact that, in earlier schemes, the entirety of businesses were getting support, which is when we were operating off the LPS database. When it is restricted to hospitality that means that a differentiation has to be provided, and that requires additional data from other sources, such as council environmental health sources, to differentiate between what is a shop as in retail and what is a shop as in a hairdresser, beauty salon or various cafes and other aspects of that. That is how they are characterised by LPS, and that has added another layer of difficulty. As of this morning, £7.84 million has been allocated from the scheme to over 2,290 businesses. The money is being rolled out. That is not happening as fast as I want it to happen, but it is going out. I am told that there have been over 11,300 applications and that those are being worked through as quickly as possible.

Mr McGlone: Can the Minister provide an update on how centrally held COVID-related funding will be utilised to specifically increase support for the hospitality sector in the run-up to the Christmas period?

Mr Murphy: A number of schemes have been put forward. As I said, my Department received £35 million for the scheme that I just talked about, and that is to get money on the ground for hospitality and people in close-contact services who have business premises, because it is based on the property model. Sixty million pounds is being held centrally for Economy to roll out schemes for other people in close-contact services and other hospitality support. I look forward to seeing the details of that and early applications for it. Of course, given the discussions that we are currently having and the possibility of an extension to the restrictions, the Executive will consider and act very quickly to get further support to anyone who has been affected by the restrictions.

Victims' Pension

3. **Mr Lyttle** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the discussions he has had with HM Treasury regarding funding for the victims' pension. (AQO 1055/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My engagement in the case has been with the NIO, because, in my view and in line with the statement of funding policy, it is for the Department that has constructed the policy to deal with funding in the first instance. I and other Ministers have raised that issue with the Secretary of State on a number of occasions and will continue to do so. A request was recently made to the Secretary of State by the First Minister and deputy First Minister to meet with him, alongside myself and the Justice Minister, to discuss the matter. He has yet to agree to a meeting. However, I am determined to pursue the necessary funding.

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Minister for his update. It is a moral stain on the history of Ireland that those innocent people, who suffered the most heinous injuries and injustice,

have waited a lifetime for the victims' pension. Indeed, many have died and are dying waiting for it. I welcome the commitment given by the Justice Minister to administer the scheme. When will the Finance Minister meet the UK Government to secure the funding necessary to deliver that unacceptably overdue assistance for victims?

Mr Murphy: As I said in my original answer, we have requested a meeting with the Secretary of State. It was the Northern Ireland Office that created the policy. It differed and departed from the agreement that the parties had reached at Stormont House. Under its rules and statement of funding policy, those who create the policy and legislate for it are responsible for funding it. We have been trying to have a discussion with the Secretary of State. Even though the request came from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, alongside myself and the Minister of Justice, we have yet to secure such a meeting, but we will continue to pursue that.

Ms Dillon: As you have already outlined, Minister, the British Government, by their own rules, say that, if you create a policy, you must pay for it. As Mr Lyttle outlined, the victims have waited far too long. Can you ask, when you have that meeting, the NIO and, indeed, the British Secretary of State to meet the victims' groups? They have all requested meetings with him, and yet, to date, he has not responded to them.

Mr Murphy: What the Member outlines is another extension of the unsatisfactory nature of the way that the scheme has been developed and taken forward by the Northern Ireland Office. I was part of the discussions at Stormont House to reach an agreement on that. Those were not easily done, and the agreement required a lot of accommodation by all five parties. The fact that the British Government unilaterally took off in their own direction and substantially changed that agreement is unsatisfactory. Their handling of it since they did that has compounded not only the political problems that they have created for all the parties in the Executive but the problems for the victims. I hope that they address all those issues in the very near future.

Mr Nesbitt: The Minister will be aware that three months ago, in August, the Executive appointed the Department of Justice to run the scheme. Has his Department had any indication from the Department of Justice on the resource requirements, the business plan or any other preparatory work for running the scheme?

2.15 pm

Mr Murphy: No, not as yet. My understanding is that work on the costings is ongoing. There has been a huge variation in some of the public expression of what the costings might be, but we have had no detail on that. The absence of a discussion with the Northern Ireland Office in the middle of all this is not assisting in the development of that process.

Spending Flexibilities

4. **Mr Catney** asked the Minister of Finance what update he has received from HM Treasury on his requested spending flexibilities. (AQO 1056/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have been pressing the Treasury to agree to a suite of Budget flexibilities for the Executive, specifically,

the ability to switch from capital to resource; a loosening of restrictions on how much the Executive can carry forward from one year to the next; and for a pragmatic approach to budget overspends.

With the Finance Ministers from the other devolved Administrations, I raised that issue again with the Treasury on 21 October. The Treasury is still considering the request, and I will continue to press for a positive outcome.

Mr Catney: I thank the Minister for his answer. What I was really trying to get at was the specific amount that you want to carry over and in which Departments.

Mr Murphy: We are yet to come to the end of the budgetary phase. We have to go through another monitoring round in January in terms of reallocation, so it is really later in the year when you realise that.

What we and the Finance Ministers in Scotland and Wales want to establish is the principle that we have a small percentage of the Budget that can be carried over and that that be extended. We may not need to use it all. We may have the ability to spend out everything that we require, although, with the additional COVID allocations this year, that will be a challenge. With the experience of COVID, that will be a challenge for departmental spending, but it is about establishing in principle those conditions that allow us to carry over.

We have not as yet identified which Departments may need that or how much they may need.

Mr Sheehan: Will the Minister give an update on the establishment of a fiscal commission that would consider the Executive's ability to raise revenue for public services?

Mr Murphy: Work on a fiscal commission and a fiscal council, which was part of the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitments, had been slowed as a consequence of the overall Executive response to COVID. That work continues, and I hope to be able to bring a paper to the Executive in the very near future with propositions for a fiscal commission.

Mr Butler: Will the Minister outline any Northern Ireland-specific conversations that he has had with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on specific asks, and any commonalities with the other devolved regions?

Mr Murphy: We will have specific asks for the Treasury. We have been raising the issue of payments to cover the protocol for Brexit, the loss of funding here as a consequence of leaving the European Union, and the replacement of all that. Those are specific to here.

We have common positions with Scotland and Wales on a lot of these issues, and we have quite a lot of dialogue with the Welsh and Scottish Finance Ministers. We have been developing common asks on flexibilities, early sight of the comprehensive spending review and early information on what our funding envelope will be for next year, all of which are essential for planning.

While Barnett consequentials have been very welcome over the past year with additional money, they have come with little or no notification and very much as a drip feed. The Executive are responding all the time to try to get that money out quickly and to get support to where it is needed. It has not been ideal, albeit the funding itself is very welcome.

Those are the conversations that we have been having regularly, more specifically for here on Brexit issues and the spending that we require for that.

Belfast Region City Deal

5. Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the Belfast region city deal. (AQO 1057/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Belfast region city deal is finalising a number of outline business cases in preparation for signing deal documents. Local partners and Departments continue to work closely to achieve that. I am fully supportive of the city/growth deals initiative, which signals our desire to build a productive, regionally balanced and inclusive economy, and will provide investment and much-needed jobs in local areas, offering hope for the future.

Miss McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his response. While I am disappointed that my constituency will largely miss out on the capital spend of the proposed city deal, I am hopeful that there will be spin-off benefits.

There are concerns, with the focus on COVID-19, that projects will be delayed. Can the Minister give an assurance that there will be no undue delay to the commencement of schemes?

Mr Murphy: The Member will know that a number of Departments and councils are involved in those projects, so there are a lot of moving parts.

Our clear intention, however, is to drive those schemes on and get them completed as quickly as possible. As part of our discussions on economic recovery, we recognise that city deals are a key component in stimulating economic activity, construction jobs and all of the benefits that flow from major capital projects. There is a strong desire in the Executive to progress the projects, and we will continue to monitor and focus on that, as will the Department for the Economy, which has been one of the major players in city deals and will work with our council colleagues to make sure that we do not experience any undue delays.

Ms Flynn: Will the Minister provide an update on any of the other city deals, please?

Mr Murphy: The city deal partners in Derry City and Strabane are working closely with officials to progress a deal to head of terms. The deal equates to £210 million. It combines city deals and includes future funding with equal contributions from the Executive and the British Government. It is a welcome investment in the north-west region, especially at this time. I will meet shortly with south-west councils to discuss the proposals attached to the funding that they have for the deals that reflect those council areas.

Mr Blair: Will the Minister confirm whether the £100 million city deal complementary fund is open and, if so, how many bids have been received?

Mr Murphy: I am afraid that I do not have those details at the moment. The Member will know that this involves a range of Departments and a number of council areas. I know that councils have been working up proposals for some of their projects and having discussions across the Belfast city deal area about the complementary fund and what might flow from it. I do not believe that any bids for that have been received. I am sure that councils are aware of it. He will know that any bids must complement

the city deal projects, and councils in other areas will be looking very closely at what they can bid for. The process of allocation, or the consideration of allocation, from that complementary fund has yet to be developed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Going by Mr Thomas Buchanan's new place in the Chamber, I should congratulate him on his promotion.

Subregional Stadia Programme for Soccer: Funding

6. Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Finance what engagement his Department has had with the Department for Communities to ensure that the necessary funding is made available for the subregional stadia programme for soccer. (AQO 1058/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Neither my officials nor I, in my current role as Finance Minister, have had any specific engagement with the Department for Communities to discuss progress on the funding for the subregional stadia programme for soccer. It will be for the Department for Communities to initiate engagement at an appropriate time.

Mr T Buchanan: Minister, I am sure that you are aware that, for many years, soccer has been underfunded and underdeveloped in comparison with the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). Will you, as Minister, give an undertaking that you will do what you can to reverse that so that soccer is funded on a par with the GAA?

Mr Murphy: I want all sports to be adequately funded. Sport is hugely beneficial to young people in particular and to society in general. You can see the effect that the inability to attend football matches and other sporting events has on society.

I disagree, absolutely, with his contention that the funding of the GAA has disadvantaged soccer. Take, for example, the number of council pitches that have been built for soccer as opposed to GAA over the years. As a lifelong member of the GAA living in a rural area, I know that any provisions for GAA that were made over the years were funded by GAA members, not by the state, Departments or council funds. GAA members funded the vast bulk of those provisions themselves. I do not think that it serves the debate well to try to get into comparative figures as if this was a political issue. We need to try to develop as much money as we can for sport. Sport makes a positive contribution, and we need to ensure that facilities and supporting arrangements for sport are as well funded as possible.

Mr Allen: As the Minister will be aware, the subregional stadia programme is a commitment that sat alongside the regional stadia programme, for which a potential increase in the final budget has been forecast. The Department for Communities carried out a budgetary exercise recently. From that, can the Minister advise whether the Minister for Communities forecasts an increased spend on the subregional stadia programme?

Mr Murphy: I have to say that, from my perspective and from my understanding from talking to officials, there is no correlation between funding for the two. Clearly, any increase in the regional stadia programme has happened as a consequence of things that are beyond the control of the people who are providing regional stadiums. Issues have held up the delivery of that programme, and that was,

obviously, not planned for by those who were developing the plans. I have not had discussions on that. I have had a preliminary meeting, as I have with most, but not all, other Ministers on budgetary matters. We cannot really decide how we allocate budgets until we know the amount that we are getting. We are dependent on the comprehensive spending review and on getting as early as possible an announcement from the Treasury on what our budgets look like, and then we will be able to finalise discussions on what is required for all programmes.

Mr Lyttle: The subregional association football stadia funding programme was to be allocated as long ago as 2016. What funding has been allocated for that programme for the financial year 2021-22? Is this not the time to make a vital capital investment in not only sport but in construction?

Mr Murphy: I do not disagree with his last point on investment. Where we can get capital programmes done, they contribute to economic recovery. The funding for 2021-22 will be allocated as part of the Budget. As yet, we are not aware what our Budget will be for 2021-22. We do not know the funding envelope that we will have. While we have been able to have preliminary discussions with Departments on their budgetary requirements, we will not be able to allocate an actual spend until we know that amount ourselves. When we are aware of what we have, we will be able to take decisions on how we spend it.

Mr McNulty: Does the Minister agree that sport plays an incredibly important role in the well-being of our society and that it is greatly missed at grassroots level? We are lucky that we have elite-level sport. We are sorry that we cannot go and cheer on our team this weekend, Minister. Armagh are playing Donegal at Breffni Park, and we would both love to be there. We cannot be there, but we will be shouting them on on the TV.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Order. The question relates to the subregional stadia programme for soccer.

Mr McNulty: I am getting there. The GAA wants only its fair share. Casement Park can be a catalyst for rebooting our economy. Can the Minister confirm that he is committed to providing all the funding to enable the construction of Casement Park and to helping to reboot our economy?

Mr Murphy: First, I agree with his outlook on sport and, specifically, Armagh GAA. The commitment to Casement is an Executive commitment. It is a flagship project. It is a key project commitment, and I expect the Executive to live up to that commitment. I will certainly play my role in helping the Executive to live up to that commitment.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We know that the Minister and Mr McNulty are two Orangemen [*Laughter*] I call Órlaithí Flynn.

Ms Flynn: My question has been covered. Thank you, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle.

Arm's-length Bodies: NDNA Review

7. **Mr McAleer** asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) commitment to review arm's-length bodies (ALBs). (AQO 1059/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive agreed the terms of reference for the review on 18 June 2020. It is a two-stage review.

The first stage is about gathering background information from Departments, and it is complete. The second stage is desk-based in the Department of Finance and involves looking at the rationale for an arm's-length body and considering whether the functions that it carries out can be delivered in the Department. Does it require political impartiality? Does it have a technical function that it would be inappropriate for a Department to carry out? Are there overlaps with other arm's-length bodies? Has it outlived its purpose? Should it be abolished? Does it have sufficient transparency to the public on its activities, and could that be improved? That work is almost complete and will be brought to the Executive when it is finalised. It will include proposals for the rationalisation, efficiency and effectiveness of the arm's-length bodies that are considered in the review.

Mr McAleer: I thank the Minister for his response. Will the Minister provide us with an update on Civil Service reform?

Mr Murphy: The two issues are linked. They are part of the broad NDNA commitments to reform the Civil Service. I have been developing propositions on Civil Service reform, and I hope to bring a paper to the Executive in the not-too-distant future outlining a process for initiating a very wide-ranging reform of the Civil Service.

Mr O'Toole: Given what the Minister just said about the importance of Civil Service reform, when will a head of the Civil Service be appointed?

Mr Murphy: The issue of a non-appointment was in TEO, and I know that it is looking at interim measures. I want to see a head of the Civil Service appointed as soon as possible. We obviously have to look at the process in the interim and then look for a more permanent replacement at the head of the Civil Service. I hope that that will be done as quickly as possible.

2.30 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

COVID-19: Financial Support during Self-isolation

T1. **Ms Bailey** asked the Minister of Finance what, if any, financial support packages have been discussed for those who might be required to self-isolate. (AQT 641/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Under the leadership of Deirdre Hargey, before she went off with illness, further developed by Carál Ní Chuilín in the Department for Communities, there had been an extension of support for those who have to isolate. Financial support packages have been discussed at almost every Executive meeting. The issue of compliance is clearly about people following the message and following regulations, but it is also about people being able to do that. If we have a situation where people who are required to isolate cannot afford to do so or the consequences of that become difficult for them and their families, the Executive will need to make sure that we provide sufficient support. The Department for Communities has been focused on that, and there is already a support mechanism there. We want to ensure that that is as good as it can be and that, when we get to this crucial stage of the year when compliance will be more

important than ever, we assist people in complying. It is not just a matter of enforcing things; we have to provide assistance to do that.

Ms Bailey: I thank the Minister for his answer. Has finance been set aside to do that work, or are we still just discussing it?

Mr Murphy: As I say, there already is a scheme in the Department for Communities. There are finances available, and I have said to Executive colleagues, including the Communities Minister, that, if additional support measures need to be brought in to assist people in isolation and assist with compliance, I am happy to consider them. As of last Thursday, we have additional money, and I think that compliance will be a key issue over the next number of months. I agree, and I will support any proposition that assists people in isolating and ensures that they can afford to do so.

Procurement Board: Social Value

T2. **Ms Anderson** asked the Minister of Finance how the new Procurement Board will promote social value, so that government spending addresses issues such as poverty and deprivation, particularly in her constituency in Derry. (AQT 642/17-22)

Mr Murphy: We have put forward propositions for the Procurement Board. It had intended to meet recently, but, because the proposals to revamp the Procurement Board were put in place, we need to seek additional personnel to go on to that and to change the make-up of the Procurement Board. Clearly, social value is a key part of that, and procurement can be used as an effective tool in achieving social outcomes. We have had discussions with them, and I know that the procurement people in the Department have been working on policies in relation to that. If the time frame allows it, we will also consider legislation, if that is required, in the next year before the end of the mandate, to enforce social value in procurement. Procurement by the Executive is a huge amount of money. It can be used not only to stimulate economic growth but in social value, and we want to ensure that that is a key part of government procurement and that of all public bodies.

Ms Anderson: Minister, most people will be glad to hear you say that you want a social value Act taken forward in this mandate. I believe that something in the region of £3 million is spent year-on-year on procurement, so, in the propositions that you mentioned, are you engaging or will that board be able to engage with other Departments to ensure that they embrace social value?

Mr Murphy: It is £3 billion, actually. Procurement has an overarching function for the entire Executive and giving advice to public bodies generally, so any policies that the Procurement Board adopts will be decided by the Executive and therefore will apply across Departments. It is one thing to have policies agreed and the Procurement Board pursuing them, but it is about implementation and making sure that Departments follow through, right down through all levels of their responsibilities and those of their arm's-length bodies, and, indeed, influence other public bodies. There will be a key focus on those policies but also on implementation to make sure that that is carried through.

COVID-19: Data Review

T3. **Ms Bunting** asked the Minister of Finance, since he will be aware that, in August, the COVID-19 death toll across the United Kingdom was reduced by 5,377 after a data review in England because people were being counted as having died from COVID-19 regardless of when they tested positive and that there seems to be some indication that people can even test positive in absentia — a question to the Minister of Health tabled by her colleague Ms Bradley refers — whether such a data review has been conducted in Northern Ireland and what the findings were. (AQT 643/17-22)

Mr Murphy: NISRA continuously ensures that its statistics and processes are as up-to-date as possible. The Member will be aware that it is a difficult area, because there are people who die from COVID and there are people who die with COVID. There are people who maybe had a terminal condition and acquired COVID while being treated for it. It is a complex area. The issues that are identified on a death certificate have to be followed through on so that there is statistical representation. It is a complex and sensitive area.

Undoubtedly, COVID is a new experience for our Health Department and for statistical agencies, and trying to develop a response to it has been challenging. I am not surprised that issues have arisen in other areas. I want to ensure that NISRA, which does that statistical work here for us, is as on top of it as it can be, because I recognise that there is a sensitivity for families if someone has been incorrectly identified as having died of something when that is not the case. I know that NISRA is conscious of that complexity and sensitivity, and we need to ensure that that continues as we go forward.

Ms Bunting: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. In response to a question for written answer, he advised me that, as of June 2020, for which he had the most up-to-date figures, data showed that, in Northern Ireland, 754 of the 830 people who had COVID mentioned on their death certificate were subsequently coded by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) as having died from it. Given the different treatment of the remains of those who are cited as having died as a result of COVID, the lack of dignity and the considerable distress that it causes to their loved ones, what is being done to ensure much greater accuracy on death certificates?

Mr Murphy: Primarily, the responsibility for that when someone has died lies with the certifying doctor. The job of the statistics agency is to transfer that into data. In the initial circumstances, the certification of death identifies how a person has died. I agree with the Member: these are hugely sensitive issues. The death of a relative is difficult enough to cope with without the additional pain of the restrictions affecting how the death is dealt with by the family and how funeral arrangements are made. It is very challenging for a lot of families. It has to be done as sensitively and accurately as possible, but not just one element is involved. There is the recording of the data and the transferring of it into statistical arrangements. In the first instance, how a funeral will operate is dictated by whoever certifies the death and how that is done.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr Robin Newton is not in his place.

COVID-19 Restrictions Business Support Scheme

T5. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Finance, since it has been reported that 2,170 applications have been made to the COVID restrictions business support scheme, to advise the House how many of those have been paid, because people are finding it extremely hard at the moment even to feed their family, about which all of us are receiving emails and messages; to assure the House that those grants will get out; and to say how many have got out so far. (AQT 645/17-22)

Mr Murphy: It is not happening as fast as I want it to, because more than one set of data is required. The initial roll-out of support through Land and Property Services (LPS) was much more straightforward, because it happened across a range of business premises. The business support scheme is specific to some sectors: hospitality and close-contact services. There have been over 11,300 applications for support. Almost £8 million has been paid out so far to 2,290 businesses. About 300 applications have been identified thus far as not meeting the criteria, and that number will probably grow as assessments continue. The initial hold-ups with data processing and getting the correct data from other sources seem to have been addressed, and I now expect the payments to roll out much more quickly.

I do not have the detail of how many have applied to the Department for the Economy schemes, for instance, or how quickly that money is getting out. The detail that I have provided relates to the scheme that is being managed by LPS.

Mr McGlone: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his response. Will he assure us that, if there is an extension to close-down for specific businesses or sectors, money will be applied to support those sectors? Will he also assure us that the money will be sent out as efficiently as humanly possible? People are really feeling the bite.

Mr Murphy: I assure the Member of that. I absolutely understand the difficulties for businesses. I hear from them; I am an elected representative, the same as everybody else. The intention is to get that money onto the ground as quickly as we can. As I said, there have been hold-ups in the verification of other sources of data, but that seems to have been addressed. The scheme has been rolling out and gathering pace ever since those issues were addressed. I absolutely understand the necessity of that. If there are extensions to restrictions for some businesses, we need to ensure that the payments go out; people are struggling to keep their businesses afloat. We have set aside money to support them; we need to make sure that that money gets to them as quickly as possible.

Brexit: Cost

T6. **Mr McGuigan** asked the Minister of Finance, with the end of the implementation period fast approaching, what certainty the British Government have provided with regard to meeting the cost of Brexit. (AQT 646/17-22)

Mr Murphy: We have gathered from a number of Departments the cost of the protocol. Primarily, they have to do with some of the arrangements at the ports from

DAERA, but there are other costs. We have recently had confirmation from the British Treasury that it will accept the costs that the Department of Finance presented to it.

Of course, as we look through budgets with Departments, there are an awful lot of other costs associated with Europe that we do not necessarily identify. They are not about the implementation of the protocol and do not cost individual Departments huge amounts, but, added together, they are significant. Outside the big headline figures for the European social fund and others, such as the agriculture funds, there is a range of smaller costs for Departments for which Europe has provided support over the years. We want to identify all those. The priority is making sure that we can implement the protocol and that the effects of Brexit are as reduced as they can be, although we know that they will be bad, no matter how we reduce them. However, there are costs still to be bottomed out in terms of a loss to Departments. We also have no certainty about the Shared Prosperity Fund, what it will look like or how it will be delivered. It is unacceptable that, at this stage, we are still seeking answers to those questions.

Mr McGuigan: Minister, thanks very much for your response. Given that the North is being pulled out of the EU against its will and given that you referred to additional costs that still have to be bottomed out, do you think that the British Government should meet the broader economic costs of Brexit in lost trade and employment?

Mr Murphy: I am party to the Brexit discussions that the Executive have every week. There will clearly be a cost from the implementation of the protocol and a cost to businesses as they try to meet whatever new requirements there may be. Those are not factored in and have not been calculated yet. I share the Member's point: we have been taken into a situation against our democratic wishes. The British Government have said that we will be better off as a consequence of leaving the European Union. I, as Finance Minister, have yet to see much evidence of that. We should do our best to identify not only the cost to the Executive and the loss of funds from Europe but the cost to businesses and other sectors of society of trying to cope with the abrupt exit from Europe, and we should present those to Treasury.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: We have probably just enough time for one more question and answer.

Finance: Moneys Returned to Treasury

T7. **Mr Nesbitt** asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of all moneys and funds at risk of being returned to the Treasury come financial year end. (AQT 647/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As I said, we have yet to have another monitoring round to reallocate Executive budgets. This time last week, we were discussing the £100 million that the Executive had held over in a prudent fashion to meet any unforeseen challenges or any repetition of some of the current challenges that we face. That is now almost £500 million. That is a significant amount that we have to ensure is spent before the end of the financial year, on top of the budgets that Departments already have. That is a challenge, and I will talk to Executive colleagues about it this week.

I think that we need to ensure that we do that. We have had a range of issues raised with us, including support for isolation and for people who are forced to be at home over the winter and some additional fuel payments and things like that. I think that there are a range of issues that can be met. From that, we need to ensure that that money is spent, because, as always with this place, the greatest sin is in returning money. Sometimes, that does not lead to the right type of planning or long-term strategic thinking, as the priority is just to get that money spent. There are a lot of challenges out there in society. We need to identify where they are, and the primary thing is to get money to support people quickly. We have four months to do that, and I think that we should be attempting to do that very quickly.

2.45 pm

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Finance Minister. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments. The next item of business will be questions to the Minister of Health. Do not forget to clean the surfaces as you leave the Chamber.

Health

COVID-19: Rural Domiciliary Care

1. **Ms Sheerin** asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the availability of domiciliary care in rural areas. (AQO 1068/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Domiciliary care workers provide a vital service to over 23,000 people in Northern Ireland, allowing them to continue to live independently. While there are sometimes particular challenges in rural areas, given the longer travel distances, we have seen increasing pressures right across our domiciliary care service provision for a number of years.

I am pleased to say that, over the past 12 months, the social care workforce has expanded significantly, with an increase of 3,409 registered workers since 2019. While that is very welcome, more staff are clearly still needed. That is not least because the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound effect on the ability of domiciliary care providers to deliver services. One impact was the number of staff unable to work because they were required to self-isolate. However, at the onset of the pandemic, many service users and their families opted to suspend their existing domiciliary care package. My Department moved quickly to put in place a guarantee of income for domiciliary care providers to ensure that there was no loss of capacity in that critical service at that time. In return for that guarantee, we asked providers to improve their sick pay for staff unable to work for COVID-19-related reasons.

Power to People was clear, and I am clear, that the only way to make the service sustainable in the long term is through improved terms and conditions. My officials are finalising a business case that sets out some of the costs for achieving that. It will be challenging, given the current financial pressures and uncertainties, to meet those costs and it will need Executive support, but I am determined to do my best to make it happen. Throughout the pandemic, we have also made sure that domiciliary care providers have access to PPE where they need it and that the health

and social care trusts continue to provide millions of items free of charge.

Ms Sheerin: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. I am sure that you will be aware of the extreme sensitivity of this subject, and I do not want in any way to understate that. Domiciliary care workers, as you outlined, are probably one of the most stretched of all groups of workers across our health service. The issue of unavailability of care packages in rural areas such as my constituency of Mid Ulster is a massive pressure point, for the workers on the ground and for the families that are affected. I have been informed in the past that your Department does not keep a record of the number of care packages that never get fulfilled because the person requiring a care package passes in hospital before they are allowed to enter their home with a care package. Can you start to record that, so that its high incidence and the great need is recorded properly?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that very specific follow-up question. She asked that in a question for written answer, and I am aware of the reply, but we will look into it, now that she has asked for it, and see whether that is feasible and to make sure that there is a useful outcome should that information be gathered.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Before I call Mr Alan Chambers, I must say that I do not wish to curtail any Member or the Minister, but, given the current climate, so many people have questions that they want to ask about Health that we need to use the half hour that we have judiciously.

Mr Chambers: Will the Minister detail what measures he has taken to shore up and support domiciliary care providers during the pandemic?

Mr Swann: I covered that point briefly in my initial answer. I introduced financial support measures, which covered the period from June until the end of October, for domiciliary care providers who were contracted to the health and social care trusts. Under those arrangements, providers had their incomes supplemented to a level that was 100% of an average of the three months prior to the pandemic. In return for that support, providers are expected to ensure that workers were paid at least 80% of their normal earnings above statutory sick pay when they are on sick leave for reasons related to COVID-19.

I have also recently agreed a fund of £5 million for providers to claim against reasonable expenses incurred as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, health and social care trusts continue to support providers with millions of items of free PPE every month.

Mr McGrath: The Minister mentioned PPE for domiciliary care workers. What assurances can the Minister give us that those care workers on the front line have the necessary PPE, rather than merely accepting employers saying that they have the correct amounts?

Mr Swann: One of the things that we did through the first wave of the pandemic was to make sure that every provider, every care supplier and every employer had a direct line into the trust. Those supply chains are established through our Business Services Organisation into trusts, and any care supplier can draw down PPE as and when needed.

Mr Lyttle: Many family carers are at the end of their resilience due to the disruption of not only domiciliary care but respite care and day services. Will the Minister give an update on the publication of a plan for the resumption of those services, as voted for by the Assembly on 7 July?

Mr Swann: It is one of those areas that is continually under pressure due to the reallocation of some of our staff. It is a piece of work that is being done on a regional basis to ensure that there is equity of service across the entirety of Northern Ireland.

Ms P Bradley: As someone who worked in the health service, I understand what unmet need is, and it has been around for many years. Will the Minister tell the House how his Department is capturing that unmet need?

Mr Swann: The Member makes a valid point that it has always been there. With domiciliary care, the demand far outstrips the supply that we currently have. That is why it is a significant step that we have increased the number of registered workers since 2009 by more than 3,400. Demand is currently outstripping the provision that we have due to members of that profession being off due to COVID and the community incidence. It is about putting in that support package for employers but also making it a profession that people want to go into. As the Member will know, many individuals who work in the sector are there by vocation because they want to support people in their communities. They do that to a very high standard and are currently under very extreme pressures.

COVID-19: International Best Practice

2. **Ms Kimmins** asked the Minister of Health what work his Department is undertaking on the interpretation of data and learning from international best practice in relation to COVID-19. (AQO 1069/17-22)

Mr Swann: COVID-19 continues to have a devastating impact right across the globe, with the recent surge of cases in Northern Ireland highlighting the need for ongoing vigilance. In order that our health and social care sector is in the best possible position to respond to the virus, and to reduce the impact on local people, it is essential that we take expert advice and learn from international practice.

Throughout the pandemic to date, the Northern Ireland Executive have received expert advice and recommendations from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser in respect of the most appropriate public health response. That advice has been based on the emerging evidence from the rest of the UK and from the rest of the world. For example, the Chief Scientific Adviser attends the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) and reviews evidence from the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling (SPI-M), which examines the data on the trajectory of the virus, nationally and internationally. In addition to that, evidence from UK Government analysis and published scientific papers are regularly reviewed with regard to international experience.

The need to consider the best evidence and practice applies not only to the strategic public health response but to all parts of the health and social care sector in responding to COVID-19. That can be seen in the reduction in mortality rates for those diagnosed with COVID-19, as experience has provided enhanced insight into the best form of treatment. However, as a novel virus,

it is important to recognise that the evidence on COVID-19 is changing over time, and there is often no consensus on the most appropriate response.

Ms Kimmins: I thank the Minister for his answer. Is data being shared effectively, North and South, with the Minister's counterparts in the South in line with the agreed memorandum of understanding?

Mr Swann: The memorandum of understanding is working well, although there are areas where it needs enhancement. One challenge that was evident over the weekend was the reaction to travel restrictions from Denmark. It took engagement from us with the Health Minister and engagement from the Westminster Transport Minister with the Transport Minister in the Republic of Ireland to make sure that information was shared on anyone who had been in or travelled through Denmark and who then entered the Irish Republic through Dublin Airport while we put in those restrictions. That engagement is ongoing. The Chief Medical Officer and senior colleagues meet their counterparts in the Republic of Ireland weekly to discuss their approach to COVID-19 and their experience of responding to the pandemic.

Mr Allister: In the first wave of the virus, it was quite clear that the impact on our care homes was catastrophic. Why, then, in the intervening period, until, I think, last week, were staff tested only once every fortnight? The Minister now says that it will be once a week. Surely it should be every day or every other day. What is the international standard, because, yesterday, there were 139 outbreaks in our care homes? Did we learn nothing from the first wave about testing in care homes?

Mr Swann: We have increased testing. The recommendation was that we tested staff every fortnight and tested residents once a month, unless the home tested positive or showed a confirmed case, in which case we increased the testing capacity.

When a home does not have an identified case, we use pillar 2. Once a home has an identified case, either a resident or a member of staff, it moves to pillar 1, which is the Northern Ireland-based testing programme, so that we can get a response to those test results more quickly. Testing has been increased to once every two weeks in order to upscale the frequency.

The Member referred to the number of care homes that are rated as having confirmed cases. About 46% of those homes are confirmed as being positive because of staff, not residents, testing positive. The increased testing programme has proved beneficial in indicating and identifying staff who may be asymptomatic so that they do not take the virus into care homes, where residents are more vulnerable to the virus.

Mr McCrossan: Does the Minister accept that other countries have much more stringent test and trace processing? Will he update the House on improvements to the test and trace system and on when they will be delivered?

Mr Swann: One thing that often happens with our test, trace and protect system is that the failings of other systems are pointed towards our system.

In our current system, in the past week, we have transferred 4,450 cases to test, trace and protect. Of the cases transferred, 4,023 were successfully detected.

That is a success rate of over 90%. By any international standard, 80% is what should be reached. From the 4,023 cases that were identified and contacted a further 9,267 contacts were identified, and 9,173 of those were eventually contacted. That is a success rate of 99%. When it comes to the failings that have been pointed out about the test, trace and protect system, often, people look at the criticism of the Westminster system and then apply those aspersions to our system.

3.00 pm

The improvements that we made over the summer were brought forward when we saw the dramatic increase in positive cases. We went to a text alert service for some people who had tested positive. We also introduced a "digital first" system whereby people could go online and identify their contacts. That made it easier for someone who tested positive to interact, whether they wanted to talk to someone on the phone, do it online or respond by text message. That is what we have done in the past number of weeks.

Often, we look to Germany for best practice. One thing that should be noted is that Germany has said that, when you get a case rate of over 50 cases per 100,000 of the population, there is no way that any test, trace and protect system can keep on top of that. It is vital that we bring down the case rate so that the real benefits of test, trace, protect and isolate can come to the fore. It is all part of the overall package. The fewer cases there are, the more impact and effect test, trace and protect has.

Mrs Cameron: Who will look after the administrative burden of testing in the care sector, given that the independent care sector has said that it cannot cope with the increase in testing, which, in going from two weeks to one week, is, effectively, doubling?

Mr Swann: We took a strategic approach. A fortnight before we announced that we were increasing the testing frequency, we put additional funding into the care home sector so that money could be drawn down and used to supply the administrative support that those homes need. It could also provide additional staff, if needs be, to come in and do those tests, which can take up to 10 or 15 minutes to perform, of residents or staff. My Department has already put in place additional financial supports for the care home sector.

Ms Bailey: In response to the original question, the Minister referred to advice that he had received from the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser. Does the Minister have the authority to act alone in implementing the experts' recommendations or does he need the approval of the whole Executive?

Mr Swann: The current regulations 9 and 10 fall at midnight on Thursday, so it would take the support of the Executive to bring forward further recommendations. If they fall at that point, I think, we will move back to the bare basics in regulation 2, which still stands and is current.

Mr Carroll: Does the Minister have any concern that the phrase "living with COVID" is being used by some Ministers? It appears to be completely out of step with international best practice and more in line with that of countries that have had a very high death toll and economic ruin.

Mr Swann: Since the outbreak and the first wave, every politician has had to be careful of the challenge around the phraseology and language used, because of the impression that can be given. I have been clear that the phrase "living with COVID" may be useful at the point at which we have a vaccine and the virus is under control. At this minute in time, because of the increased rate in Northern Ireland, we are not at that point. As for the phrase "living with COVID", one thing that I do not want to see is more people dying from COVID.

COVID-19: Missed Test Appointments

3. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Health to outline the number of individuals that received positive COVID-19 test results for a test they booked and did not attend. (AQO 1070/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. Testing through the national testing programme is managed by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in London. I am advised that a few such incidents have been reported through the Public Health Agency (PHA), and my officials have been made aware of that. Upon investigation by the Public Health Agency and the DHSC, they have advised that no specific details have been received to enable the issue to be investigated further. My officials will continue to liaise with DHSC on the matter as required, and DHSC has advised that individuals who have been impacted by such an incident should contact the 119 helpline to provide their specific details for further investigation.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his answer. Minister, this is a little bit concerning. I have been advised by three individuals whom I know personally — one is an accountant, another is a solicitor and the other is a social worker — that they all got positive test results for tests that they were not able to attend. We know that a lot of good has been done during the pandemic, but there are also people out there who want to do mischief. We know that discretionary support grants are available for people who test positive for them or their family members. I would like you to look at that further and to look at those figures to see whether there have been any patterns, changes or increases in recent weeks. It is public knowledge, certainly in the area that I represent, that that can be done.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. It is something that her party leader, the First Minister, raised with me earlier in the week. We contacted DHSC to see whether that is a possibility. It is looking into its systems to make sure that it does not and cannot happen. It would be unthinkable for somebody to fake a positive COVID test for the sake of a payment, because that puts pressure not only on other individuals and their family members but on our health service by making it look as though we have a higher incidence than we actually do.

Fortunately, when we see the number of positive cases compared with the number of hospitalisations and people who are in an intensive care unit (ICU), it does not seem to be a widespread practice. One of the difficulties that PHA and DHSC had was that, although the Member said that she was aware of three such individuals, no one was prepared to give their contact details, name, address or identification so that it could be followed through the system to see whether it was happening. However, it is something that the DHSC and the PHA are aware of.

Mr Nesbitt: My question to the Minister concerns what is happening in Liverpool with rapid and mass testing, and I wonder whether he has any thoughts on whether those mechanisms could be deployed in Northern Ireland.

Mr Swann: We are observing in Liverpool a pilot of mass testing, and I think that it will be useful. However, in being part of the observation group that is overseeing what happens and learning the lessons from it, we want to make sure that that sort of mass testing can be utilised to its best and most effective use and that any individual who tests positive receives the correct support and advice. It is easy, when we look at Liverpool, to put it in the context of being a large city, but when you put it in another context, you see that Liverpool has a population that is actually larger than Northern Ireland's. It is about using mass testing most effectively for the region. We will look at a number of pilots once the testing system, should it be lateral flow, proves efficient. Whether we do that by a sectoral rather than a geographical basis is still something that my expert advisory group on testing is exploring.

Ms Bradshaw: Minister, the DHSC in England is issuing new guidance for clinically extremely vulnerable people to patients, who are provided with a formal shielding notification that can act as guidance for employers. Will you reintroduce shielding letters here?

Mr Swann: The Chief Medical Officer is meeting his shielding advisory group tomorrow to see what steps we need to take and whether those should replicate what England is doing. That guidance and updated advice will be considered in the context of where we are in Northern Ireland with the spread of COVID-19, R and the direct effect that they would have on that specific group of individuals in Northern Ireland.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I know that Mr Gildernew and Mr McCrossan have indicated that they want to ask a question, but we have only eight minutes left. I see that Mr Gildernew is number one on the topical questions list and that Mr McCrossan is number four, so I hope that they will forgive me if I move on to the next question.

Mental Health Services: Funding

4. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health what additional funding will be made available for mental health services. (AQO 1071/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question.

With the Principal Deputy Speaker's indulgence, I may take more than two minutes for the answer, because of the nature of the issue.

Since taking up my post as Minister of Health, I have been very clear that mental health is one of my key priorities. I have created a mental health champion, and I have published the mental health action plan, which includes a dedicated COVID-19 mental health response plan. My officials are also working on developing a new 10-year mental health strategy that I intend to publish for consultation by the end of the year. Also, since taking up the post of Minister, I have provided additional funding for mental health. That includes £1.5 million for the implementation of the mental health action plan secured through June monitoring; an additional £300,000 approximately, also secured through June monitoring, for mental health co-production work; and an additional

£180,000 secured through June monitoring for suicide prevention. There is £1.5 million for my Department to support the Department of Education in its work on mental health in schools. To assist suicide prevention in 2020-21, £649,000 has been allocated to zero-suicide initiatives in HSC trusts. An additional £190,000 has been allocated to enable the continued delivery of the multi-agency triage team project, and a further £60,000 has been allocated to the Derry crisis intervention service to allow its continuation to the end of the year. The Executive have also jointly agreed to fund the mental health champion with £500,000 per year. Furthermore, over the last couple of years, a programme of capital investment to provide immediate improvements to the old mental health facilities has seen around £3.5 million in funding, which will directly benefit mental health patients.

I welcome the additional COVID funding made available for the Department of Health through the HSC during this particularly challenging time, including funding to support mental health services. From that funding, I am seeking to make available up to £2.6 million to ensure capacity across mental health services, including support for the adult acute mental health bed management network, the provision of additional nurses and funding for psychology therapies and waiting lists. The new mental health strategy will, going forward, provide the strategic direction for mental health services when the full strategy is published in July 2021. I intend to also publish a 10-year funding plan, and that will provide a comprehensive outline of the funding required for future mental health services.

Mr K Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his answer. The focus is currently on COVID and rightly so. However, the strains on other conditions and the pressures on people's personal lives are putting pressure on the mental health of the population across Northern Ireland. Is the attention to the pandemic outweighing attention to other conditions and putting strains on people's mental health?

Mr Swann: The Member raises the point of the additional mental health strains that COVID has put on the population of Northern Ireland and on our health professionals because of the stresses and strains that they cope with. That is why, when we produced the mental health action plan, we included a specific section on COVID-19 to pick up on the specific additional points that are being brought to bear because of additional pressures, be they from self-isolation or the loss of a loved one due to COVID, which is affecting many people across Northern Ireland.

The additional pressures on our mental health service are being compounded by COVID. It is also a part of our health and social care system that needed additional funding. It needed additional support pre COVID, and I am pleased that, due to the support that we have across the Executive and even in the New Decade, New Approach commitments, that support is now coming forward and that work is being championed by our interim mental health champion, Professor Siobhán O'Neill.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for all those really positive mental health initiatives. They are greatly appreciated by the sector. I am conscious that the mental health action plan that was announced six months ago contained specialist community perinatal services, and I know that the sector and the perinatal mental health campaigners are waiting in suspense. Can the Minister confirm when funding will be made available for those services?

Mr Swann: The business case for specialist community perinatal mental health services was received by the PHA. Officials in the mental health and capacity unit reviewed the document and consulted professional colleagues before requesting further evidence from the PHA to support the proposals. Following a further review of the amended business case, there remained several minor discrepancies, and the PHA has agreed to complete those amendments as soon as possible. The PHA has noted that its response to the current COVID pandemic has added substantial pressures to this workload.

Recurrent costs associated with the business case are significant, with high costs apportioned to the extensive multidisciplinary team complement proposed for each trust.

3.15 pm

In the June monitoring round, I approved funding for 2020-21 for perinatal mental health as part of the mental health action plan. That action requires recurrent funding and so creates an inescapable pressure of £4.7 million recurrently. The business case proposes a phased implementation, with the first phase requiring £3.4 million and the second phase an additional £1.3 million. A submission seeking approval of the business case and the recurrent funding will be sent to me on receipt of the finalised business case from the PHA.

I had that answer prepared. I knew that it was something that the Member would raise, because it is an issue that she has championed in her time in the House.

Ms Hunter: I am mindful of the time, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker, so I will be quick. Can the Minister identify whether any additional funding from his Department will go towards those with mental health issues who are struggling with addiction and those who face a dual diagnosis?

Mr Swann: The increase in the level of dual diagnoses has been brought to the fore, especially during lockdown. The Assembly all-party group on dual diagnosis and addiction has raised the issue, and it is something that my Department is working on.

Initially, the issue was brought to the House and debated. What often was happening was that the dual diagnosis fell as two diagnoses rather than be brought together in one place. The challenge that my Department and the trusts face in their work is for people to receive the appropriate support, guidance and help that they need.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Ten seconds for Mr Beggs, followed by 10 seconds for the Minister.

Mr Beggs: I thank the Minister for his update and for his detailed response on COVID and additional mental health pressures. Can he provide an update on the mental health and suicide prevention group?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question. Contrary to media reports suggesting an increase, suicide rates in Northern Ireland have remained relatively stable over the past decade. That mental health funding is in place. As I detailed earlier, it is approximately £300 million a year, which is only 5% to 6% of total HSC funding. It is accepted that that is significantly lower than funding in other places, and that is why I continue to put in bids and to increase the finance to make sure that we get a support package, and

not just one that provides finance but one that provides personnel to support those who need it.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Minister. That ends the period for listed questions. We now move on to topical questions.

COVID-19: Vaccine

T1. **Mr Gildernew** asked the Minister of Health what plans his Department has to secure a COVID-19 vaccine for people here. (AQT 651/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his question, which is very topical. The UK Government, acting on behalf of the whole of the UK, have access to six potential COVID-19 vaccine candidates. That reflects a national strategy to ensure that we have a supply of vaccines, should any of them prove to be safe and effective.

The vaccines are at various stages. There was an announcement about one yesterday. It still has to undergo rigorous testing and complete the development process that vaccines must complete before they can be considered for use in a vaccination programme.

The United Kingdom would be eligible for the one announced yesterday and has pre-bought over 20 million vaccination doses, which will be distributed across the devolved Administrations using the Barnett formula. That would leave us with 575,000 doses, which would be the equivalent of initially vaccinating 255,000 people. I stress to the Member that it is one out of six potential vaccine candidates. It is the first to be brought forward.

Mr Gildernew: We have, as you said, heard from one company that has made progress. Can the Minister explain how that vaccine will be rolled out for those 255,000 people and what priority groups he is considering for it? Would it be for care home residents, Health and Social Care staff or those who were previously advised to shield?

Mr Swann: That is one of those decisions that is taken out of my hands. One of the things that the Department of Health does, and this is the case across all four nations, is to ensure continuity of supply. The decision on any vaccination programme is handed over to the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI).

It decides what flu vaccines we should prepare and buy in advance, the groups that they should be allocated to, and in what order. It has already done an initial trawl as to where it sees the priority for a COVID-19 vaccine. One of its main thrusts is by age and by working sector. The first sector that it is looking at is those in care homes and the care home working sector. The next sector will be for those over 85. It will then move down into those working in the health and social care systems and will then be ratified by age group.

The JCVI is undergoing the stratification of who will be accessible. I will write to the Member with that because it is accessible. I will also inform the Committee and update the House, should that be useful.

COVID-19: Testing

T2. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Health whether, given the difficulties witnessed with COVID-19 testing, he believes that the current test, trace and protect approach is fit for purpose. (AQT 652/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for her question. Earlier, I gave a few statistics for our current test, trace and protect system. At times, it does come under criticism because of what happens in other places. At the Committee a couple of weeks ago, some of the management team came under unfair criticism and personal attack, which was unfortunate. In that dedicated team there are now 220 tracers working under three different employment contracts — full-time, part-time or on-call bank — so that they can flex up.

We made advances over the summer in being able to contact people by text message and online. The digital ability to test, trace and protect is being enhanced continually. As I said in response to another question, even the best system in the world, when we get those large numbers, does not simply rely on a test, trace and protect system to bring it under control. COVID-19 takes a multitude of tools to bring it under control. In Germany, whose test, trace and protect system has often been lauded as the most efficient, they are saying that, once you get over 50 cases per 100,000, no test, trace and protect system can effectively manage that. We are sitting at 200 per 100,000, so we have a long way to go. I would rather see us dropping the incidence of COVID-19 and then rely on test, trace and protect, isolation and support to provide the enhanced service that manages and keeps COVID-19 under control.

Ms Dolan: Thank you, Minister. You touched on this briefly in your answer, but we heard earlier that the World Health Organization and others stress the need for a find, test, trace, isolate and support strategy. Do you have any plans to renew the approach to cover all those elements?

Mr Swann: It is a conversation that is ongoing between my Department and the Department for Communities, which is held by the Member's colleague Minister Carál Ní Chuilín, about how we can provide additional supports. There is a non-refundable payment loan that can be drawn down. The conversation that has been raised is that our system is means-tested so that anyone who earns over £21,000 per annum is not eligible for it because it is being handled through the Department for Communities and social services. It is something that the Minister for Communities and I are looking at to ensure that anyone who does test positive, or becomes a contact to someone who is positive, is supported and encouraged to self-isolate and to remain at home so that they are not put under a financial burden to get back to work or out into the community. It is a holistic approach that we are taking forward to make sure that the support is there.

COVID-19: Shielding

T3. **Mr G Kelly** asked the Minister of Health if he would expand on the assessment given by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) on 23 September that COVID-19 shielding advice should not change. (AQT 653/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for his update. I know that he was not in for the initial part of Question Time due to the COVID-19 seating arrangements in the House, but I informed Ms Bradshaw that the CMO is meeting the shielding advisory group tomorrow to review where we are. One of our concerns is that we have seen an increase in the number of over-60s who are testing positive. The test rate that we have shows that roughly 23% of tests are for

someone in that over-60 age group. We all know that they are the most vulnerable section of our community should they contract COVID, because there is a high incidence of it ending in hospitalisation. It is a piece of work that the CMO is looking at. He is meeting the shielding advisory group tomorrow to update recommendations to me and the Executive.

Mr G Kelly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. I thank the Minister for his answer. I apologise. I met Paula Bradshaw, and hopefully I will not repeat her supplementary. Somewhere in the region of 95,000 people got the original shielding letter. Some of them have been in touch with me. There are a huge number of families involved. They are under greater threat. Will the Minister commit to sending an updated letter to those who were shielding to at least give them reassurance and any more information that is there?

Mr Swann: The CMO issued updated guidance about two and a half weeks ago, although it was done online and through social media and we did not post it out to everyone. The Member underestimates it. By the time that we finished issuing shielding letters, there were 208,000. The number of people who finished up in that shielding group far outweighed our initial expectations. That updated guidance is online. I will send it to the Member so that he can forward it to his constituents. It is an area of concern for many. When that group meets tomorrow and the additional advice comes out, I will make sure that it is shared with all MLAs and across all Health and Social Care sectors. We can then inform each of our constituents who have those concerns, should they fall under renewed advice or into renewed categories that we are concerned about.

COVID-19: Restrictions

T4. **Mr McCrossan** asked the Minister of Health whether, given the frustration of many at the lack of decision-making by the Executive in recent days and the impact of uncertainty on the business community, he can confirm that further restrictions are likely in the month of Christmas if there is any easing in the restrictions currently in place. (AQT 654/17-22)

Mr Swann: If there are any further easements, I cannot give a guarantee.

Mr McCrossan: Thank you, Minister. You also mentioned that the vaccine is forthcoming. It is a game changer, particularly for the restrictions that affect every aspect of our society. You mentioned that the roll-out will happen by age, but there are many in our community, from a variance of age groups, who have underlying health conditions, some very serious. Can the Minister give any assurance to the House that his Department will prioritise those with underlying health conditions to ensure that they get access to the vaccine as quickly and swiftly as possible on its release, hopefully this year?

Mr Swann: As I said in response to the initial topical question from the Committee Chair, prioritisation of who receives that vaccine is managed by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation so that there is equity and equality across the United Kingdom and we do not get drawn into a political sphere where politicians get to decide who gets access to a vaccine and who does not. It is left in the hands of medical professionals who can best decide,

when the vaccine becomes available, what groups need to have it and in what order.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Clare Bailey.

Ms Bailey: I did not know that I had a question, Mr Principal Deputy Speaker.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Do you want to take it? No?

Ms Bailey: No. Sorry.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Dead on.

Flu Vaccination

T6. **Ms P Bradley** asked the Minister of Health, after thanking Ms Bailey for the opportunity, for an update on the flu vaccination programme. (AQT 656/17-22)

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. The one before was easier to answer. The flu vaccination programme is proceeding at pace. One of the things that we have done is to increase the order of flu vaccinations. We did that in the summer. The initial batch that arrived was in the region of 665,000. Our vaccination programme usually runs from 1 October into December, and then the second batch arrives for times of need. This time, we increased the number of people who will get the flu vaccine, and we increased its promotion. That initial batch of 665,000 was distributed.

The majority of that was administered within 26 days, and the highly proficient system that we put in place outstripped our supplies of flu vaccine. The other batch is due in the next couple of weeks, so that should allow us to pick up on those who missed out — they did not miss out, but they thought that they were going to be vaccinated at an earlier stage. Arrangements for the schoolchildren's vaccine were in place and remain so, but we very much got ahead of ourselves with those in the adult ranges. One of the things that it has proved to us is that, when a COVID vaccine becomes available, we know that the systems will work very efficiently.

3.30 pm

By way of an update to the Member, one GP sent out flu vaccination letters to 500 patients and 499 turned up. That is unheard of anywhere else. They were able to trace the one remaining person and realised that he or she did not receive the letter. The initial uptake far outstretched any of our expectations of a vaccine programme. It was also beneficial that we took the time in the summer to order additional vaccines, because they will supplement the cohort that was missed during the first phase.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Ms Bradley.

Ms P Bradley: Oh, I am getting to ask a supplementary question. Even better.

Minister, following on from what Ms Bradshaw said about possible shielding letters being sent out, we have heard from various people that they have not yet received their flu vaccine. Will those who are required to shield and their family members be treated as a priority in the next tranche?

Mr Swann: That was one of the pieces of advice and guidance that were sent out. Shielding letters were often based on those who were eligible for a flu vaccine, so the

counter works. One of the things that we did was to expand it so that anyone who was a carer of someone in receipt of a flu vaccine was also eligible. That is why we saw that massive uptake at the start.

I know that many saw it as a criticism, but it delivered far in excess of our expectations, and I must congratulate our GPs, community pharmacists and all the peer vaccinators across our health and social care system. They went out of their way to deliver what is usually a three-month programme in 26 days.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: Mr McGuigan and Mr Durkan are not here. Ms Armstrong can have one question if she and the Minister are brief.

Child Poverty

T9. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Health, after hearing Dr Julie-Ann Maney from the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children talk about children hiding toast in their nappies, what actions are being taken to ensure that children are not living without food and that benefits are allocated by the Department for Communities to those families identified by social services as living in poverty. (AQT 659/17-22)

Mr Swann: The story that the Member raised broke many a heart and brought a tear to many an eye when people realised that that was happening in our community and sector.

The work that is being done by social services in identifying and supporting those families that need that help is crucial. There is also an onus on us, as elected politicians, to make sure that those individuals know what help is available and how to access it. We should also make it as easy as possible to access for the people who need it. It is heartbreaking to think of the reliance on food banks that we now have in Northern Irish society.

The step that the Minister of Education took to support the expansion of free school meals in school holidays was welcome, but it was an embarrassment that we had to do that and that we do not have support mechanisms across our society that prevent people being driven into those situations. There is a partial responsibility among us all in the Executive and the House to make sure that children do not have to hide toast in their nappies because they do not know when they will get their next meal.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: That concludes questions to the Minister of Health. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments. Please also do not forget to wipe down the surfaces etc on your way out of the Chamber.

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

Executive Committee Business

Budget (No. 3) Bill: Final Stage

Debate resumed on motion:

That the Budget (No. 3) Bill [NIA 09/17-22] do now pass. — [Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): We will resume the Final Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill, and, at this stage, we will look to Mr O’Dowd to continue his contribution.

Mr O’Dowd: Before we broke for lunch and for Question Time, I was responding to some comments from Mr Frew about his opinion of the Executive, the role of the Executive and the passage of the Budget Bill. I commented on what I see as dithering in the Department for the Economy and dithering by the Minister for the Economy, not only in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has crippled our economy and, indeed, had a huge impact on the world economy, but in bringing forward proposals for the economic recovery on the other side of this. I also mentioned the frustration in sections of the business sector that, although they were promised funding when they were closed down by the Executive, there has been a delay in getting that funding out. Facts speak louder than words on many occasions, and, on this occasion, the facts speak for themselves.

Some grants are the responsibility of the Department for the Economy, and 51 were paid out during the most recent lockdown. The Department of Finance has paid out 2,142 grants; £7 million has been paid out and that is still progressing. That is comforting news to the 2,000 businesses on one side and the 51 businesses on the other, but we need to continue to get that money out the door. If we are to close businesses down — there will be occasions when we have to — and if everybody wants to work towards a position where our economy is opened up again in a safe way, we have to ensure that there are mechanisms in place to get the money to those businesses, and the key to that is having a Minister at the front of it leading and making sure that it happens.

I want to end with a few comments on the budgetary position. It is worth noting that, before COVID-19 hit, our economy was going into recession. In fact, it was in recession. That is the basis from which we are starting. We were in recession before COVID-19 came along. COVID-19 has hit us and Brexit has hit us. Brexit was part of the reason that we were in recession before COVID-19, but Brexit is having a huge impact on our economy, on our ability to recover from COVID-19 and, indeed, on putting a Budget in place that will meet the needs of our society moving forward.

Declan McAleer made an interesting point during his speech. He said that some of the measures being put in place at the ports would cost around £45 million a year. Those are just some of the measures. That is about £800,000 a week. What could our farmers do with £800,000 a week? Quite rightly, Members have been talking about the needs of restaurateurs, the hospitality sector, care and beauty therapists etc, but £800,000 a week is being paid out on infrastructure and staff because

of Brexit. When we look in the round at the damage being done to the economy, we have to look at it in its totality.

In the Chamber last week — the Minister read out some of the figures earlier — the Minister for Infrastructure was answering questions on the North/South Ministerial Council meeting in transport sectoral format, and she said:

“It is no secret in the House that the Department for Infrastructure often struggles to secure funding, but I am willing to talk to anybody [to see what we can bring about]” — [Official Report (Hansard), Bound Volume 132, p130, col 1].

That statement stuck with me. Then, today, I heard the Finance Minister say that the Department for Infrastructure received £180 million in the most recent funding package. That matches the Department of Education, and I suspect that the highest funding has, deservedly, gone to Health. Therefore, it is not the case that the Department for Infrastructure is struggling to find funding. It is no secret that it received up to £180 million in the most recent financial packages.

Mr Deputy Speaker, I will end on this point. I started off by talking about one of the subjects that was mentioned during questions to the Health Minister: children who are so hungry that they hide toast down their nappy. The Budget and other policies are key to tackling poverty. Quite rightly, people ask, “What are the Executive doing? What have you done?”. Let us look at some of the positive measures that have been taken across the Executive, as a collective. They are not Sinn Féin initiatives, DUP initiatives or SDLP initiatives. When the Executive act together, they make a difference. In England, there was a recent debate, as there was in the summer, about free school meals. It is worth noting that there is a more generous free school meals scheme in place here in the North than there is in England. In this society, you can be in a higher earning bracket and still receive free school meals than is the case in England. Why? It is because the Executive and the Finance Minister, then and now, funded it.

Look at our welfare reform system — the infamous universal credit — and what the Executive did. They put hundreds of millions of pounds in place to mitigate the effects. Scotland is one of the most progressive Administrations on these islands, and people often point towards Scotland and say, “Look at what the Scottish are doing”. Scotland has not put hundreds of millions of pounds into a mitigation scheme for welfare reform. The Executive have, and the Finance Minister backed it, as did other Ministers. There are numerous examples across Departments of where Ministers have put in place funding packages to mitigate the impact of poverty or bring people out of poverty, and that has to be welcomed.

Our Executive make a difference. The question is this: do we have enough money or the fiscal powers to make a significant difference — the change in tempo that we need? My answer is that we do not. If we are to stop children hiding toast down their nappy because they are so hungry, we need to have the fiscal powers that have been talked about in this and other debates. We also need to have a matching economic strategy that will create well-paid jobs and wealth and ensure that our young people, our older people, and everyone in between, are able to contribute to society and earn a proper wage. I will leave it at that.

Mr Allister: I will strive to be mercifully brief, but I want to make a number of miscellaneous points. Of course, we all need to recognise that, when it comes to Budget procedures, this year is, undoubtedly, a year apart. The circumstances, so unforeseen in many regards, have, of necessity, produced not one but three Budget Acts. Who knows? There might be another before we are finished. So, this year is to be treated as something apart.

One of the factors that emerges from the urgencies of this year is that this sort of crisis demonstrates that, if ever you needed to be nimble in government — to have a system capable of being swift of foot — an occasion like this is it. However, what we have, by virtue of our system of government, is probably the most clumsy system imaginable. Yes, I make lots of criticisms about that system but, in making that statement, I am simply making a statement of fact. This is an inherently clumsy system, and it is therefore one that does not lend itself to the swiftness of action that might otherwise be desirable.

3.45 pm

This system of government and process does not emerge well from the present crisis. We have had many people in considerable desperation contacting us all, I am sure, saying, “Government have closed us down and have promised us assistance”. However, as I put it to the Minister during Question Time, many of them are asking about the current schemes, “Where is it?”. The Minister gave an explanation about that, but that does not detract from the reality that there is a considerable time lag between the promise of assistance and its delivery.

I am reading a message that was sent by one self-employed person this afternoon. She is in the beauty industry and has been shut down for four weeks. She has not had a penny. If she is to reopen on Friday, and she does not know that, she does not have any money to buy in what she needs. That drag in the compensation and matching the reality to the promise are compounding many difficulties. Is she opening on Friday? Who knows? It is pretty clear that the Executive have been unable to reach agreement about that. Indeed, it seems that they have not even met today to deal with it.

A circuit breaker was brought in three weeks ago. As I said this morning, we do not need a circuit breaker now but a circus breaker. It really is a circus, but it is not funny for those who are at the receiving end; they do not even know whether their doors will open again on Friday. That is so unfair. That is a physical manifestation of the clumsiness and lack of nimbleness that attends our system of government. That is something that, for many, is quite appalling. Someone, rightly, made the point on the radio this morning that it is OK for the public sector — we are all paid out of the public purse — that it is the private sector that is really paying the price in all this and that employees in the private sector are in desperation as a result.

We had some interesting contributions to the debate. Probably the most interesting was the one from the Deputy Chair of the Finance Committee, Paul Frew. He made a number of very pertinent and challenging points. One of the points that he made is sometimes forgotten in the House: the House is meant to be a forum of challenge. It is meant to be the forum that holds to account the Executive. You would think, from listening to some, that we are here only to back up, sustain, support and, where necessary,

cover up for the Executive. We are not. We should not be. We should be here to challenge. That is something that has been substantially underrated and underprovided in the House.

Mr Frew: I thank the Member for giving way. Given that we have a five-party coalition Executive, that those five parties all come from different directions and go to different places and that we have no Opposition in this place, is it not right and proper that we, as MLAs, should all challenge where we can? Whilst we have members on the Executive, no one has a majority on the Executive. It is vital that we, as an Assembly, do not become compliant and that we challenge where we see the need arise.

Mr Allister: I largely agree with that; there needs to be challenge. Of course, fundamentally, there needs to be an official Opposition. It is beyond farcical that we are in circumstances where they do not exist. Even when they existed, they had their hands tied behind their back because of a lack of provision.

I will pick up on one of Mr Frew's points about the monitoring rounds. We set a Budget and allocate various provisions. One of the points that I made last week at the Finance Committee was that, when we set those allocations, we set them at such a high level that, frankly, they mean very little. We set, for example, £2 billion for the Department of Education. We do not specify in the Estimates or in the Budget how much of that is for primary, preschool, secondary etc; we simply set a global figure. That does not invite or permit an avenue of proper scrutiny, and I think that it is done because Ministers like the luxury of being able to move money around. I am sorry, but that is not really what it should be about. It should be about tabulating what Ministers need according to each sector in their Department, and those on scrutiny Committees should be able to see that. It should not just be £5 billion for Health and £2 billion for Education: we should be able to see the composition of all of that, and we should be able to interrogate that and find answers to that. I think that that information is held in each Department and in the Department of Finance, but it is not conveyed to the House. That is why we get pretty meaningless global figures in our Estimates etc.

Mr Frew made a point about our monitoring rounds. We set all of these figures, and, three times a year, we have an arbitrary — “arbitrary” in the sense that there is no input from the House — distribution by the Executive of reallocations within that. The House is simply told. The House, according to the theory of Budget, is supposed to be the authoriser of spend. It is supposed to be the House that authorises the spending of public money, yet, when it comes to the monitoring rounds, we have no function whatever. We are simply told what the allocations are. As Mr Frew suggested, why cannot the House be in a position where the allocations are subject to a vote of the House? Why can we not ascribe to that some democratic accountability? Why can we not have the monitoring rounds discussed, as they are to a degree, with the Committees and then brought to the House and a resolution of the House required to implement them? That is the fundamental principle of distributing money to Departments, but it certainly does not operate in respect of monitoring rounds. That is something that could properly be addressed.

I heard much talk of a fiscal council. I have a couple of questions about that. What would a fiscal council do that the Office for Budget Responsibility cannot do? Every day, the Department of Finance sends its Consolidated Fund figures to London: every day. That information is fed to a source where the Office for Budget Responsibility can assess it and make recommendations and do as it does elsewhere. What would a fiscal council do that the Office for Budget Responsibility cannot do? Are we in the business of reinventing the wheel? There was a question earlier about quangos and arm's-length bodies. Are we just going to create for the sake of creating, or is there something there to adapt and to work with?

Someone suggested that it was all about fiscal powers. I am sorry, but I have to say to the House that the thought of letting this Executive put their hand into the pocket of business and taxpayers in this Province is, for me, a most frightening proposition.

I, for one, do not want to see fiscal powers be given to this House. This House has grown up with the mentality that you just spend. You spend, spend, spend, and then you whinge and complain when you do not get more to spend. The thought therefore of giving this House fiscal powers, considering how it has exercised many of its current powers, is, for me, a very frightening proposition. For some, perhaps that would be a reason to do it, but there it is. I do not think that it is a sensible proposition whatsoever.

I said that my comments would be miscellaneous, and they are. I will leave them there.

Mr Carroll: It has been referred to already, but a video circulated online last week from Dr Julie-Ann Maney, a paediatrician who works in the children's hospital at the Royal in my constituency of West Belfast. She was being interviewed about an article that she wrote on 'Medium', in which she said:

"Years of austerity have had a devastating impact on the one in three children in Northern Ireland living in poverty."

Many in this Chamber would do well to read what she has written. Mr O'Dowd referred to her comments. He should reflect on what his party did to increase poverty and implement austerity in previous Executives, alongside other parties.

In the interview, she spoke of 14-month-old children who are so hungry that they store food in their nappy; seven-year-old children who are eating three portions or more because they are so hungry; and children with deficiencies whose short lives have been plagued by malnourishment because of poverty. It is heartbreaking stuff. She spoke of dental decay. Her quote that:

"Between 10 and 12 teeth are cleared out of children's mouths every day"

across the North has stayed with me since I heard it. The outpouring of heartbreak and rage on behalf of those children is something that I felt as I watched that caregiver, health worker and doctor being forced to speak out because the impoverished children in our communities are being failed by this Assembly. We are supposed to be living in a civilised part of the world, but that does not sound like civilisation to me.

Every time that I could rise to speak at each stage of this Bill, during the debate on the Estimates and at every stage of the previous Budget Bill, I said that they do nothing to challenge the state-maintained poverty in our communities. This Budget Bill is a continuation of the kind of politics that has deepened poverty rather than alleviated it in our communities.

We hear much about the increased investment in the Budget to alleviate the COVID crisis. It would be quite astounding if there were less money invested in tackling the crisis. As with almost everything that comes before the House, however, that investment has been predominantly aimed at businesses. Far too many people and workers have been forced to struggle throughout this pandemic.

I said something similar a few months ago, but little did we know that £10,000 was rushing into the accounts of some, including accounts that were connected to, or in the control of, public representatives who did not ask for it or did not qualify for it. All the while, I and my colleagues and every community service across the North have been inundated with pleas from people in working-class communities to help them dig around somewhere or barter with someone to get what money or food they need to tide them over. How many hospitality workers would welcome or, indeed, need £10,000 in their account to get them through this crisis? Quite a lot, I would say.

Unite the Union has had to design a financial bailout package because support for workers that it represents is severely lacking, despite those workers being expected to get back on the front line every time that this Executive click their fingers or change their mind and before the virus is under control or a proper testing system is in place.

It is also worth asking this: if, as a result of a universal credit overpayment, sums of £10,000 had been rushed into the accounts of social security claimants, many of whom are new claimants, having lost their job during COVID and facing a Christmas that they never imagined, how quickly would the relevant Department and agencies come down on them to pay it back? I guarantee that it would be done very quickly indeed. That people who hold or who previously held public office chose not to pay back that money is disgraceful, and I am glad that some of them have walked. That the Stormont Executive did not move immediately to claim back the rest of the money taken wrongly from the public purse at a time when people are suffering is completely unacceptable.

4.00 pm

The Finance Minister has been quick to say that Tory austerity has tied the hands and the purse strings of this place and has deepened poverty. Few in this Chamber hate the rotten Tories more than I do. I believe firmly that the Tory Party's influence has made people here worse off, not to mention people in England, Scotland and Wales. I hope that one day we can consign them to the dustbin of history, along with the rotten system that they thrive under and want to maintain.

However, it is plainly false to say that the Assembly could not have done more. The last Executive, of the DUP and the Finance Minister's party, Sinn Féin, spent a decade begging the Tories to let them reduce corporation tax to harmonise our levels with the South, in an ugly game of race-to-the-bottom economics to give multinational

corporations a tax break and to send up a flare to other corporations to fill their boots here at the expense of our block grant. To this day, I do not think that the Sinn Féin Finance Minister can pledge that he would champion an increase in corporation tax to make those who profit from workers in the North pay their way and fund our services. Perhaps he can correct me.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. On the topic of corporation tax, does the Member think that it is fair to describe a policy that could have brought thousands of jobs to Northern Ireland as a strategy of “filling your boots”?

Mr Carroll: I remind the Member that no evidence exists that reducing corporation tax would bring a single additional job into the North. However, if he can supply me with such evidence, I will happily share it online. However, I know that it does not exist; it is fantasy economics.

We do not even need to push Westminster for further powers to make the wealthiest pay. People Before Profit has, for years, pushed the idea of lifting the rates cap, so that those with the broadest shoulders carry the heaviest burden. It is worth noting that billionaires have increased their collective wealth by an estimated £25 billion to £30 billion solely during the pandemic. I have been calling on Governments, North and South and across these islands, to consider a wealth tax to bail out ordinary people.

I am not alone in that; progressive economists and activists have raised the idea too. Not only are those Governments not implementing a wealth tax, but, just today, I asked the First Minister whether a COVID-19 wealth tax was discussed at the recent British-Irish Council meeting. She told me that it was not even on the agenda. If we needed another reminder that we are not all in this together and that Governments continue to work with those with the deepest pockets, a vivid example of it is right there.

Finally, I find it galling that some in this Government are going above and beyond to present an image of themselves as mould-breakers, as shakers of institutions, and as champions of social security claimants and those in public housing. The big parties in this House set the mould, built up the institutions and ran them, in large part, as a gravy train.

It was never good enough that parties like Sinn Féin played good cop against the will of the big, bad DUP or the wolves across the water. However, it is particularly exasperating when they stand over this Budget today; when they stand over the approach of this Executive to the COVID-19 pandemic; when they harp on about Bengoa being the solution to our health service underfunding shambles; when they allowed health workers to strike in the cold and still refused to pay them the lost pay that they had promised would be paid; when they continue to stand over the decision to do the Tories’ bidding by introducing and defending welfare reform, the mitigations to which have cost more than it would have done to avoid introducing them in the first place, and when there are so many cracks that people are struggling to pay the bedroom tax that we were told was never coming to the North.

They should scrap welfare reform; they should raise the rates on the wealthiest; they should shout and scream about raising corporation tax and not be shy about it; and they should radically shake up the priorities of this —.

Mr Stalford: I appreciate the Member giving way. The Member talks about raising people’s rates, but can I outline a scenario for him? The Member will know that in my constituency there are places such as Stranmillis, where people bought their houses 40 or 50 years ago. They are now pensioners who may be asset-rich but who are cash-poor. If he places them in the bracket of the wealthy, how does he intend to extract the money from them? Will they be forced to sell their homes?

Mr Carroll: I thank the Member for his intervention. I am advocating that the wealthy pay more, but I believe that the Member probably disagrees with that, given his comments yesterday.

How else can parties claim to stand on the side of people in working-class communities who will always feel the sharp edge of their budgets and never seem to benefit from the scandal-laden schemes, of which there are too many to name, that have come from this Building?

I am very well aware that this kind of speech will be received, particularly by Mr Stalford —.

Mr Stalford: With the contempt that it deserves.

Mr Carroll: “With the contempt that it deserves”, he says. I am well aware of that, given yesterday’s comments and optics, with his side of the House having a meltdown with the talk of basic socialist policies. I think that he is still hurting from Trump’s defeat in America [*Laughter.*] Indeed, I have enough experience of having radical ideas about the redistribution of wealth being met with sneering and arrogant disdain from several sides of the Chamber and, sometimes, even laughs from across the way. We have had plenty of them today. However, it is not my job to present politics that is acceptable to Establishment politicians; it is quite the opposite. I know that the Budget is likely to be passed, and there will probably be no Division in the Chamber. However, I want to put on record my opposition to it for the reasons that I have outlined.

Mr Nesbitt: I listened to Mr O’Dowd’s speech earlier. His remarks focused on children who were so frightened that they would go hungry again that they hid food in their nappies in the Royal Belfast Hospital for Sick Children. We are a First World country. Of course, there are many measures of how successful a Government, an Executive and a society are, one of which is how well we look after children. Another is how well we look after elderly people, and, another, the most vulnerable in society. In fact, section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 specifies nine categories of people to whom we must pay particular attention.

I am sure that I have said this before: Mr O’Dowd and I could go now to the maternity unit of the Ulster Hospital round the corner and ask to see the latest child to be born into this country. I imagine that we could agree that, in that child, there is a spark of ability, creativity and talent. Our job as politicians is to create the environment where that child can explore that spark and find out what it is.

As a former Minister of Education, Mr O’Dowd might actually agree that our education system, which provides the schools that are the environment where children find out who they are, perhaps, puts too much emphasis on one particular form of intelligence: the academic. We know that there are multiple intelligences. In this country, we produce people who are brilliant at all sorts of things; great

artists, musicians, actors, scientists and sportspeople. A lot of people will recognise that George Best was the best footballer of his generation; a man who was born in east Belfast in the 1940s. What a lot of people fail to recognise is that, within two years of George Best's birth and two miles from where he was born, another sportsman was born. He was Mike Gibson, who the All Blacks, the best rugby players in the world, said was the best rugby footballer of his generation. Those men were born not only in a small regional capital city of the UK but in one quarter of that city.

I, certainly, commend to Members the thinking of the late professor of creativity Ken Robinson, who recognised that spark, which he called "the element", in children. We need to allow children to find that spark or element. We have to use the Budget to produce positive outcomes for people. We are debating the Budget in isolation. As I have said before and will say again, it should be a multi-annual Budget and should be linked very carefully and closely to a Programme for Government. The Programme for Government, which still sits in draft form, has an overarching purpose to improve the well-being of all our people. That is what we need to do.

The architect of outcomes-based accountability in programmes for government, Mark Friedman, makes it clear that trying hard is not good enough.

I know that the Minister is trying hard, and maybe all of the Ministers in the Executive and everybody in the House is trying hard, but that does not mean that we are succeeding. I think that, if you were to ask the hospitality sector, it would say that we are failing. Much more widely, there are many people in our society who are looking at us today and saying, "You are failing", and some may be even going as far as to say, "You have failed. There is no way back".

Mr Frew makes the point that we need to scrutinise, particularly because there is no Opposition in the Chamber and no second revising Chamber, as there is in London and Dublin. The media may play a much more important scrutinising role in this country than they do in the Republic, England, Scotland and Wales because there is no Opposition or second Chamber. This morning, I heard a well-known radio host deride the Executive because they went home at 9.00 pm last night without an agreement. He made the point that, if his team were working on an investigation, it would work through the night until it was resolved. Well, there is a problem with the analogy because I do not think that his team splits in two, with one half saying, "We are taking the investigation down this road", and the other half of the investigative team saying, "Oh no, we are going in exactly the opposite direction". Unfortunately, that seems to be what is happening with our Executive today. As Mr Allister has said, it appears that there is not even agreement on when to meet, never mind agreement on the substantive points on the agenda.

I hear a fear expressed that at least one party of the Executive is trying to run down the clock until Thursday night at midnight, which is when some of the regulations fall. If the clock runs down, the pubs reopen. Well, the Finance Minister and I could agree to go to lunch in a pub on Friday in his constituency or mine. There is just one problem: there will be no food. The pubs, hotels and restaurants need lead-in times, and the lead-in times have gone for reopening on Friday.

I say, as a final thought — one that, I think, is reflective of how many people are thinking about us in the Chamber today — that the two parties that run the Executive out of Stormont Castle have had 13 and a half years to find a way to rub along together. That is 13 and a half unbroken years to put their differences aside and to recognise that, when the votes are counted, they are not opponents any more but partners in government. Coming to a point where, after 13 and a half years, they still cannot overcome difficulties for the greater good of the people, difficult as it is, is not good enough.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I thank all of the Members who have spoken today in the debate and all of those who contributed to earlier debates. We have had a number of debates on the Estimates and at the earlier stages of this Budget Bill. I have listened with interest, and, while I do not agree with all of the arguments that were presented, it is useful for me, as Finance Minister, to hear those arguments. There are points that have been made that I would like to come back to.

A number of people mentioned the fiscal council; indeed, Mr Allister questioned the need for it. The fiscal council is part of the NDNA agreement, so it is a five-party Executive agreement that we will have a fiscal council. Therefore, as the Minister responsible, it is my obligation to provide a fiscal council, and that is what I intend to do. As I said — I think that it was during Question Time — I intended to bring a paper to the Executive in the not-too-distant future and had been working on it. Of course, that work, like a lot of normal Executive work, was held up because of the response to COVID issues, but that is clearly the intention.

My colleague John O'Dowd took Mr Frew to task on a number of issues, but there is clearly an internal issue with regard to his party leadership being worked out, once again, in his speech. I have no desire to get into that. Suffice it to say that we have given over £428 million to the Department for the Economy to support businesses. Of course, my Department has provided support to businesses as well. Mr Frew's attitude to additional fiscal powers is similar, given his kind of COVID-denying speech here, to that of his colleague Sammy Wilson.

4.15 pm

Mr Frew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: Let me finish my point.

I remember that, when, as Finance Minister, he was asked about additional fiscal powers for the Assembly, he said, "I don't want any more fiscal powers because I'm a unionist". That, to me, betrays a colonial mindset where you think that people in Whitehall know better than us natives and therefore should take responsibility for our decisions. That is as well as being someone who —

Mr Frew: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: I will in a second, if you will allow me to finish my point.

That is as well as being somebody who is clearly opposed to the strategy that the Executive are taking in response to COVID. His remarks were not about the current restrictions and getting support out on the ground but about the entirety of the approach to the restrictions. It was in pointed language, but, as I say, that is more to do with a challenge to his party's leadership. The idea that he does

not want fiscal powers falls into that category as well. I am happy to give way.

Mr Frew: I thank the Minister for giving way. Mr Deputy Speaker, is it right that the Minister would misinterpret my wording? I have never denied COVID; in fact, in my speech, I talked about it being a dangerous disease and virus. The reason that I would not want further fiscal powers for the House is that in front of me is one of the most dangerous political parties in western Europe.

Mr Murphy: In relation to COVID, clearly, the remarks that the Member has made consistently in the last number of debates have challenged the whole approach of the Executive, whose priority is to protect public health and protect lives. Clearly, he considers the necessary, if very difficult, choices that we have made — all five parties collectively in the Executive — as something with which he fundamentally disagrees.

Mr Frew also raised the issue of the delay in LPS payments. I accept that there was a delay, and I would have much preferred that the payments were out much more quickly. I answered the question at Question Time. There were issues because the scheme was perhaps not quite as straightforward as the one for the first round of payments. There were other data issues attached to that, but I am told that those have been resolved. As of yesterday, over 2,000 payments of over £7 million in support had been issued on the ground, and more will go out today. I am hopeful that that will then start to roll out accordingly.

Caoimhe Archibald raised the case of multi-annual Budgets, as did a number of Members. We have had that discussion here on a number of occasions. Members will know not only my desire but the Executive's desire for multi-annual Budgets, given the planning that we wish to do and the certainty that we wish to have about our finances. She also mentioned the issue of those excluded, particularly travel agents. The First Minister, the deputy First Minister and I met that sector a week or so ago, and we have undertaken to do some work with them. We recognise that they, like a number of other sectors, have not yet received support and that a way should have been found for them to receive support some time back. We have given a commitment to try to do that.

Dr Archibald raised questions about the funding held at the centre. Just for clarity, as I said, again at Question Time, we had held back £100 million for further interventions, and, as of last Thursday, we have an additional £400 million. That is a significant amount of money. The Executive will want to get down fairly quickly to ensure that the schemes that we have started to roll out get on the ground where they are needed and that other schemes and supports can get out where they are required in the next four months, because that money has to be spent in the current financial year.

Dr Archibald asked about the Shared Prosperity Fund. I regret that we still have no certainty about how much that will be. Of equal concern to us is the fact that the legislation being brought through Westminster — I note that it ran into some hiccup yesterday in the House of Lords — seems to give Whitehall the power to decide on and allocate programmes in relation to what would have been European funding. That is clearly not what was agreed or expected not just by us but by Scotland

and Wales, and it is a matter of some concern for those Administrations also.

Dr Archibald asked about flexibilities, as did other Members, including Pat Catney and, perhaps, Matthew O'Toole and Andrew Muir.

Again, that issue is common to Scotland, Wales and us. We have pressed the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to agree additional flexibilities, including carrying forward unspent funding and the ability to switch capital to resource. That would allow us to manage our budgets more effectively within our overall funding. It is not about asking for additional funding; it is about managing the funding that we have. We have yet to hear from the Treasury on its consideration of that.

Dr Archibald asked a pertinent question about mental health funding. That is a key concern of the Executive as a whole, which is why we supported the establishment of a mental health champion. In June, the Executive allocated £1.5 million for the implementation of the mental health action plan. That includes a dedicated COVID-19 mental health response plan. There is collective concern across the Executive about that.

Matthew O'Toole has just arrived in the Chamber. I had written a series of responses to him. However, he must be a good man for an each-way bet in the bookies. Having outlined all his criticisms of the Executive, he tempered them by recognising all the challenges and the fact that the SDLP is very much part of the Executive, so I had to retreat from some of the areas of contention that I was going to raise with him in relation to that. He recognises that there are challenges. We have now had £2.8 billion of additional spend this year. We did not get that money at the start of the financial year and told to spend it over the financial year. We got it in chunks, unannounced. Sometimes, we learned from the media that we were getting additional money. Had we had this debate this time last week, we would have been operating on the basis that we had £100 million set aside to spend. Within two days, we have £500 million set aside. Matthew O'Toole argues for much more planning and foresight — a strategic approach. I am not complaining about the additional money; I am happy to have it. The problem of trying to spend it is much better than the problem of not having enough. However, he has to understand, as others do, that that makes strategic planning almost impossible. We want to allocate the money to where it is needed most.

After Mr O'Toole had spoken, Mr Muir raised the point that the most unforgivable thing that we can do is have money unspent. Those two things compete: strategic, long-term planning; and ensuring that you spend the additional tranches of money that come at you unexpectedly. I have no doubt that, if I stand here on 1 April talking about money that we have returned to the Treasury, there will be a litany of criticism of the Executive. That is not an excuse; it is a recognition of the circumstances. I agree that, in the longer term, we need budgetary plans attached to an agreed Programme for Government. That is why we have argued, as the Member knows, for multi-annual Budgets that will fit with more long-term, strategic planning. In the circumstances that we find ourselves in, it has been practically impossible to do that. I agree, as I have said to him on many occasions, that we need a fiscal commission as well as the fiscal council. We have been working side

by side on those. Propositions for both are well worked up, and we intend to bring them forward very soon.

Matthew O'Toole raised questions about borrowing. We have not yet utilised the RRI borrowing in 2020-21. It can be used only for capital expenditure, and the current assessment is that the existing capital budget will be sufficient for Departments this year. He will know that we lost at least the first quarter — arguably, the first six months — of construction. If we asked to borrow but were unable to spend the capital that we have, questions would be asked, but we will continue to monitor that position.

I thank Pat Catney for some of the points that he made in relation to the Department, and, indeed, the work of the Committee. He asked about NIW and its funding. I agree that every Department is challenged. The £15 million was, I am sure, welcome to NIW. However, the Department for Infrastructure has had an increase of almost 19% in its capital budget this year, which is substantial. It is for the Minister to prioritise how to spend that within her Department. I have no doubt that she is challenged. John O'Dowd remarked that the Infrastructure Minister had said that it was no secret that her Department does not get the allocations that she wants.

No Department gets the allocation that they want. A 19% increase in capital with an almost 10% increase in resource and £180 million given to it over this year on top of that is a substantial amount of money for any Minister to be going along with. You then get to the question of what they decide to do with that money and how they prioritise that.

John O'Dowd raised questions about the certainty that we want for next year's funding envelope. He knows that we will continue to press the Treasury for that amount. We are waiting on the outcome of the comprehensive spending review. It should have happened over the summer, but it has been pushed back into the autumn. The later it comes, the more difficult it becomes for us to do our consultation exercise that we want to do in order to afford effective scrutiny to next year's Budget. That did not happen this year, and we recognise that. The later it is that that amount is revealed to us, the more compressed that consultation exercise becomes.

Jim Allister raised a number of points. He criticised the need to be nimble. I agree with him. This emergency has highlighted that. In certain circumstances, it has highlighted weaknesses that we probably always knew were there. He referred to one business that was in touch with him, but he also has to recognise that we were able to turn schemes around in days to get them out, albeit there were delays in getting the data to get the money paid, and that under previous Executives those schemes would have taken months to turn around and get out the door. There has been a degree of nimbleness and a responsiveness, certainly in some Departments. Undoubtedly, a five-party coalition has made that more difficult, but I can look at the Scottish Government, which have a single-party government, and see that they have some of the same difficulties and criticisms that we have about getting support out on the ground. Wales is the same. In the South, a three-party coalition is having its difficulties. That is not unique to our system of government, to be quite honest.

If we can get this all spent by the end of the financial year, and we have the bulk of it spent, we will spend £2.8 billion on top of the budgets that we already had to spend. That is a significant challenge. To get schemes out in the middle of that, with people off work, working from home and all the disruption that that brings is a significant challenge.

I agree with him and with Paul Frew about the challenge role of the MLAs. He does not have to do this, but some people try to present themselves as being opposed to the decisions that the Executive make while not recognising that, in fact, their party in the Executive voted for the very decisions that are being taken. Absolutely, there should be a challenge function in Committees and in the Chamber, but people cannot ride two horses at the one time.

I recognise that there is a challenge in the scrutiny of the monitoring rounds because you have a bidding process coming in very late from Departments, and that money has to be turned around within a certain time and allocated. The Committees have an ability to ask departmental officials for details on spending areas in not only the Budget allocation but in the monitoring round allocations. While that does not, perhaps, allow the entire Assembly to do that prior to a monitoring round, it can nonetheless be carried out by Committees.

He is also an opponent of fiscal power. It is fair enough if he thinks that he would not like to see the Executive put their hands in the pockets of businesses, but he is quite content for Tories such as Boris Johnson, Michael Gove and all those characters to put their hands in the pockets of businesses here and decide what to do with it in order to give tax breaks to their friends over there. He is content for that to happen.

Gerry Carroll again raised questions. He made the point that he is not here to present acceptable politics. I absolutely get that, and he should challenge as much as he wants to, but he also has to present accuracy. When he says that the Executive have spent much more on businesses than we have on workers, that is not true. Setting aside the furlough scheme, which was done by Westminster, was for workers and probably outweighs all that we have spent —.

Mr Stalford: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Murphy: I will just finish this point, and then I will give way. The Health budget, the budget that is going through Communities for vulnerable people and the Education budget far outweigh the money that we have given to Economy. If he thinks that it is his responsibility to present unacceptable politics, and I congratulate him on that, he has a responsibility to present accurate figures.

I will give way on that point.

Mr Stalford: I thank the Minister for giving way. On that point, the Member from West Belfast talks about giving money to businesses. Businesses do not exist in isolation; they are made up of people. They provide jobs for people that those people will have to go back to.

Does the Minister agree that, if we were to follow the logic of the Member for West Belfast of permanent or semi-permanent lockdown, that would make it more and more difficult to revive those jobs once we come out of the crisis?

4.30 pm

Mr Murphy: There are difficult challenges to be faced by any Executive. Obviously, we have to act on the basis of health advice. The vast majority of our businesses are small enterprises that employ very few people. They are not multi-property stores. They are not huge businesses. The vast bulk of the businesses that we have in this part of the world are small businesses.

The fact is that Mr Carroll is not correct. The fact is that the last Executive did not spend 10 years begging for a reduction in corporation tax; it was part of a one-off agreement at Stormont House. The fact is that the health workers' strike pay is not being held up by the Executive. I allocated that money to the Health Department months ago, and it has not been paid by the Health Department. As I say, the Member can present the politics that he wants to present. He is absolutely entitled to do so, and I support him in doing that. I support his challenge in relation to austerity and other matters, but he has to be accurate when he speaks about that.

On Mike Nesbitt's points, I am old enough to remember Mike Gibson. He was a very classy full back, as I recall.

Mr Nesbitt: A centre.

Mr Murphy: A centre, yes. I remember him playing. Mr Nesbitt characterises the difficulties that we have in the Executive as being simply the product of the DUP and Sinn Féin. That is fair enough; he is in a different party. A lot of parties here present themselves as being in opposition and in the Executive at the same time. I always think that the danger of trying to ride two horses is that you fall off in between. I was prepared and ready to have an Executive meeting at 9.00 pm last night. My party or the other parties in the Executive did not call off an Executive meeting at 9.00 pm last night. I have been prepared all day, even though I have been on duty in the Chamber, to go into an Executive meeting. I have not been able to get an Executive meeting. I am ready to do business in the Executive any time soon.

I will finish with this point, which is probably a more optimistic note. Mr Nesbitt referred to children who might be born today: as I was answering questions in the Chamber earlier, I learnt that I had a grandson born today *[Applause.]* I am very conscious of our responsibility not just to the next generation but to the one beyond that. I ask Members to continue to support the legislation so that we can address all of the key issues, not only now but into the future. I ask Members to support the Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Thank you. It would be remiss of me if we did not put on record our congratulations to you and the family, Minister. I hope that mother and baby are very well.

Before we proceed to the Question, I advise Members that, as this is a Budget Bill, the motion requires cross-community support.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved (with cross-community support):

That the Budget (No. 3) Bill [NIA 09/17-22] do now pass.

Adjourned at 4.33 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 Finance

Extension of the Financial Support Agreed for Derry City and Strabane District to all Areas

Published on Tuesday 20 October 2020.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I wish to provide Members of decisions taken by the Executive on 15 October 2020 on the provision of financial assistance to be paid to businesses most directly affected by the essential actions outlined to the Assembly by the First and deputy First Minister on 14 October 2020. They indicated then that the Executive would be working on supports as a matter of priority.

Support Scheme

This Statement provides details of a first support scheme.

The Executive previously agreed a financial support package for Derry City and Strabane District Council area. The regulations (The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020) to allow the financial assistance to be paid to businesses in Derry and Strabane were laid on Wednesday. Those regulations are directly linked to The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. Consequential amendments to the Health regulations will continue to be linked with the financial support scheme. The scheme opened to applications on 14 October.

The Executive has now agreed that the scheme agreed for Derry and Strabane should be extended to all districts with effect from Monday 19 October. I will now ensure that amendments are made to the Financial Regulations at the earliest possible opportunity this week to incorporate the revised levels of support and to link with the revised restrictions that came into operation on Friday evening.

Eligibility

The definitive list of all the revised restrictions are in Amendment No 9 of the Health Protection Regulations made on 16 October 2020.

The Department's Scheme seeks to support those businesses using commercial premises now significantly restricted in use or now forced to close directly by these new Regulations. These include:

- Cafes, pubs and restaurants that are required to close or limit their services to a takeaway service instead;

- Hotels, guest houses and registered Bed and Breakfasts;
- Close contact services detailed in the Health Protection Regulations which use commercial premises;
- Indoor visitor attractions;
- Other businesses which under the Health Protection Regulations are required to cease to carry on that business or service, such as; campsites and caravan parks for touring caravans, cinemas, museums and galleries, bingo halls, funfairs, inflatable parks, indoor amusement arcades and skating rinks.

The Department will look carefully at every application; it is not possible to outline every scenario at this stage given that the new Health Regulations only came into force on Friday 16 October.

I am keen to roll out the current scheme to all areas so the majority of businesses affected by the new restrictions get financial support as quickly as possible.

Levels of Support

The Executive has further agreed that we double the levels of financial assistance made to qualifying businesses. The new rates will be as follows:

£800 per week for businesses in properties with a Net Annual Value of £15,000 or less and businesses that are joint occupant of a property with any NAV;

£1,200 per week for medium sized businesses in properties with a Net Annual Value between £15,001 and £51,000; and

£1,600 per week for businesses in properties with a Net Annual Value of £51,001 or more.

Businesses in the Derry and Strabane Council area who have already applied to the scheme do not need to re-apply - they will automatically receive the higher payment.

Financial Implications

The costs of the scheme for 4 weeks are estimated at £35 million. DoF will deliver the scheme through its Land and Property Services and DoF has been allocated £35m for this purpose.

Other support

The extension of this scheme across the North means that it can be implemented almost immediately. It opened for applications on Monday 19 October.

The construction of the financial assistance scheme – which is linked directly to the Health Protection regulations – means that it is not a suitable vehicle to deliver support to those businesses and sectors which have been indirectly affected by the restrictions.

I know there are many businesses who haven't benefitted from previous support schemes. I have encouraged Executive colleagues to urgently bring forward proposals for sectors they have responsibility for.

Conor Murphy
Minister of Finance

Department of Health

COVID-19: Update

Published at 5.00 pm on Friday 23 October 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): In this update to Members I am pleased to be able to report that the rate of increase in Covid-19 cases has slowed from last week.

Testing has remained stable over that period, however there has been a progressive rise in COVID hospital patients, which today now stands at 296. We are now very close to peak levels experienced during wave 1 and indeed some individual Trusts have well exceeded the level experienced by them in April.

Unfortunately the spread of the virus has caused serious disruption to our Health and Social Care system. Whilst we know much more about treatment for Covid-19 now than we did in March, and detailed surge plans are in place across each of the local Trusts, with many staff either infected or being required to self-isolate there has been an unavoidable disruption to some front line services.

I am deeply concerned however that some cancer procedures have been postponed. I have always made clear that I expected to see red flag and cancer procedures protected as much as feasibly possible. From next Monday I have asked that all patients whose cancer surgery was cancelled in recent days to be provided with a new date.

The ability to protect these urgent services, and provide the appropriate post-operative care, however is very dependent on the number of Covid-19 hospital admissions, the demand for ICU beds and the availability of specialised staff. That is why stamping down on Covid-19 infection rates is now more critical than ever as reducing our rates helps us to protect those cancer and other vital services.

Whilst we are sadly reporting a number of deaths each day now, and R remains above 1 both for cases and hospital admissions, it does appear that Northern Ireland may be beginning to turn the corner on this wave. The R number has fallen slightly since last week. This is likely to reflect both the impact of the Northern Ireland wide household restrictions and the wider restrictions in Derry City and Strabane Local Government District area.

The percentage of positive tests has also begun to plateau, while remaining at a high level. Assuming that current restrictions reduce R to less than 1, Professor Young has advised that we expect some indication of an improvement in these measures in the next week.

There has been an increase in ICU occupancy which now sits at 34 and in the context of the increase in hospital admissions and inpatients, we have now moved beyond the lag period between increased case and pressure on the health and social care system. As a result of the recent strict measures taken and as long as public adherence remains high, my Department expects that admissions, bed occupancy and ICU admissions will peak in the next two weeks.

It is essential therefore that everyone takes all the necessary precautions to look after themselves and others.

Shielding for 'clinically extremely vulnerable' people has been paused since 31 July 2020. The Chief Medical Officer and his team have looked at this position again in light of the increased numbers of cases of Coronavirus in Northern Ireland.

Since shielding was first advised, a number of important changes have taken place in our approach to managing coronavirus and reducing its transmission. This includes a greater awareness of the importance of social distancing, the requirement to use face coverings, Covid secure workplaces and greater adherence to respiratory and hand hygiene.

After careful consideration, the Chief Medical Officer and his team has concluded that shielding should remain paused. This position will, however, be kept under review and my Department will not hesitate to update our shielding advice if we need to.

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Department for Communities

COVID-19 Culture, Languages, Arts and Heritage Support Programme 2020-21

Published at 12.00 noon on Monday 26 October 2020.

Ms Ni Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): My Department has been working at pace to bring forward funding schemes to support the culture, languages, arts and heritage sectors. I recognise the profound and pressing challenges for organisations and individuals in the sectors and have worked hard to ensure the allocation of funds by the Executive to address these.

I have already approved the release of £3million to Arts Council to manage oversubscription to their current funding scheme for individual creatives in recognition of the significant hardship that self-employed and freelance individuals are currently facing.

I am today releasing a further £15.75million to Arts Council, and heritage and indigenous language partner bodies. Details of how to apply to Arts Council's support fund for organisations and to a Heritage Recovery Fund will be available from Wednesday 28 October 2020.

I will announce further allocations in the coming weeks, with the aim of dispersing the total Executive Covid-19 funding allocation of £29million by 31 March 2021.

This paper sets out the rationale, further details of the approach to supporting these vital sectors, and the wide ranging benefits they deliver to our society, communities and individuals.

Value of these Sectors

The culture, languages, arts and heritage sectors make a substantial contribution to our local economy, our quality of life, health and wellbeing, and in shaping our standing as a great place to live, work, visit and invest.

These sectors have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, and we are at risk of losing a quarter of the GVA they generate, as well important skills and of our valued cultural infrastructure crumbling.

These sectors need to be supported urgently, not just to protect economic and social benefits, but also in recognition that they have a vital role to play in helping us all understand the impact of the pandemic, reconnect with one another and find ways to emerge from this crisis fresh and refocussed, ready to tackle social challenges.

Engagement

In developing a policy framework to support these sectors, my Department has engaged widely with partners across central and local government, as well as arm's length bodies and people from the sector, to ensure that funding can be distributed quickly, fairly and in ways which maximise its impact.

Release of £3million

Arts Council are already delivering a £5.6million Covid-19 Creative Support Fund which has so far opened for calls for applications from arts organisations and creative individuals in two tranches. The second tranche call for

applications from creative individuals was significantly over-subscribed and so I have approved the release of £3million from the £29million Programme budget to provide much needed support.

Support Schemes

My Department has now finalised proposals and approvals for funding schemes to support these sectors with the remaining £26million budget.

All proposals are premised on demonstration of need and ability to deliver defined outcomes now and in the longer term.

The majority of the budget will be used to meet immediate needs, with a focus on stabilising sectoral organisations and supporting self-employed individuals working in these sectors. The remaining funds will be allocated to new projects to create momentum and begin to deliver social renewal with a new focus on tackling poverty, social exclusion, isolation and deprivation.

Delivery partners' administration costs to manage these grant schemes will be deducted from scheme allocations.

All schemes will include proportionate due diligence to manage the potential for duplication with other funding sources and ensure funding awards are prioritised to achieve value for money.

Sectoral Organisations

New funding programmes to support the culture, arts and heritage sectors will be available from 28 October 2020.

Sectoral organisations which apply for support will be expected to demonstrate that their primary purpose is to create, present or support across a range of areas, including visual, performing and traditional arts, music, community arts, creative industries, heritage, and independent museums, libraries and cinema amongst others.

Commercial organisations, including those which not have previously received public funding, will be eligible to apply for support provided they are viable and their primary purpose relates to these sectors. However, they will compete for funding with non-profit organisations by demonstrating the contribution they make, and the benefits they deliver to our wider creative infrastructure and communities

Individuals

A further call for applications to the Arts Council scheme to support individuals will also open shortly and will provide support to those who have not yet received funding from previous calls. Individuals will be required to demonstrate that a significant proportion of their income is derived from creative activity and that as a result of this having been lost, are facing financial hardship.

This third tranche of funding for individual creatives will include higher awards for deaf and disabled creatives who have additional support needs.

Support will also be available to individuals working in the heritage sector.

Indigenous Languages Culture and Heritage

I am also today releasing funding to support individuals, organisations and groups working in our indigenous languages sectors.

This will help to support cultural development, for example music and tuition; develop ways to promote communities' cultural and linguistic heritage; provide local community services through the medium of their indigenous languages; and help develop partnership working (including urban and rural joint projects) within their communities to focus on social renewal and outreach for a wider audience.

Partner bodies will release details of funding support on 4 November 2020.

Local Government Sectoral Organisations

Allocations will shortly be made to local councils to provide them with funding to support these sectors and the arts and heritage organisations for which they are responsible – this will also ensure a geographical spread to the support.

Renewal Projects

I am keen to catalyse new, renewal activity in addition to stabilising these sectors and this will be achieved through allocating the remainder of the Programme budget to new project ideas.

The Community Foundation in partnership with the Rural Community Network will shortly be calling for applications from organisations – not limited to those traditionally working in this space – for proposals for culture, language, arts and heritage projects.

The University of Atypical will expand their successful Deaf & Disabled Artists Programme and the Architectural Heritage Fund will expand their successful Community Enterprise Catalyst scheme.

Funding will also shortly be allocated to National Museums, Libraries and to our Creative Learning Centres via NI Screen, to deliver partnership projects with the community to reach new audiences. I will also allocate additional funding to Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships to allow communities to take forward cultural, language, arts and heritage projects to spark momentum at community level.

Cultural Strategy

This emergency has highlighted the need for a more strategic and sustainable approach to the sector. I have asked my officials to develop a Culture Arts and Heritage Strategy to set out an ambitious vision for how these sectors must adapt in the post-Covid-19 landscape in order to thrive and deliver longer term social and economic benefits. I will bring further proposals on this forward in due course.

I hope that you will join me in welcoming this much needed investment for the culture, languages, arts and heritage sectors.

Department of Health

Clinical Concerns within Urology at Southern Health and Social Care Trust

Published at 12.00 pm on Tuesday 27 October 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The Southern Health and Social Care Trust notified my Department on 31 July 2020 that it had identified clinical concerns in relation to the work of a consultant urologist who no longer works in the health service.

An internal exercise was immediately initiated by the Trust and is ongoing in order to ascertain the number of patients whose care may need to be reviewed. At this stage, a small number of patients have been contacted in this regard.

As Health Minister, I am extremely concerned about any issue that involves the potential for patients to come to harm within our Health and Social Care system. However, it is important to stress that the vast majority of urology patients in the Southern Trust will be unaffected by the issues that have come to light. I want to assure all patients and their families that the investigation into these matters will be comprehensive, and that anyone whose care needs to be reviewed will be contacted as quickly as possible.

My Department has been kept updated by the Southern Trust regarding progress with this exercise, and I intend to make an oral statement in the Assembly as soon as practicable in order to provide further details about this matter.

My Department's immediate priority is to ensure that the Southern Trust completes this initial phase of work in the weeks ahead in order to minimise and prevent any potential risk or harm to patients.

My Department has therefore established a Urology Assurance Group to provide external oversight to the Southern Trust's ongoing process, and the future management plan for the issues arising from it. The Assurance Group comprises senior officials from the Department of Health, Health and Social Care Board, Public Health Agency, Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, as well as the Southern Trust. I will publish final terms of reference for the Assurance Group alongside my Assembly statement.

If any urology patient or their carer has concerns about their treatment and would like information they should contact the Southern Trust on 0800 4148520.

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Department of Finance

2020-21 October Monitoring and COVID-19 Funding

Published on Thursday 29 October 2020.

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I wish to provide Members with an update on the second monitoring round of 2020-21 which has taken place alongside decisions taken in response to the Executive's new COVID-19 restrictions coming into effect.

COVID-19 Response

Covid Funding Available

In response to COVID-19 the Chancellor, on 9 October, announced further measures which increased the amount of funding guaranteed to the Executive in 2020-21 to £2.4 billion. This provided an additional £200 million Resource DEL for allocation.

The Health Minister has provided his assessment of the need within his department. Of the £600 million held centrally £526.7 million is needed for rebuild, the full expected cost of PPE and the response to a second surge. This leaves £73.3 million for other COVID pressures.

Departments have declared reduced requirements against previous COVID-19 allocations and details are provided in the tables provided with this statement. This makes £25.6 million Resource DEL available for reallocation.

My Written Statement on 20 October provided details of financial support costing £35 million. Since then the Executive has agreed an allocation to the Department of Education of £1.4 million to provide support to those who receive free school meals over the extended half term break. The Executive has agreed the proposals brought forward by the Economy Minister for schemes to help the tourism and hospitality sectors and the recently self-employed and for a Business Support Scheme. £60 million has been set aside and held centrally for these schemes.

The total amount of funding as a result remaining for allocation is £202.5 million.

I had previously advised that funding was being held centrally pending proposals from relevant department to provide support for other sectors. From that funding £7.3 million has been allocated to the Department of Health to ensure that hospices can continue with the critical role they play in the delivery of health services. £25 million has been earmarked for schemes to support the bus, coach, haulage and taxi industries with £19 million allocated to the Department for Infrastructure now and a further £6 million held centrally pending finalisation of costs. £10 million previously set aside to provide support to the airport sector and £12.9 million for other sectors continues to be held while proposals are developed.

October Monitoring COVID-19 Bids

Departments have submitted COVID-19 bids totalling £213.4 million Resource DEL and £32.4 million Capital DEL, details are provided in Table F.

The Executive has decided that it would not be prudent to allocate all the available funding at this stage and is holding £100 million in reserve to provide support should it be necessary for further restrictions.

COVID-19 Allocations

Further allocations to provide immediate support have been agreed by the Executive and these are shown in Table H to this statement.

The Department for Communities will receive £36.5 million to provide £15 million for Local Council support in recognition of the lost income across council amenities and £15 million to provide support for all levels of sport. £3 million to the Emergency Community Support Fund will ensure the voluntary community sector can continue their key role in providing direct community support while £3.5 million will provide much needed food packages to the vulnerable in our society.

In addition to the £60 million held for support schemes for Business, Tourism and the recently self-employed, the Department for the Economy also receives £2.8 million for the Further Education sector to continue the free school meals provision and in recognition of lost income.

The Department of Education will receive £49.4 million for a range of measures related to restarting education in a safe environment and using blended learning, and to respond to the changing circumstances brought about by COVID-19.

The Department for Infrastructure receives £10 million to help alleviate pressures as a result of lost income.

The Executive Office receives £3.1 million for the communications work it has taken forward as the Executive responds to COVID-19.

October Monitoring Funding

£28.1 million Resource DEL, £24.4 million Capital DEL and £115.2 million Financial Transactions Capital DEL was available to address the more routine pressures in October Monitoring.

Central Issues

Changes to a number of central items have had a minor impact on the funding available, with £2.0 million Resource DEL and £1.2 million Capital DEL made available.

Reduced Requirements

Reduced requirements totalling £26.0 million Resource DEL, £30.8 million Capital DEL and £8.1 million Financial Transactions Capital DEL have been identified by departments. However, two adjustments are necessary to these amounts to come to the amount available for allocation. The Capital DEL amount for Shared Education is not available for reallocation bringing Capital DEL available for allocation to £24.4 million. The Financial Transactions Capital easement against a COVID allocation due to the nature of that funding will be added to the overall FTC amount available for reallocation.

Full details of all reduced requirements are included in the tables provided with this Statement.

Allocations

Departments submitted bids totalling £132.6 million Resource DEL and £23.0 million Capital DEL. I have allocated October Monitoring funding of £28.0 million Resource DEL and £36.0 million Capital DEL.

The Department of Education receives £12.8 million for schools maintenance and to fund pressures within the Education Authority including Special Educational Needs.

In addition to the £534.0 million required from the centrally held funding I am providing a further £6.3 million non Covid funding to the Department of Health. This will allow for the implementation of the Review Body on Doctors and Dentists Remuneration recommendations.

The Department of Justice receives £4.5 million to provide certainty as we approach the end of the Transition period and exit the EU.

I have allocated £4.1 million to the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission for increased costs in relation amended determination for Member's allowances.

I am allocating £0.3 million to the Executive Office for the Social Investment Fund.

Turning to Capital DEL I am allocating £32.4 million to the Department of Health for COVID related costs. There is no specific COVID funding for capital works so this allocation is from the general October Monitoring funding.

The Department for Infrastructure will receive £3.6 million to fund an increased level of enabling works for the Belfast Transport hub and essential road maintenance.

I have allocated £1.1 million Capital DEL to the Department of Justice for PSNI.

Ring-fenced Financial Transactions Capital Funding

Allocations of ring-fenced Financial Transactions Capital totalling £39.3 million have been made to the Department for Communities in this round for Co-Ownership pending the Office for National Statistics decision on the classification of Registered Housing Associations in Northern Ireland. £32.2 million to the Executive Office will provide £30 million for the next tranche to the Investment Fund.

Ring Fenced Resource DEL

Allocations have been made to the Department of Education £0.1 million and £1.8 million to the Department for the Economy for increased depreciation costs in the Further Education Sector.

Flexibility

Departments in this round had full flexibility to reallocate internal budgets to meet emerging pressures. The outcome of this is shown in the tables to this statement.

October Monitoring Outcome

At the conclusion of October Monitoring all Resource DEL funding has been allocated and Capital DEL is overcommitted by £12.7 million. This level of overcommitment is manageable at this stage of the year. The Executive continues to work to provide support to

those that need it as a result of COVID-19 and I will continue to keep the Assembly informed of funding for further measures as this is agreed.

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Table K Departmental Outcome by Spending Area

Table A Previously notified Reduced Requirements

Previously Notified Reduced Requirements for Information (£ millions)

Department	Description	Capital
DfC	Decent Homes Slippage due to COVID-19	-3.5
	Discretionary Support Loans	-1.9
	Ulster Supported Employment Ltd	-0.2
Total DfC		-5.5
DfE	Further Education Colleges – Southern Regional College	-4.9
	Higher Education – Learning & Teaching	-5.0
Total DfE		-9.9
DoF	Project Delays and Capital Receipts	-5.9
DOJ	PSNI	-5.5
Total Reduced Requirements		26.9

Totals may not add due to roundings

Previously Notified COVID Reduced Requirements for Information (£ millions)

Department	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource
DfC	COVID-19 - Supporting People	-1.6
	COVID-19 - Supporting People - PPE	-2.4
Total DfC		-4.0
Total COVID Reduced Requirements		-4.0

Totals may not add due to roundings

Table B OCTOBER Monitoring Reduced Requirements (£ millions)

	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource	Capital	FT Capital
DAERA	Capital Projects Slippage due to COVID-19		-5.9	
DfC	Building Successful Communities Slippage due to COVID-19		-0.8	
	City Deal Projects		-0.2	
	Housing Association Grant Repayments		-2.2	
	IT Development		-0.3	
	Mitigation Measures	-3.0		
	Public Realm Slippage due to COVID-19		-1.0	
	Supporting People - IT Equipment		-1.7	
	Welfare Reform	-3.4		
Total DfC		-6.4	-6.2	
DfE	Higher Education - Learning & Teaching			-8.1
	Insolvency Services Fees CFER	-0.0		
	Presbyterian Mutual Society		-9.4	
	RHI - Legal Costs	-0.7		
Total DfE		-0.7	-9.4	-8.1
DE	Education Authority - Capital Receipts		-0.7	
	Fresh Start Post-Primary		-1.1	
	Fresh Start Primary		-5.9	
Total DE			-7.7	
DoF	Accommodation Services	-1.0		
	Project Delays and Capital Receipts		-1.0	
Total DoF		-1.0	-1.0	
DoH	Agenda for Change - Pay	-6.3		
DfI	Consolidated Fund Extra Receipt	-0.0		
DOJ	Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Services		-0.0	
	PSNI		-0.0	
Total DOJ			-0.0	
TEO	Capital Projects		-0.5	
	Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry	-10.0		
Total TEO		-10.0	-0.5	
FSA	Community Activities / Events reduced due to COVID-19	-0.2		
	Nutrition Work affected by COVID-19	-0.3		
	Recruitment Delays due to COVID-19	-0.1		
Total FSA		-0.5		
NIA	Recruitment Delays	-0.8		
NIAO	Training, Travel and Additional Receipts due to COVID-19	-0.4		
Total Reduced Requirements		-26.0	-30.8	-8.1

Total may not add due to roundings

Table C OCTOBER Monitoring COVID Reduced Requirements (£ millions)

Department	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource	Capital	Ft Capital
DfE	COVID-19 - Business Support Grant Schemes	-16.3		-7.0
DE	COVID -19 - Childcare Support Scheme	-9.1		
DfI	COVID-19 - Airports	-0.2		
Total Reduced Requirements		-25.6		-7.0

Totals may not add up due to roundings

Table D OCTOBER Monitoring Reclassifications (£ millions)

Department	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource	Capital
DOJ	PSNI - Road Safety Camera Income	-0.1	0.1
Total Reclassifications		-0.1	0.1

Table E OCTOBER Monitoring Non-COVID BIDs Submitted (£ millions)

Department	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource	Capital	Ft Capital
DAERA	Common Market Organisation	1.0		
DfC	Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association Scheme			39.3
DfE	Expected Credit Loss	9.0		
	Further Education - End Year Flexibility	0.8		
	Higher Education - University's Quality-related Research	8.1		
	Invest NI - Grant Assistance	6.0		
	Project Stratum		6.1	
Total DfE		23.9	6.1	
DE	Childcare Strategy	0.5		
	EA Pressures including Special Education Needs	25.1		
	Education Transformation Programme	2.4		
	Non-Teaching Pay (2019 & 2020 - Contractual Costs)	17.0		
	Rates	2.2		
	Schools Maintenance	4.0		
	Teaching Pay (2019 & 2020 - Contractual Incremental Costs)	15.0		
	Voluntary Exit Scheme	2.5		
Total DE		68.6		

Department	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource	Capital	Ft Capital
DoH	Critical Health Service Provision	15.0		
	Elective Care	1.5		
	General Capital Pressures		6.7	
	Non-Agenda For Change Pay Pressures	6.3		
	Palliative and End of Life Care	1.5		
Total DoH		24.3	6.7	
DfI	Belfast Transport Hub		1.6	
	Brexit Staff	1.3		
	Holiday Pay	1.6		
	Planning Portal		1.0	
	Roads - Works and Street Lighting		6.5	
	Winter Service	3.0		
Total DfI		5.9	9.1	
DoJ	PSNI EU Exit	4.5	1.1	
NIA	Member's Staff Costs	4.1		
TEO	Financial Transactions - Capitalised Interest			2.2
	Northern Ireland Investment Fund			30.0
	Social Investment Fund	0.3		
Total TEO		0.3		32.2
Total Non-COVID Bids Submitted		132.6	23.0	71.5

Totals may not add due to roundings

Table F OCTOBER Monitoring COVID BIDS Submitted (£ millions)

Department	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource	Capital
DfC	Community Wellbeing Support	0.5	
	Digital Divide	1.0	
	Emergency Community Support Fund	5.0	
	Food Packages	3.5	
	Fuel Poverty/Winter Warmth	2.0	
	Local Councils	25.0	
	Sport	25.0	
Total DfC		62.0	
DfE	Assistance to Business	2.9	
	Assistance to Tourism	0.9	
	Free School Meals	0.3	
	Further Education Lost Income	2.5	
	Project Spring	1.0	
	Support for Universities	7.2	
Total DfE		14.8	

Department	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource	Capital
DE	Response Boarding Schools	1.3	
	Response Childcare Sector Funding Support September - December	14.3	
	Response Education Authority	8.8	
	Response Holiday Food Payments - October & December	4.1	
	Response Pathway Fund	0.5	
	Response Preparatory Schools	0.8	
	Response Restart Programme Initial Staff Costs	0.5	
	Response School Meals	8.3	
	Response School Uniform Grants	3.7	
	Response Schools Maintenance	2.4	
	Response Voluntary Grammar, Grant Maintained Integrated Lost Income	0.6	
	Restart C2K - Standards and Learning	0.5	
	Restart Childcare	2.8	
	Restart Cleaning and Maintenance	1.1	
	Restart Non-Statutory Pre-School Settings	1.8	
	Restart School Meals: Free School Meals and Lost Income	8.2	
	Restart Schools	12.4	
Total DE		72.1	
DoH	Response and Rebuilding		32.4
DfI	Bus Coach Haulage and Taxi	25.0	
	Crumlin Road Gaol Lost Income	0.2	
	DVA Lost Income	12.0	
	Parking Changes Lost Income	3.7	
	Lost Passenger Income	20.0	
	Planning Application Fees Lost Income	0.1	
	Rathlin Ferry Lost Income	0.3	
Total DfI		61.3	
TEO	Executive Communications	3.1	
Total COVID Bids Submitted		213.4	32.4

Totals may not add due to roundings

Table G OCTOBER Monitoring Allocations (£ millions)

Department	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource	Capital	FT Capital
DfC	Northern Ireland Co-Ownership Housing Association Scheme			39.3
DE	EA Pressures including Special Education Needs	11.8		
	Schools Maintenance	1.0		
Total DE		12.8		
DoH	Non-Agenda For Change Pay Pressures	6.3		
DfI	Belfast Transport Hub		1.6	
	Roads – Works and Street lighting		2.0	
Total DfI			3.6	
DoJ	PSNI	4.5	1.1	
NIA	Member's Costs	4.1		
TEO	Financial Transactions - Capitalised Interest			2.2
	Northern Ireland Investment Fund			30.0
	Social Investment Fund	0.3		
Total TEO		0.3		32.2
Total Allocations		28.1	4.7	71.5

Totals may not add due to roundings

Table H COVID-19 Allocations (£ millions)

Department	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource	Capital
DfC	Emergency Community Support Fund	3.0	
	Food Packages	3.5	
	Local Councils	15.0	
	Sport	15.0	
Total DfC		36.5	
DfE	Free School Meals	0.3	
	Further Education Lost Income	2.5	
Total DfE		2.8	
DE	Response Childcare Sector Funding Support Sept - Dec	8.5	
	Response Education Authority	5.9	
	Response Pathway Fund	0.5	
	Response Restart Programme Initial Staff Costs	0.5	
	Response School Meals	8.3	
	Response School Uniform Grants	3.7	
	Response Schools Maintenance	0.8	

Department	Description	Non Ring Fenced Resource	Capital
	Response Voluntary Grammar, Grant Maintained Integrated Lost Income	0.2	
	Restart C2K - Standards and Learning	0.5	
	Restart Childcare	2.8	
	Restart Cleaning and Maintenance	1.1	
	Restart Non-Statutory Pre-School Settings	1.8	
	Restart School Meals: Free School Meals and Lost Income	4.8	
	Restart Schools	10.0	
Total DE		49.4	
DoH	Assessment of Health Costs	526.7	
	Hospices	7.3	
	Response and Rebuilding		32.4
Total DOH		534.0	32.4
DfI	Bus Coach Haulage and Taxi	19.0	
	Passengers Lost Income	10.0	
Total DfI		29.0	
TEO	Executive Communications	3.1	
Total COVID-19 Allocations		654.9	32.4

Totals may not add due to roundings

Table I 2020-21 Ring-Fenced Resource DEL (£ millions)

Department	June Monitoring Position	Changes
DAERA	25.3	0.0
DfC	14.1	-1.6
DfE	116.0	1.8
DE	0.8	0.1
DoF	36.2	0.1
DoH	158.4	0.0
DfI	116.2	0.0
DOJ	76.9	0.0
TEO	1.2	0.0
FSA	0.0	0.0
NIA	3.7	-0.5
NIAO	0.2	0.0
NIAUR	0.1	0.0
NIPSO	0.1	0.0
PPS	2.0	0.0
Total	551.1	0.0

Totals may not add due to roundings

Table J 2020-21 Administration Costs (£ millions)

Department	June Position	October Monitoring Position	Change
DAERA	72.8	73.8	1.4
DfC	57.2	52.6	-8.2
DfE	59.1	62.1	5.2
DE	16.9	16.9	0.0
DoF	163.7	161.1	-1.6
DoH	31.6	31.8	0.6
DfI	83.6	87.5	4.7
DOJ	41.2	42.8	3.9
TEO	17.9	18.0	0.1
PPS	2.1	2.1	0.0
Total	546.2	548.7	0.5%

Totals may not add due to roundings

Table K Departmental Outcome by Spending Area

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs - Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL

£million

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Food and Farming	420.6
Veterinary Service and Animal Health	52.6
Rural Affairs	14.5
Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission	2.3
Environment, Marine and Fisheries	67.2
Forestry	3.7
Total Objective A	560.9
Total	560.9

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs - Capital DEL

£million

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Food and Farming	43.2
Veterinary Service and Animal Health	6.6
Rural Affairs	9.4
Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission	0.6
Environment, Marine and Fisheries	17.9
Forestry	2.9
Total Objective A	80.7
Total	80.7

Communities - Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL**£million**

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Welfare and Employment	356.2
Local Government	134.2
Housing Benefit (Rates Element)	119.0
Housing and Regeneration	166.2
Culture, Arts and Sport	135.8
Voluntary and Community Funding	94.6
North South Language Body	5.9
Total Objective A	1,011.8
Total	1,011.8

Communities - Capital DEL**£million**

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position		
	Conventional Capital	Financial Transactions Capital	Total Capital
Objective A			
Welfare and Employment	16.1		16.1
Housing and Regeneration	162.5	39.3	201.7
Culture, Arts and Sport	20.1		20.1
Voluntary and Community Funding	6.8		6.8
North South Language Body	0.2		0.2
Total Objective A	205.7		244.9
Total	205.7	39.3	244.9

Economy - Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL**£million**

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Economic & Business Development	260.6
Tourism	30.2
Employment and Skills	351.3
Student Support & Higher Education	331.5
Tourism Ireland Ltd.	14.4
Inter Trade Ireland	5.5
Representation & Regulatory Services	23.7
Total Objective A	1,017.3
Total	1,017.3

Economy - Capital DEL**£million**

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position		
	Conventional Capital	Financial Transactions Capital	Total Capital
Objective A			
Economic & Business Development	2.5	10.0	12.5
Tourism	6.6	10.0	16.6
Employment and Skills	30.7		30.7
Student Support & Higher Education	46.5		46.5
Tourism Ireland Ltd	0.6		0.6
Inter Trade Ireland	0.1		0.1
Representation & Regulatory Services	0.7		0.7
Total Objective A	87.8		107.8
Total	87.8	20.0	107.8

Education - Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL**£million**

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Pre-school, Primary School & Post Primary Education	2,183.8
Youth and Other Children's Services	38.9
Activities to Support Education	251.3
Total Objective A	2,474.0
Total	2,474.0

Education - Capital DEL**£million**

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Pre-school, Primary School & Post Primary Education	113.0
Youth and Other Children's Services	7.6
Activities to Support Education	29.3
Total Objective A	149.9
Total	149.9

Finance - Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL**£million**

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Finance & Personnel Policy & Other Services	20.9
NICS Shared Services	63.9
NI Statistics & Research Agency	20.9

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Land & Property Services	63.9
EU Programmes	0.4
Special EU Programmes Body	1.3
NICS Accommodation Services	41.0
Total Objective A	212.2
Total	212.2

Finance - Capital DEL

£million

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Finance & Personnel Policy & Other Services	0.8
NICS Shared Services	12.9
NI Statistics & Research Agency	1.2
Land & Property Services	3.0
Special EU Programmes Body	0.0
NICS Accommodation Services	3.5
Total Objective A	21.4
Total	21.4

Health - Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL

£million

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Hospital Services	4,324.8
Social Care Services	1,253.4
FHS - General Medical Services	311.6
FHS - Pharmaceutical Services	536.8
FHS - Dental Services	117.7
FHS - Ophthalmic Services	25.0
Health Support Services	233.3
Public Health Services	86.3
Paramedic Services	106.8
Food Safety Promotion Board (N/S Body)	2.2
Fire & Rescue Services	83.2
Total Objective A	7,081.2
Total	7,081.2

Health - Capital DEL**£million**

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Hospital Services	227.2
Social Care Services	0.1
FHS - General Medical Services	12.0
Health Support Services	98.9
Public Health Services	12.1
Paramedic Services	6.4
Fire & Rescue Services	8.6
Total Objective A	365.3
Total	365.3

Infrastructure - Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL**£million**

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Roads, Rivers and Waterways	201.7
Waterways Ireland	3.5
Bus, Rail and Ports	198.2
Road Safety Services Including DVA	22.3
Planning and Legacy Sites	5.1
Water and Sewerage	139.4
Total Objective A	570.3
Total	570.3

Infrastructure - Capital DEL**£million**

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Roads, Rivers and Waterways	237.4
Waterways Ireland	1.6
Bus, Rail and Ports	160.3
Road Safety Services Including DVA	9.0
Planning and Legacy Sites	1.1
Water and Sewerage	164.8
Total Objective A	574.2
Total	574.2

Justice - Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL**£million**

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Access to Justice	145.4
Safer Communities	74.8
NI Prison Service and Youth Justice Agency	144.6
Police Service of Northern Ireland	784.0
Total Objective A	1,148.8
Total	1,148.8

Justice - Capital DEL**£million**

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Access to Justice	4.1
Safer Communities	6.1
NI Prison Service and Youth Justice Agency	17.9
Police Service of Northern Ireland	55.7
Total Objective A	83.8
Total	83.8

The Executive Office - Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL**£million**

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Objective A	
Executive Support	90.9
Good Relations	18.9
North-South Ministerial Council	1.5
Attorney General for Northern Ireland	1.3
Total Objective A	112.6
Total	112.6

The Executive Office - Capital DEL**£million**

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position		
	Conventional Capital	Financial Transactions Capital	Total Capital
Objective A			
Executive Support	2.3	112.2	114.5
Good Relations	5.8		5.8
Total Objective A	8.1	112.2	120.3
Total	8.1	112.2	120.3

Non Ministerial Departments - Non Ring-fenced Resource DEL

£million

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Food Standards Agency	10.7
Northern Ireland Assembly	42.7
NI Audit Office	7.5
NI Authority for Utility Regulation	0.2
NI Public Services Ombudsman	3.3
Public Prosecution Service	35.4
Total	99.8

Non Ministerial Departments - Capital DEL

£million

Objective and Spending Area	2020-21 October Monitoring Position
Food Standards Agency	0.1
Northern Ireland Assembly	1.1
NI Audit Office	0.6
NI Authority for Utility Regulation	0.0
NI Public Services Ombudsman	0.1
Public Prosecution Service	0.6
Total	2.5

Department of Health

COVID-19: Update

Published at 5.00 pm on Friday 30 October 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): While some welcome progress has been made in the past two weeks, it is essential that this is not only maintained but accelerated.

Over the last week, the number of cases has continued to plateau and has begun to decline slightly, however I would caution the rate of decline is slow and the trajectory remains uncertain.

R is now likely to be slightly below 1 for cases, around 1 for admissions and above 1 for hospital inpatients, but has fallen somewhat since last week. This is likely to reflect the initial impact of the Northern Ireland wide restrictions and the earlier restrictions in Derry City and Strabane, which is no longer the Local Government District with the highest 7 day incidence.

The extent to which our recent progress is maintained will be a central consideration when it comes to deciding what measures may need to be in place at the end of the current four week period of restrictions.

At this time, as we look around to the experience of our neighbours and those on mainland Europe, any expectation that we can return to any kind of normality from November 13 would be entirely misplaced.

What we cannot countenance is allowing case numbers to surge once again, through complacency, or poor levels of compliance with public health advice, or premature relaxation of all restrictions.

Further enhancements to the contact tracing service have an important role to play in the weeks and months ahead, but this must not be viewed as a panacea. Members will be aware that other jurisdictions, with contact tracing systems that have been compared favourably to ours, are now in even stricter lockdown situations.

Our health and social care system and its dedicated staff remain under intense and unprecedented pressure.

The welfare of patients – both Covid and non-Covid - and of staff will continue to be the overriding priority. I once again pay tribute to staff at all levels of health and social care.

I also want to underline the toll the current pressures are taking so many of them. Exhaustion – both physical and mental – is a very real concern.

There is only so much we can ask of staff and this will be to the forefront of my mind as we consider next steps after November 13.

The health service's staffing challenges are well documented and long-standing. They certainly long predate this pandemic. Northern Ireland is by no means unique in this regard.

Significant numbers of people are coming forward through the current workforce appeal, with over 9,000 expressions of interest so far resulting in almost 5,000 formal applications. Whilst the clinical applications are prioritised however I would thank each and every person who has come forward, as well as all those that remain in post or on call from the first appeal.

Putting our permanent workforce on a stable footing however is a long-term task. It takes years to train up specialist staff.

As things stand at present, an already overstretched workforce is being further depleted by Covid-related absences.

A health system that was already fragile has been further weakened and is now facing into winter with an additional 354 Covid patients to treat.

There has been a progressive rise in COVID hospital patients which we expect to plateau in the next week at levels significantly above wave 1. Any subsequent decline is likely to be slow and will depend on how cases fall.

While strenuous efforts are being made to maintain non-Covid services, this will not always be possible – especially when increasing numbers of ICU patients require the redeployment of specialist staff from other posts. There are herculean efforts being undertaken every single day by our clinicians to try to protect the most urgent services, including cancer surgeries, and in the event of cancellations I am assured every feasible option is being explored to reschedule them as quickly as possible.

The health and social care system needs ongoing support across society at this critical juncture.

That means all of us doing all we can to stop Covid spreading – cutting down our contacts with each other, maintaining social distancing, wearing a face covering and downloading the Stop Covid-19 app.

Written Ministerial Statement

The content of this written ministerial statement is as received at the time from the Minister. It has not been subject to the official reporting (Hansard) process.

Department of Health

COVID-19: Update

Published at 5.00 pm on Friday 6 November 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): As I have emphasised before, our health and social care system is facing into its most challenging ever winter.

Let me once again publicly thank everyone who works within it. Our society will never be able to repay the debt we owe to health and social care staff.

We only have one workforce and they are battling against relentless daily pressures, while already exhausted. This has been a deeply distressing and difficult 9 months and we must never underestimate the physical and emotional strain it has placed on our staff.

In order to sustain sufficient ICU capacity to care for critically ill Covid and non Covid patients painstaking and complex work continues.

As of today there are 93 patients in critical care across Northern Ireland, of which 49 are Covid positive. The Trusts have capacity across their critical care units totalling 119 critical care beds. The Belfast Trust has a further 10 fully occupied cardiac surgical ICU beds, giving a total capacity across the region of 129 ICU beds.

This scaling up of ICU requirements inevitably and unavoidably comes at a cost. Even with revised staffing ratios, expanding the number of ICU beds requires the redeployment of experienced and specialist staff away from other parts of the health service.

ICU patient numbers are monitored on a daily basis in liaison with Critical Care Network Northern Ireland (CCaNNI). Should it be deemed possible to scale back ICU bed numbers in agreement with CCaNNI, this would allow further urgent or emergency surgery to be progressed.

Whilst some procedures are unfortunately being cancelled, in many cases they are being quickly rescheduled. Other elective services, many of which were cancelled in the first wave, are continuing.

Thankfully hospital admissions have begun to decline slowly over the last week, but remain much higher than the peak ever experienced in wave 1.

The best way to protect non-Covid services is to stop Covid spreading and thankfully over the last week, the number of cases has continued to decline. R is definitely below 1 for cases, around 1 for admissions and likely to be above one for hospital inpatients and ICU occupancy.

The fall in cases is undoubtedly as a result of the momentous efforts and sacrifices being made by you, the people of Northern Ireland. I do not underestimate for one moment the strains that the restrictions, as well as the continued prevalence of the virus, is having on the ordinary day to day lives of our citizens, and the economic damage this virus is inflicting.

For our health and social care workers, our older people, our other clinically vulnerable citizens and society as a whole we all have an obligation to do all that we can to push down infection rates and keep them low. That's a

duty on us all as individuals in our daily lives and on those of us making decisions around the Executive table.

This week I submitted a paper to the Executive, informed by the latest medical and scientific advice, and I hope that early next week a decision can be made. If we do not take action we almost certainly will have to intervene more significantly if we are to avoid our health service being overwhelmed.

The best way to navigate through these dark days is to strictly follow public health advice – for the sake of ourselves and others and for the sake of the health service and its workforce.

That's how we build hope and optimism – by sticking together as a community and continuing to do the right thing.

There are grounds for wider hope on the horizon. Work is continuing on the development of mass testing with fast turnaround times; hugely important advances have been made towards a successful vaccine; treatments will continue to improve. We should be in a much better place by next Spring.

This winter will be undoubtedly a tough slog, I will not sugar-coat the situation nor offer false hope or assurance.

There are no quick fixes, easy solutions or overarching strategies that are going to make this virus go away. My priority will be to ensure that the health service is not overwhelmed, with all the consequences that will entail.

Let me emphasise once again that I share the concerns voiced by other Members about economic consequences of this pandemic. The Executive rightly has to consider all potential interventions in the round, taking into account the full societal implications. We are taking the most difficult and complex decisions of our political lives.

It is, of course, my duty to stand up for the health service – for staff, for all those who receive and need treatment and care.

It should always be remembered that an overwhelmed health service would be detrimental to our economy and society.

We can all play our part in avoiding that nightmare and I am confident that we will.

The Executive Office

Decisions of the Executive on COVID-19, 12 November 2020

Published on Thursday 12 November 2020.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister: We are writing to provide Members with an update on today's decisions taken by the Executive to help mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

The Executive has agreed the following:

- Close contact services including driving instructors will reopen by appointment on 20 November;
- Hospitality will reopen on a graduated basis, with unlicensed premises such as cafes and coffee shops opening on 20 November, with restricted opening hours to 8.00pm. This will not include the purchase or consumption of alcohol on such premises;
- Support will be provided for mitigations to reduce risk within the hospitality sector, including improved ventilation and requirements for the recording of customer information for contact tracing purposes;
- Pubs and bars will be permitted to sell sealed off sales on 20 November;
- The remaining restrictions, which came into being on 16 October, would be extended and come to an end at midnight on 26 November, leaving all elements of hospitality including hotels able to open on 27 November;
- A vaccination programme will be rolled out from as early as possible in December in line with England, initially targeting priority groups such as health care staff, care homes and those with underlying vulnerabilities;
- Ongoing preparation for introduction of rapid testing at the earliest opportunity;
- Additional financial support for affected businesses; and
- A strengthened adherence/compliance working group, which will work to assist and to mitigate risk in the opening up of the hospitality businesses.

Department of Health

COVID-19: Update

Published at 5.00 pm on Friday 13 November 2020.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): This has not been a good week for the Executive. Whilst the pandemic has undoubtedly confronted us with many immensely difficult decisions, the people and businesses of Northern Ireland deserved so much better than the leadership and political stewardship they were given.

There is huge work required to repair the damage that has been caused but I would urge Ministers to look forward to the very real issues at hand rather than repeat the arguments that have been exhausted over recent days.

At the forefront of all our minds is that the pandemic remains an immediate and serious public health threat.

We must also remember why we decide to take the decisions we do. On the 16th October the Executive introduced a range of restrictions for two crucial reasons - firstly, to limit the transmission of Covid and secondly, to avoid an immediate risk to our Health and Social Care system and all the staff that work within it becoming overwhelmed.

There is clear evidence that the restrictions have proven effective in bringing down the value of R. As a result of the ongoing personal and collective sacrifices of so many of our people and businesses over the last week, the number of cases has continued to decline, albeit at a slower rate than during the previous week. Rt for confirmed cases has however started to increase and is now between 0.8-0.9. We should not underestimate the danger presented by that.

Worryingly it would appear that as a result of the relatively higher value of Rt in over 60's, hospital admissions remain at a higher than anticipated level.

The numbers of hospital inpatients are not falling, and instead have risen from 407 last Friday to 443 today. Whilst the number of ICU inpatients and deaths remain tragically high, but relatively stable, I remain concerned about the overall capacity of our hospital system.

So it was in the recognition that any relaxation this week would have likely put upward pressure on R, and starting from a high baseline of ongoing community transmission and significant numbers of hospital inpatients, the Executive extended the restrictions.

Whilst there are grounds to be optimistic for the future given the huge advancements that are being made in regards to a vaccine and improved treatments, I am becoming fearful of just how challenging the next number of weeks and months will be.

Whilst R has been brought down, it is now heading in the wrong direction and creeping up once again. I suspect the political wrangling this week has also caused untold damage to the public confidence and understanding of the current restrictions.

Moving forward there is very limited headroom without quickly reaching the point where the hospital system, which is already now operating at over capacity, struggles to cope. So as the Executive is already well aware, if I have to recommend further interventions to prevent vital services being overwhelmed, I will not hesitate to do so.

Of course, it must be underlined again, that everyone across society has a vital part to play in stopping the spread of the virus. That means following the public health advice by cutting down our contacts, keeping our distance, wearing a face covering and washing our hands.

There is a heavy burden on the public in terms of protecting each other and the health service. I hope and trust they will rise to the challenge better than the political class has managed this week.

Committee Stages

Northern Ireland Assembly

Committee for Communities
5 November 2020

Pension Schemes Bill [NIA 07/17-22]

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Paula Bradley (Chairperson)
Ms Kellie Armstrong (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Andy Allen
Mr Mark Durkan
Mr Alex Easton
Ms Sinéad Ennis
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Robin Newton

Witnesses:

Mr Gerry McCann
Ms Doreen Roy

Department for Communities

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): Gerry McCann and Doreen Roy from the Department are with us. Paul Stitt from the Bill Office joins us via StarLeaf. You are very welcome. You have been around a long time, so you know exactly how we do clause-by-clause consideration.

Without further ado, members, we will go directly into our clause-by-clause consideration.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 1, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 2, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 3, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 4, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 5, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 6, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 7, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 8, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 9, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 10, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 11, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 12, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 13, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 14, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 15, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 16, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 17, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 18, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 19, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 20, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 21, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 22, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 23, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 24, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 25, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 26, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 27, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 28, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 29, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 30, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 31, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with schedule 1, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 32, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 33, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 34, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 35, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 36, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 37, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with schedule 2, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 38, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with schedule 3, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 39, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 40, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 41, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 42, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 43, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 44, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 45, put and agreed to.

The Chairperson (Ms P Bradley): That concludes the Committee's clause-by-clause scrutiny of the Pension Schemes Bill. A draft Committee report on the Bill will be brought to the Committee for agreement in the coming weeks. Again, thank you very much, Gerry and Doreen. Sorry to keep you waiting so long.

Mr Gerry McCann (Department for Communities): Not at all.

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 23 October 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Ms Bunting asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) what Social Investment Fund projects that were previously agreed, are now not proceeding; and (ii) the reasons why, broken down by constituency. **(AQW 2461/17-22)**

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Projects being delivered through the Social Investment Fund are those based on identified need, prioritised by Steering Groups and which demonstrate value for money.

65 projects are proceeding with an investment of £80.5 million.

The table below sets out those projects originally subject to a Letter of Offer that are no longer progressing to completion.

Project	Element	Constituency	Reason not Proceeding
Clogher Orange Hall	N/A	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Value for Money not demonstrated – Funding was originally approved for energy efficiency improvements. Conditional surveys identified significant additional works required, increasing costs for the revised project by 1182%.
Titanic People	N/A	Belfast East	No longer delivers SIF objectives and Value for Money not demonstrated - Full conditional surveys of the building identified significant additional works required, increasing revised project costs by 211%. Changes in expected outputs also meant the project no longer sufficiently meet SIF strategic objectives.
Community Operated Sports (3 elements)	Downpatrick Football Pitch	South Down	Value for Money not demonstrated - Ground condition surveys identified a flood risk, with mitigating works increasing project costs by 211%.
Increasing Community Services (5 elements)	Arts for All	Belfast North	Value for Money not demonstrated - Full conditional surveys identified significant additional works required increasing the revised project costs by 171%.
Community Capacity Hubs (7 elements: 2 Community Halls & 5 Orange Halls)	Kennedys Orange Hall	Mid Ulster	Value for Money not demonstrated - Funding was originally approved for energy efficiency improvements. Conditional surveys identified significant additional works required, increasing revised project costs by 345%.
	Lisnamorrow Orange Hall	Mid Ulster	Value for Money not demonstrated - Funding was originally approved for energy efficiency improvements. Conditional surveys identified significant additional works required, increasing revised project costs by 481%.

Project	Element	Constituency	Reason not Proceeding
Belfast North Increasing Community Services (5 elements)	Westland Community Centre	Belfast North	Withdrawn by Group
Community Premises Support (30 elements)	St Matthews GAC	East Londonderry	The Group independently completed and funded the works to their building removing the need for SIF funding.

Mr O'Toole asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how the Common Travel Area will be protected in legal form and what measures will be taken to prevent exploitation of different immigration systems on the island of Ireland.
(AQW 5827/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: A Memorandum of Understanding between the UK and Ireland on the Common Travel Area (CTA) was signed by both governments in May 2019 to re-affirm their commitment to maintenance and protection of the CTA. This commitment includes legislative provisions should it be required.

Immigration, including decisions on residency and entry and exploitation prevention, is not devolved and is managed on a UK-wide basis by the Home Office.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they decided the Minister of Health had more time than the junior Ministers to take forward the debates on the COVID-19 regulations.
(AQW 6934/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: In light of the demanding and significant workload during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Junior Ministers welcomed the opportunity to provide support to the Minister of Health by leading the Assembly scrutiny of the Coronavirus subordinate legislation.

Looking ahead and reflecting the need to address the evolving priorities of the recovery phase, which includes the development of a Programme for Government and implementation of the New Decade New Approach document, it is now appropriate for this role to return to the Department of Health.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the funding received by groups from the Victims and Survivors Service, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 7122/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Victims and Survivors Service provides funding to a variety of groups throughout Northern Ireland through the Victims Support Programme (VSP). Figures for each of the last three financial years are outlined in the tables below. Figures for 2020-21 are currently available on the VSS website (https://victimsservice.org/vsp_piv_funding_2020_21/).

VSP & PEACE IV funding 2017-18

Combined Budget Review	VSP Year 1	PEACE IV Year 1	Total Year 1
Organisations			
Aisling Centre	£70,912	£0	£70,912
Antrim Youth	£34,641	£0	£34,641
Ashton Community Trust	£516,821	£63,595	£580,416
Aurora Counselling	£97,399	£0	£97,399
Barnardos	£124,043	£0	£124,043
CALMS	£185,689	£0	£185,689
Castlehill Foundation	£57,784	£34,271	£92,055
CHWB	£36,542	£0	£36,542
Colin Community Counselling	£56,278	£0	£56,278
County Armagh Phoenix	£41,384	£0	£41,384
Cunamh	£129,942	£29,973	£159,915
Decorum NI	£54,886	£32,167	£87,053

Combined Budget Review	VSP Year 1	PEACE IV Year 1	Total Year 1
Derry Well Women	£93,045	£0	£93,045
East Belfast Counselling	£55,958	£29,216	£85,174
Ely Centre	£224,057	£31,340	£255,397
FAIR	£81,115	£0	£81,115
Families Beyond Conflict	£51,351	£0	£51,351
Families Moving On	£97,170	£32,343	£129,513
Firinne	£157,315	£80,774	£238,089
FRPU	£58,095	£120,671	£178,766
Holy Trinity Centre	£92,619	£0	£92,619
Institute for Conflict Research	£32,162	£0	£32,162
Koram Centre	£77,420	£0	£77,420
Lenadoon Community Forum	£81,280	£0	£81,280
MAPS	£75,437	£0	£75,437
MAST	£60,788	£0	£60,788
MUVE Project	£61,065	£0	£61,065
New Life Counselling	£98,820	£0	£98,820
Omagh Support and Self Help Group	£141,978	£66,554	£208,532
Out of the Shadows	£70,604	£0	£70,604
Paper Trail	£7,000	£36,325	£43,325
Pat Finucane	£79,620	£197,633	£277,253
REACT	£65,947	£0	£65,947
Relatives for Justice	£575,043	£208,751	£783,794
SARWN	£52,655	£0	£52,655
SEFF	£388,556	£182,145	£570,701
SETWS	£63,036	£0	£63,036
Springhill Community House	£94,526	£0	£94,526
Survivors of Trauma	£112,316	£0	£112,316
Tara Centre	£119,668	£0	£119,668
UDR Coleraine	£36,017	£0	£36,017
Ulster Human Rights Watch	£20,754	£125,753	£146,507
VAST	£102,751	£0	£102,751
WAVE	£1,392,613	£317,009	£1,709,622
44	£6,127,101	£1,622,260	£7,749,361
Small Grants			
Antrim Voluntary Welfare	£22,500		£22,500
Larne Voluntary Welfare	£15,100		£15,100
Newry and Mourne Voluntary Welfare	£18,927		£18,927
Omagh Police Wives	£3,762		£3,762
South Tyrone Voluntary Welfare	£30,000		£30,000
Strule Association	£17,603		£17,603
Tullyvallen Family Support	£20,000		£20,000

Combined Budget Review	VSP Year 1	PEACE IV Year 1	Total Year 1
UDR Castledearg	£21,020		£21,020
UDR Enniskillen	£19,780		£19,780
UDR Lisnaskea	£14,165		£14,165
Wounded Police and Families Association	£19,225		£19,225
11	£202,082	£0	£202,082
	£6,329,183	£1,622,260	£7,951,443

VSP & PEACE IV funding 2018-19

Organisations	VSP Year 2	Peace IV Year 2	Total Year 2
Aisling Centre	£72,770	£0	£72,770
Antrim Youth	£34,874	£0	£34,874
Ashton Community Trust	£544,633	£64,198	£608,831
Aurora Counselling	£97,739	£0	£97,739
Barnardos	£131,686	£0	£131,686
CALMS	£186,805	£0	£186,805
Castlehill Foundation	£58,076	£34,673	£92,749
CHWB	£36,611	£0	£36,611
County Armagh Phoenix	£41,531	£0	£41,531
Cunamh	£137,709	£30,259	£167,968
Decorum NI	£55,184	£32,465	£87,649
Derry Well Women	£98,752	£0	£98,752
East Belfast Counselling	£59,120	£29,528	£88,648
Ely Centre	£279,987	£67,929	£347,916
FAIR	£81,492	£0	£81,492
Families Beyond Conflict	£51,640	£0	£51,640
Families Moving On	£97,572	£32,625	£130,197
Firinne	£191,998	£81,391	£273,389
FRPU	£79,612	£121,712	£201,324
Holy Trinity Centre	£100,802	£0	£100,802
Institute for Conflict Research	£32,268	£0	£32,268
Koram Centre	£94,994	£0	£94,994
Lenadoon Community Forum	£102,010	£29,624	£131,634
MAPS	£75,529	£0	£75,529
MAST	£61,047	£0	£61,047
MUVE Project	£61,267	£0	£61,267
New Life Counselling	£110,137	£0	£110,137
Omagh Support and Self Help Group	£164,045	£67,194	£231,239
Out of the Shadows	£70,967	£0	£70,967
Paper Trail	£6,000	£36,673	£42,673
Pat Finucane	£78,255	£214,184	£292,439
REACT	£66,334	£0	£66,334

Organisations	VSP Year 2	Peace IV Year 2	Total Year 2
Relatives for Justice	£574,795	£210,755	£785,550
SARWN	£53,019	£0	£53,019
SEFF	£431,099	£312,057	£743,156
SETWS	£63,223	£0	£63,223
Springhill Community House	£95,036	£0	£95,036
Survivors of Trauma	£113,029	£0	£113,029
Tara Centre	£120,644	£0	£120,644
Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Peace Foundation	£0	£56,655	£56,655
UDR Coleraine	£36,117	£0	£36,117
Ulster Human Rights Watch	£33,650	£126,871	£160,521
VAST	£103,269	£0	£103,269
WAVE	£1,473,282	£404,184	£1,877,466
44	£6,458,609	£1,952,977	£8,411,586
Small Grants			£0
Antrim Voluntary Welfare	£6,000	£0	£6,000
Larne Voluntary Welfare	£15,100	£0	£15,100
Newry and Mourne Voluntary Welfare	£18,927	£0	£18,927
Omagh Police Wives	£3,762	£0	£3,762
South Tyrone and Voluntary Welfare	£30,000	£0	£30,000
Strule Association	£17,603	£0	£17,603
Tullyvallen Family Support	£20,000	£0	£20,000
UDR Castlederg	£14,277	£0	£14,277
UDR Enniskillen	£19,780	£0	£19,780
UDR Lisnaskea	£14,165	£0	£14,165
Wounded Police and Families Association	£14,895	£0	£14,895
11	£174,509	£0	£174,509
Grand Total	£6,633,118	£1,952,977	£8,586,095

VSP & PEACE IV funding 2019-20

Organisations	VSP Year 3	Peace IV Year 3	Total Year 3
Aisling Centre	£77,213	£0	£77,213
Antrim Youth	£35,109	£0	£35,109
Ashton Community Trust	£554,516	£64,806	£619,322
Aurora Counselling	£110,328	£0	£110,328
Barnardos	£125,853	£0	£125,853
CALMS	£199,883	£0	£199,883
Castlehill Foundation	£58,372	£35,069	£93,441
Centre for Health & Wellbeing	£36,682	£0	£36,682
County Armagh Phoenix	£41,680	£0	£41,680
Cunamh	£132,010	£30,547	£162,557
Decorum NI	£57,716	£32,767	£90,483

Organisations	VSP Year 3	Peace IV Year 3	Total Year 3
Derry Well Women	£102,507	£0	£102,507
East Belfast Counselling	£56,827	£29,843	£86,670
Ely Centre	£293,733	£68,551	£362,284
FAIR	£81,873	£0	£81,873
Families Beyond Conflict	£60,383	£0	£60,383
Families Moving On	£97,978	£32,926	£130,904
Firinne	£158,799	£82,015	£240,814
Holy Trinity Centre	£96,304	£0	£96,304
Institute for Conflict Research	£32,374	£0	£32,374
Koram Centre	£105,137	£0	£105,137
Lenadoon Community Forum	£90,555	£29,940	£120,495
MAPS	£75,701	£0	£75,701
MAST	£61,308	£0	£61,308
MUVE Project	£61,471	£0	£61,471
New Life Counselling	£101,787	£0	£101,787
Omagh Support and Self Help Group	£143,300	£67,840	£211,140
Out of the Shadows	£71,269	£0	£71,269
Paper Trail	£6,000	£37,025	£43,025
Pat Finucane Centre	£82,898	£217,617	£300,515
REACT	£66,726	£0	£66,726
Relatives for Justice	£578,578	£212,808	£791,386
South Armagh Rural Women's Network	£55,787	£0	£55,787
South East Fermanagh Foundation	£518,059	£409,263	£927,322
South & East Tyrone Welfare Support	£70,134	£0	£70,134
Springhill Community House	£95,550	£0	£95,550
Survivors of Trauma	£113,750	£0	£113,750
Tara Centre	£124,985	£0	£124,985
Tim Parry Johnathan Ball Peace Foundation	£0	£57,718	£57,718
UDR Coleraine	£36,218	£0	£36,218
Ulster Human Rights Watch	£37,769	£127,999	£165,768
VAST	£105,952	£0	£105,952
WAVE Trauma Centre	£1,569,223	£407,780	£1,977,003
43	£6,582,298	£1,944,514	£8,526,812
Small Grants			
Antrim Voluntary Welfare	£15,000	£0	£15,000
Larne Voluntary Welfare	£15,100	£0	£15,100
Newry and Mourne Voluntary Welfare	£18,927	£0	£18,927
Omagh Police Wives	£3,762	£0	£3,762
South Tyrone and Voluntary Welfare	£30,000	£0	£30,000
Strule Association	£17,603	£0	£17,603
Tullyvallen Family Support	£20,000	£0	£20,000

Organisations	VSP Year 3	Peace IV Year 3	Total Year 3
UDR Castlederg	£12,125	£0	£12,125
UDR Enniskillen	£19,780	£0	£19,780
UDR Lisnaskea	£14,165	£0	£14,165
Wounded Police and Families Association	£14,900	£0	£14,900
11	£181,362	£0	£181,362
Grand Total	£6,763,660	£1,944,514	£8,708,174

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether a request was put to the Minister of Justice to chair the new Ministerial-led group to consider compliance and enforcement of the regulations; and (ii) if so, what was her reply.
(AQW 7359/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: A proposal was made to the Executive that the Minister of Justice should convene a working group on compliance. The Executive agreed that a working group on compliance and enforcement of the regulations be established, but that this should be led at ministerial level by the Executive Office. We do not comment on the views expressed by Ministers in their correspondence to colleagues.

Mr Stewart asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) why the High Streets Task Force, announced by their Department on 6 August, has yet to meet; and (ii) what date the first meeting will take place.
(AQW 7439/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The High Streets Task Force is intended to be a strategic response to the long-standing challenges faced by town and city centres: such as the need for infrastructure investment, the prevalence of on-line shopping, and changing patterns of consumer behaviour.

Engagement with stakeholders on the co-design of the initiative is underway, and our aim will be to bring a proposal to the Executive in the coming weeks.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) what funding their Department has made to Cara-Friend; and (ii) the purpose for which the money was awarded, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 7727/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office has provided funding to Cara-Friend on two occasions in the last three years (2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20 financial years).

They were awarded a grant from the Shared Future Fund in 2018/19 to provide a T:BUC Camp, project name 'Rainbow Bridges'. The grant award was for £10,020.54 and was paid to Cara-Friend by the Education Authority as delivery partner for The Executive Office.

They were also awarded a grant from the Central Good Relations Fund in 2016/17 for cross-community sports projects, mindfulness training events and workshops in identity. A payment of £9,201.90 was made in June 2017, which was for a grant drawdown for work carried out in 2016/17.

Mr K Buchanan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they will promote more effective enforcement of the Executive's COVID-19 regulations at GAA fixtures across Northern Ireland.
(AQW 8194/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Whilst it is not within the remit of the Department for Communities to enforce public health regulations, DfC and Sport NI officials continue to engage with sports Governing Bodies on a range of issues including the development of plans and protocols to ensure that games with a limited number of spectators can be played in a safe environment that fully complies with Covid advice and with social distancing guidelines.

The GAA are also working, as are other sports, to ensure that they have controls in place to manage incidents of players and backroom staff testing positive and to ensure that they follow the health guidance.

In terms of enforcement of the Executive's Covid-19 regulations, the Executive has set up a strategic enforcement group, chaired by the TEO Junior Ministers, to coordinate efforts on encouraging compliance and enforcement. The group includes the Health Minister, officials from DoJ and DfE and is working closely with the PSNI and local government and other partners.

Mr Stewart asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the employment provisions of the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 with regards to the teaching exemption.
(AQO 749/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Although the power to repeal or amend the teachers' exception in Article 71 of the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 is conferred on the Executive Office, any change to the exception would clearly have implications for the Department of Education.

The exemption of teachers from The Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 will receive further consideration in due course.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) when the Knockninny Area of Special Scientific Interest was declared; and (ii) the features which led to this.

(AQW 6313/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Knockninny Hill was declared an ASSI on 31 July 1997. The selection features of the site are: Upland Calcareous Grassland; Upland Mixed Ashwood; Higher Plant Assemblage and Invertebrate Assemblage.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what plans his Department has to improve the conservation status of the Knockninny Area of Special Scientific Interest.

(AQW 6314/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department is taking a variety of actions at a strategic level to improve conservation status of Areas of Special Scientific Interest. We support actions on the ground by providing others who own and manage ASSIs with grant support and bespoke agreements through our Environmental Farming Scheme, the Environment Fund and Management of Sensitive Sites (MOSS) programme, and through the INTERREG Va Habitats Programme for sites also designated as Special Areas of Conservation.

Specifically at Knockninny Hill, 66% of the land area within the site is within the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS). A number of land owners have availed of the EFS Higher scheme within the last three years restoring, preserving and enhancing grassland and woodland habitats.

The Department is also working to address wider pressures on protected sites, such as that posed by ammonia emissions and associated nitrogen deposition, through the development of an Ammonia Strategy and a review of the operational protocol on the assessment of air pollution impacts on sensitive habitats which are due to be consulted on later in the year.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what powers his Department has to address malodours in the vicinity of the Kinnegar area, Holywood.

(AQW 6362/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department deals with policy and legislation on statutory nuisance for Northern Ireland. The laws are enforced by the environmental health units of the district councils.

Article 63 of the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 defines statutory nuisances. Article 63(1)(d) includes "Any dust, steam, smell or other effluvia arising on industrial, trade or business premises and being prejudicial to health or a nuisance" as a statutory nuisance. This only applies to a smell arising from industrial and trade or business premises. However, other subsections of article 63 could be relevant, depending on the nature/source of the odour. For example, article 63(1)e indicates that 'any accumulation or deposit which is prejudicial to health or a nuisance' could constitute a statutory nuisance.

The statutory nuisance regime, as set out in CNEA is enforced by the District Councils. As such, it would be for an officer of the relevant District Council to investigate any complaint made and determine whether or not it constitutes a statutory nuisance, and what, if any action should be taken.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the impact that the recent decision of the European Union to ban the use of lead shot will have on shooting in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6381/17-22)

Mr Poots: It is widely acknowledged that many waterfowl die from lead poisoning after ingesting lead shot which has fallen onto wetland. In Northern Ireland lead shot has been banned for use over wetlands since 2009.

The EU REACH committee vote on Thursday 3rd September approved the proposed EU wide ban on the use lead shot over wetlands. This proposal includes a buffer zone of 100metres and will now have to be ratified by the EU Council of Ministers within 3 months. Once ratified it will need to be published in in the Official Journal, and 20 days after this, the regulation will come into force and the 2 year transition period will begin.

It is uncertain if the EU regulation will come into force prior to end of the EU exit transition period on 31st December 2020, thereby the UK may not be required to implement.

As outlined above, Northern Ireland has already implemented a ban on the use of lead shot over wetlands, along with similar legislation in the rest of the UK. The main difference in the proposal by the EU REACH committee is that it will significantly increase the area land where a ban would be enforceable. At present it should be noted that my officials, in the exercise of their duties, have not detected any infringements of the current regulations.

Notwithstanding that the UK may not be legally obliged to implement, it should be noted that organisations such as the British Association for Shooting and Conservation have already proposed a five year transition in the total ban on lead shot to their members. This stance demonstrates that the use of lead shot is already being phased out by significant elements of the shooting community.

My Department will continue to monitor the progress of the EU REACH proposal and liaise with our UK colleagues as appropriate.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to outline funding streams available to assist the development of Cairn Wood Forest.^[R]

(AQW 6429/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department, through the Forest Park Enhancement Scheme, has allocated funding of £450,000 towards the cost of a £787,000 scheme to enhance Cairn Wood Forest Park. The project, which is currently being delivered by Ards and North Down Borough Council, involves the provision of toilet amenities, carparking facilities and enhancement of the existing walking trail network.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) how many (a) visits; and (b) enforcement notices under the Noxious Weeds Order (NI) 1977 has his Department taken or issued; (ii) the breakdown of these visits or enforcement actions between (a) farmers; (b) the public sector; and (c) other landowners, in the last two years; and (iii) how his Department informs (a) landowners who are not in receipt of area payments; (b) other Government Departments; and (c) public sector organisations, about their responsibilities to control noxious weeds.

(AQW 6575/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department investigates noxious weed complaints under The Noxious Weeds (Northern Ireland) Order 1977, which requires landowners to control Thistles, Ragwort, Docks and Wild oats that could infest agricultural land.

In 2018, eleven notified occurrences were investigated, resulting in eight enforcement notices for control measures being issued to landowners. Nine follow up visits confirmed compliance with notice requirements.

In 2019, sixteen notified occurrences were investigated, resulting in six enforcement notices for control measures being issued to landowners. Seventeen follow up visits confirmed satisfactory compliance.

One case of noxious weeds on public sector land was investigated in 2018 and the site inspection confirmed that satisfactory control measures had been taken, therefore no notice issued. As investigations undertaken and notices issued under the Noxious Weeds (Northern Ireland) Order 1977 are directed to the land owners, they do not distinguish between farmers and non farmers

The Department raises awareness of legislative requirements to all landowners annually, usually in the springtime, to encourage control of noxious weeds. This normally includes mail shots and posters issued directly to Government Departments, other public landowners, including Councils. These are also displayed at DAERA Direct offices. As a consequence of the Covid-19 circumstances that prevailed, this was not undertaken in Spring 2020, however the Department plans to resume the campaign in Spring 2021.

More generally the Department uses press articles to raise awareness of responsibilities for all landowners and provides detailed comprehensive guidance on a range of control options for Noxious Weeds, which is published on the Department's Internet site.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department has any plans to introduce the mandatory use of CCTV in Northern Ireland's abattoirs as is already in place in other parts of the United Kingdom.

(AQW 6587/17-22)

Mr Poots: I currently have no plans to make the installation of CCTV recording in abattoirs mandatory as the systems already in place provide assurance that welfare standards are being met. At present, over 99% of animals and birds processed in Northern Ireland are slaughtered under CCTV coverage.

Official Veterinarians from my Department maintain a permanent presence in approved Northern Ireland slaughterhouses during the hours of slaughter. They are responsible for monitoring animal welfare at slaughter and verifying that operators fulfil their obligations under both meat hygiene and animal welfare legislation.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether there are plans to reform rights of way access legislation.^[R]

(AQW 6805/17-22)

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.

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.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what representations they have made to the (i) UK Government; and (ii) European Union regarding any potential for the Northern Ireland post-Brexit food supply being disrupted. **(AQW 6831/17-22)**

Mr Poots: I have been clear all along that I want this aspect of the Northern Ireland Protocol implemented in a way that minimises any frictions on the flow of goods into and out of Northern Ireland, one that works for our businesses and citizens.

I have directly engaged with Minister Eustice on several occasions in the past months to ensure that we take the necessary steps to minimise and remove where possible the impacts on the movement of goods, including food, into and out of Northern Ireland. I am content that I have sought clarity from the UK Government throughout and where necessary I have taken legal advice to support my considerations as my officials seek to develop effective options in response to a complex and time sensitive task.

At all stages, I have clearly outlined to my officials as part of the programme delivery that I want to see the levels of facilities minimised, that any physical inspections at the points of entry are as low as possible and that any costs to businesses are removed. I have indeed challenged them on several occasions over the past months asking them to consider in detail how these requirements are met, as I am mindful that negotiations with the EU commission are ongoing.

My officials are currently developing proposals in conjunction with Defra and will share them in due course. Their discussions with UK Government colleagues have also included Food Supply Contingency planning in relation to Northern Ireland. My Department, working collaboratively with other Executive Departments, continues to lead on the regular assessment of the health of Northern Ireland's food supply chain and my officials are committed to developing associated contingency plans.

I believe it is because of my challenges that we are actually holding both the UK Government and the EU Commission to account in ensuring there is a minimised impact on Northern Ireland as we seek to deliver against the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department will be represented at the United Nations Summit on Biodiversity on 30 September 2020. **(AQW 7140/17-22)**

Mr Poots: My Department will not be represented at the United Nations Summit on Biodiversity. Representation at the Summit will be on a UK wide basis and led by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).

My officials work closely with Defra and the other devolved administrations on this and other biodiversity related international issues as applicable.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the answer to AQW 5466/17-22. **(AQW 7219/17-22)**

Mr Poots: DAERA continues to work closely with the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in order to develop and implement arrangements that will meet the obligations emerging from the Northern Ireland Protocol. Recently this has included detailed work in the following areas;

- a Updating the EU designation applications for the Northern Ireland Seaports and supporting drawings further to the EU designation applications made on the 30 June 20;
- b Obtaining EU Technical support for the delivery of the IT functions and;
- c The development of an approach for engagement with the retail sector.

I have made clear to the Defra Secretary of State that the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) regime to be implemented under the Protocol must be minimised in terms of its effect on the movement of animal and plant products into Northern Ireland and I am assured that he and his officials are fully committed to delivering this outcome through on-going engagement with the EU Commission.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether he intends to redirect funds for Greening Payments to other environmental aspects of the Basic Payment Scheme; and (ii) whether he has engaged with stakeholders on this matter. **(AQW 7306/17-22)**

Mr Poots: On 10 September 2020 I announced my intention to incorporate the Greening payment into the overall BPS entitlement unit values. This funding will, therefore, not be directed specifically to environmental aspects of the Basic Payment Scheme.

There was stakeholder engagement on this issue as part of the 2018 engagement exercise taken forward by DAERA on a potential future Agricultural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland.

I hope you find this response helpful.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on plans to decarbonise business activity by introducing legally binding targets to cut its greenhouse gas emissions to net-zero by 2050, as is the case in the rest of the UK.

(AQW 7482/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have written to the independent expert UK Climate Change Committee (CCC) for advice on what would be our equitable contribution to the UK's net zero emissions target, to ensure our greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets are credible and evidence-based. Unfortunately the CCC are not in a position to respond to my request until after they have provided advice on the UK's sixth carbon budget, which will be published in December 2020.

In the interim, my officials have provided me with proposals on an options appraisal for a Climate Change Bill in Northern Ireland. I will consider those options along with the advice provided from the CCC and will present my findings to the Northern Ireland Executive to agree a way forward.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to list the wildlife under possible threat of extinction in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7769/17-22)

Mr Poots: The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) have produced categories and criteria used to assess the conservation status of species and to inform the IUCN Red List of threatened species. NIEA have worked in partnership with National Parks and Wildlife Service in the Republic of Ireland to produce a number of relevant Red Data lists for the island of Ireland. These give specific detail on the vulnerability of a wide range of species, including vascular plants, terrestrial mammals and bryophytes. These lists can be found at <https://www.npws.ie/publications/red-lists>.

The Birds of Conservation Concern in Ireland 2014-2019 is the latest assessment of the conservation status of all regularly occurring birds on the island of Ireland. It uses data from a wide variety of sources and a traffic light system (i.e. Red, Amber and Green) to indicate the conservation status of species. Of the 202 species assessed, 37 were placed on the Red List; i.e., the most threatened species. These include well-known species such as Corncrake, Curlew and Barn Owl. The full listing can be found at:

<https://birdwatchireland.ie/birds-of-conservation-concern-in-ireland-2014-2019/>

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in regard to dealing with ruinous and dilapidated buildings and neglected sites, to detail (i) what powers are bestowed on local councils under the Clean Neighbourhoods and Environment (NI) Act 2011; (ii) the legal definition of ruinous and dilapidated buildings and neglected sites; and (iii) how many times the legislation has been successfully used by councils to deal with such sites and buildings, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 8075/17-22)

Mr Poots: A dilapidated or unsightly building can ruin the general appearance of the area in which it is located. A business whose property adjoins such a building can suffer a loss of trade due to the deterioration of the amenity of the area. Property owners can also suffer due to decreasing property values. Dilapidated buildings also have consequences in terms of people's perceptions of an area. Such areas can attract anti-social behaviour and can harm tourism potential and reduce civic pride. The maintenance of attractive and successful places in which people are happy to live, work and visit is therefore very important and should help Northern Ireland as we seek to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic.

District councils currently do not generally have statutory duties in this area, with the exception of dealing with statutory nuisances under Part 7 of the Clean Neighbourhoods & Environment Act (NI) 2011, whereby councils are required to inspect, investigate and serve abatement notices. For the purposes of Part 7 "any premises in such a state as to be prejudicial to health or a nuisance" constitute a statutory nuisance.

There is no definition of "ruinous and dilapidated buildings and neglected sites" contained within the legislation and my Department does not hold any information on how often these provisions have been used by district councils.

Much of the legislation used by councils in this area dates back to the mid-19th century and/or applies to specific geographical areas. The Belfast Improvement Act 1878 and the Towns Improvement Clauses Act 1847 place some statutory duties on councils in relation to dangerous/ruinous buildings, walls, etc. (such as requiring the owner or occupier to demolish, secure or repair a property or requiring councils to secure such properties themselves by way of a board or fence). There is also a significant legislative deficit in Northern Ireland compared with other jurisdictions, which have access to powers to deal with dilapidation at a much earlier stage.

Over the past few years my Department has engaged with stakeholders through blight summits, a discussion document, bi-lateral meetings and a formal public consultation in March 2016. The overwhelming majority of the respondents to the consultation expressed a preference for the development of a wide-ranging Dilapidation Bill that would consolidate and amend much of the existing legislation, and supplement it with new provisions in respect of low level dilapidation and

dangerous buildings already available to local authorities in the rest of the UK. The other key proposal was to enhance significantly the cost recovery provisions available to councils, making the option of them carrying out the relevant works themselves much more viable.

The intention of the proposed Bill is to provide all district councils with a modern, fit-for-purpose Northern Ireland-wide enforcement regime to deal with the negative impact of dilapidated/dangerous buildings and neglected sites.

It is intended to introduce the Bill to the Assembly in 2021 so that it completes its passage before the end of the current Assembly mandate.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how much rural development funding has gone into the the North Antrim villages of (i) Armoyle; (ii) Bushmills; (iii) Dervock; (iv) Mosside; and (v) Stranocum, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 8150/17-22)

Mr Poots: In accordance with EU Regulation No. 1306/2013 and Commission Regulation No. 908/2014, details of amounts received by UK beneficiaries under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) can be found at <http://cap-payments.defra.gov.uk/>. This information includes Rural Development funding and can be searched by town and postcode.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of why (i) the Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006; (ii) the Phosphorus (Use in Agriculture) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006, (iii) the Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 and (iv) the Nitrates Action Programme (Northern Ireland) 2014 did not prevent deterioration in water quality arising from agriculture expansion.

(AQW 8161/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Nitrates Action Programme (NAP) Regulations first came into operation in 2007 and are reviewed and revised every 4 years. The NAP contains a range of measures to control the application of manures and chemical fertilisers to land. It applies to all farms in Northern Ireland and the measures promote best practice and efficient use of nutrients on farms.

The Phosphorus (Use in Agriculture) Regulations contained measures for land application of chemical phosphorus fertiliser, to limit its use so it was only to be applied where and when there was a crop requirement.

After the introduction of these regulations, water quality improved with reductions in both annual mean nitrate concentrations in surface water and groundwater, and soluble reactive phosphorus (SRP) in rivers.

However, water quality data since 2012, especially for SRP in rivers, indicates this downward trend has reversed, although nutrient concentrations in waters are generally below those before the introduction of the NAP and Phosphorus regulations. This decline in water quality is likely to be related to an increase of phosphorus inputs to NI agriculture in terms of livestock feeds and chemical phosphorus fertiliser use. Overall livestock numbers have also increased from 2012 to 2018.

Therefore, when the NAP 2015-2018 was reviewed, a range of additional measures were introduced for the NAP 2019-2022, in response to the decline in water quality. Specific phosphorus measures include requirements for a fertilisation plan and soil analysis for the application of chemical phosphorus fertiliser by all grassland farms, and phosphorus rich manures and anaerobic digestate by all farms and new maximum phosphate fertiliser application limits for extensively managed grassland. The NAP for 2019-2022 came into operation in April 2019 and has been renamed the Nutrients Action Programme, to reflect the fact it now incorporates the Phosphorus (Use in Agriculture) Regulations.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assessment his Department has made of the potential effect of hydrogen technology on improving air quality.

(AQW 8163/17-22)

Mr Poots: Air pollution can have a serious effect on people's health and has negative impacts on our environment.

To date, my Department has not assessed the potential effect of hydrogen technology on improving air quality. However, I did meet with Ministers Dodds, Mallon and Murphy on 5 October and there was support for the development of hydrogen technology. The Department for the Economy is leading on this work and as such you may wish to contact them for further information.

You may also find it interesting to note that my Department has been working on developing a Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document involving close collaboration with other Departments. The Discussion Document has now been finalised and will be launched shortly for public consultation. The consultation will invite views on a range of matters relating to air quality and will be an opportunity for stakeholders to put ideas and suggestions to my Department. I welcome full engagement in this process.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when his Department will be issuing the discussion document aimed at collecting stakeholder views on how we should deal with environmental plans, principles and governance in the future.

(AQW 8164/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Discussion Document on Plans, Principles and Governance was scheduled for publication on the DAERA website and the Citizen Space consultation platform on 12 October 2020 but has been postponed to allow officials to provide further briefing to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The discussion document will issue as soon as it is practicable to do so.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what plans he has to bring forward legislation to ban the import of hunting trophies from endangered species.

(AQW 8165/17-22)

Mr Poots: In November 2019 Defra launched a UK wide consultation on options for the future of importing and exporting hunting trophies in the UK. Unfortunately, due to the current coronavirus outbreak, there has been a delay in publication of the summary of responses.

The international trade of endangered species, including hunting trophies derived from them, is subject to global agreement and regulated under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).

CITES is a reserved matter within UK Government and my officials were engaged during the development of the consultation. Only when the consultation process is complete will it be clear what is the appropriate action for the UK Government to take forward.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he intends to introduce Lucy's Law, or similar legislation, in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 8167/17-22)

Mr Poots: I can see merit in introducing a law prohibiting the sale of pups and kittens by third parties in Northern Ireland (known as 'Lucy's Law' in England). However, I am conscious that immediate EU exit related legislative pressures provide little scope to introduce a new law at this juncture. I have, however, instructed my officials to progress the matter as resources permit with a view to ensuring that it can be introduced as soon as is possible when those pressures ease.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how his Department follows up on the implementation of village plans arising from under rural development funding.

(AQW 8239/17-22)

Mr Poots: Priority 6 of the EU Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020 makes provision for the development of integrated village plans to assist development on the basis that the plans can be utilised by communities, working with their local Council, to identify need and seek action from the statutory bodies. Local Action Groups (LAGs) are given an allocation of RDP funding to support a range of activities and some choose to fund village plan activities so as to demonstrate action. The Department in its role as Paying Agency carries out a percentage check on projects funded under the Village Renewal Scheme in accordance with EU rules.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in order to prevent further deterioration in water quality and to be legally compliant with the (i) Water Framework Directive; and (ii) the Habitats Directive, whether he will consider an immediate repeal of the Nutrients Action Programme 2019-2022 relaxation on fertiliser plan requirements and livestock thresholds.

(AQW 8253/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Nutrients Action Programme (NAP) 2019-2022 implements a number of additional measures to the previous NAP 2015-2018. These include an additional requirement from 1 January 2020 for all grassland farms using chemical phosphorus fertiliser; and all farms using phosphorus rich manures and anaerobic digestate, to prepare and keep up to date a fertilisation plan and conduct a soil analysis. In the previous NAP 2015-2018 fertilisation plans were only required for farms operating under an approved derogation. The purpose of fertilisation plans is to ensure that nutrients are only applied where there is a crop requirement, therefore reducing the risk of nutrient losses to water.

There has been no relaxation in relation to livestock thresholds. The NAP 2019-2022 introduces an additional requirement that Low Emission Slurry Spreading Equipment (LESSE) must be used from 1 February 2022 on cattle farms with 200 or more cattle livestock units and pig farms with a total annual livestock manure nitrogen production of 20,000 kg or more from pigs. The purpose of this measure is to improve both water and air quality and nutrient use efficiency.

As the NAP 2019-2022 has added more requirements for fertilisation plans and for the use of LESSE on farms of specific livestock thresholds, there are no relaxations to consider for repeal.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the impact that the numerous Nitrates Directive derogations sought by his Department have had on water quality deterioration.

(AQW 8255/17-22)

Mr Poots: Farms operating under the Nutrients Action Programme (NAP) derogation must adopt specific nutrient management, land spreading restrictions and record-keeping measures, in addition to complying with the NAP measures. Derogation requirements include preparation of annual fertilisation plans and accounts, regular soil analysis and a farm

phosphorus balance limit. The purpose is to ensure that operating at the higher grazing livestock manure limit of the derogation does not adversely impact on water quality.

The conditions of the derogation are set by the European Commission and specified in the legal decision. The Northern Ireland derogation has been granted by the European Commission since 2008 and must be renewed every 4 years. The application process for renewal is lengthy and involves detailed scrutiny by the European Commission and the EU Nitrates Committee. In order for the derogation to be approved, it must be demonstrated that it will not adversely impact on water quality. Given that the Northern Ireland derogation has been approved on four occasions, the European Commission and the EU Nitrates Committee consider that it should not cause a deterioration in water quality.

Data since 2012 indicates that deterioration in water quality in Northern Ireland is mainly due to increases in concentrations of soluble reactive phosphorus in rivers. This is likely to be related to an increase of phosphorus inputs to NI agriculture in terms of livestock feeds and chemical phosphorus fertiliser use. Overall livestock numbers have also increased from 2012 to 2018.

However, on derogated farms phosphorus inputs are constrained as they must operate within a farm phosphorus balance limit. In addition, water quality monitoring of a derogated sub-catchment compared with a non-derogated sub-catchment of the Upper Bann has indicated little difference in the measured median concentrations of soluble reactive phosphorus in out-flowing drainage water between these two sub-catchments. This implies that the derogation is not exacerbating water quality problems.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when AQW 5910/17-22 will be answered.
(AQW 8274/17-22)

Mr Poots: The answer to AQW 5910/17-22 is still under consideration by my Department and I will respond when this work is complete.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what action his Department is taking to address ongoing issues with Japanese knotweed in Redburn Country Park.
(AQW 8275/17-22)

Mr Poots: Japanese knotweed has been confirmed as occurring within the historical Walled Garden area at Redburn Country Park. It is not known to occur in any other areas within the Park.

The growth in this area has been subject to control for a number of years via the application of a systemic herbicide which was most recently undertaken on 17 September 2020 by my Officials in the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

During the course of the ongoing control programme my Officials became concerned that despite fencing and local signage having been put in place to restrict local access, some members of the public were still ignoring this and crossing the control area, which appeared to have been spreading the knotweed further and setting back the control efforts. In response to this, the existing cordoning off of the area, is in the process of being enhanced to further restrict public access in the immediate area.

My Officials will continue to monitor and control as necessary until no further regrowth occurs.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs why no critical load information is available on the Air Pollution Information System website for the following Special Areas of Conservation (i) Rea's Wood and Farr's Bay; (ii) Red Bay; and (iii) Skerries and Causeway.
(AQW 8364/17-22)

Mr Poots: The habitats and species for which Rea's Wood and Farris Bay, Red Bay and Skerries and Causeway SACs have been designated are not considered to be sensitive to the eutrophication caused by nitrogen deposition. Therefore, no critical loads have been set for those features.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many farms are still to be inspected under the Single Farm Payment Scheme before payment is made.
(AQW 8390/17-22)

Mr Poots:

488 businesses who have submitted claims under the Basic Payment Scheme have been selected for an On the Spot check (OTSC) in 2020. All of these businesses have been inspected by an external contractor using Control with Remote Sensing. This involves the use of satellite imagery to determine the eligibility of each field. For any fields where the contractor has difficulty ascertaining the eligibility, DAERA inspectors complete a rapid field visit (RFV) i.e. a physical check on the ground, to ensure a high level of accuracy.

As of 12 October 2020, final results for 144 businesses have been returned to DAERA and 83 of these have been sent for payment with the remainder going through final validation checks. Therefore 405 businesses remain outstanding. My Department is currently processing these businesses as quickly as possible and the number being transferred for payment increases every day. It is anticipated that the vast majority of OTSC cases will be paid by the end of November 2020.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will bring forward a clean air strategy for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 8413/17-22)

Mr Poots: In December 2016, the previous DAERA Minister, Michele McIlveen, gave a commitment to develop an air quality strategy for Northern Ireland.

Since then, the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has been working on developing a draft Clean Air Strategy discussion document. Work has involved close collaboration with other Departments, in particular the Department for Infrastructure. The Discussion Document has now been finalised and will be launched shortly for public consultation. The consultation will invite views on a range of matters relating to air quality and will be an opportunity for stakeholders to put ideas and suggestions to my Department. I welcome full engagement in this process.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what (i) Departmental; and (ii) arm's-length body spend there has been in each of the North Antrim villages (i) Armoy; (ii) Bushmills; (iii) Dervock; (iv) Mosside; and (v) Stranocum, in each of the last ten years.

(AQW 8428/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and Arm's Length Bodies has identified a total of £986k in the North Antrim Villages of Armoy, Bushmills, Dervock, Mosside and Stranocum from 2013-14 to 2019-20. This is broken down in the table below.

North Antrim Village Spend

	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	Total
	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000	£'000
Armoy	26	30	-	-	88	-	115	259
Bushmills	58	117	6	-	68	79	293	621
Dervock	7	10	-	-	7	-	-	24
Mosside	16	11	-	-	8	-	4	39
Stranocum	12	4	-	-	8	17	2	43
Total	119	172	6	-	179	96	414	986

Due to the Department's document retention policy of 7 years, financial information for the 2010-11, 2011-12 and 2012-13 years is limited and has therefore been excluded.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) what assessment he has made of changes in the level of air pollution during lockdown restrictions due to the COVID-19 outbreak; and (ii) what steps he is taking to reduce air pollution.

(AQW 8445/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department continually monitors air quality across Northern Ireland. This includes monitoring pollutants such as particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide. Sources of nitrogen dioxide include domestic and industrial combustion and road transport. Particulate matter is formed from domestic wood and coal burning and industrial combustion.

During the first few months of lockdown, levels of nitrogen dioxide were lower than in previous years. However, this is thought, at least in part, to be a result of weather conditions in 2020. More recently, levels of nitrogen dioxide have begun to return to post lockdown trends.

Particulate matter has shown more variability than nitrogen dioxide. At times, levels of particulate matter in 2020 have remained above the five year average for a sustained period. For example, on the 9 April my Department issued an air pollution alert for the following day, due to high levels of particulate matter being forecast.

You ask about the action that I am taking to reduce air pollution in Northern Ireland.

My Department financially supports district councils in monitoring air quality through the Local Air Quality Management Grant. This year additional funds have been made available to upgrade existing monitors and support a variety of projects relating to air quality. Funding is also provided to Sustrans, the active travel charity to promote behavioural change and encourage walking and cycling.

The data from the monitoring stations is publically available on the Air Quality NI website (www.airqualityni.co.uk/) which was redesigned earlier in the year. A page specifically for children has been added. The data from the website is used in the first Air Quality App for Northern Ireland, which I launched on 7 May 2020. I would encourage everyone to download the new Northern Ireland Air App in order to receive the most up-to-date information on the quality of air across the province.

In addition to the App, my Department has been working on developing a Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document. Work has involved close collaboration with other Departments, in particular the Department for Infrastructure. The Discussion

Document has been finalised and will be launched shortly for public consultation. The consultation will invite views on a range of matters relating to air quality and will be an opportunity for stakeholders to put ideas and suggestions to my Department. I welcome full engagement in this process.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assessment his Department has made of air quality in the South Antrim constituency.
(AQW 8446/17-22)

Mr Poots: Air pollution can have a serious effect on people's health. It also has negative impacts on our environment.

In Northern Ireland, District Councils are responsible for reviewing the state of air quality in their district. They do this through monitoring air quality at a number of sites throughout Northern Ireland and the Department provides financial assistance to support this monitoring network.

The air quality within the South Antrim constituency is monitored with a network of nitrogen dioxide diffusion tubes managed by Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council. Local councils produce an annual report on the quality of air within their district. The 2019 report for Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council can be found on the Northern Ireland Air website at www.airqualityni.co.uk/laqm/district-council-reports.

For information specifically regarding these AQMAs, I recommend that you contact Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough council.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, as part of the Clean Air Strategy, whether his Department plans to introduce (i) a city-wide Low Emission Zone for Belfast; and (ii) smaller localised Low Emission Zones for specific hotspots in other areas.
(AQW 8447/17-22)

Mr Poots: In December 2016, the previous DAERA Minister, Michele McIlveen, gave a commitment to develop an air quality strategy. Since then, my officials have been working on developing a draft Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document. This work has involved close collaboration with other Departments, in particular the Department for Infrastructure. Information on Low Emission Zones (LEZs) is included within the Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document.

The Discussion Document has now been finalised and will be launched for a 12 week public consultation in the coming weeks. The consultation will invite views on a range of matters relating to air quality and will be an opportunity for stakeholders to put ideas and suggestions to my Department. I welcome full engagement in this process.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail plans to increase funding for additional air quality monitoring sites.
(AQW 8448/17-22)

Mr Poots: Air Quality is continually monitored across Northern Ireland. This includes monitoring pollutants such as particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide. Sources of nitrogen dioxide include domestic and industrial combustion and road transport. Particulate matter is formed from domestic wood and coal burning and industrial combustion.

My Department financially supports district councils in monitoring air quality through the Local Air Quality Management Grant. Annual sums offered each year under this Grant are in the region of £180,000. During the 2010/21 financial year an additional £90,000 has been offered to district councils to upgrade existing monitors.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 2615/17-22, (i) why his Department does not hold information on (a) the location; or (b) volumes of commercial peat extraction activities in Northern Ireland; (ii) for his assessment of the value of such data in relation to the work of his Department; and (iii) whether he intends to instruct his Department to explore options for (a) collating; and (b) publishing this information.
(AQW 8454/17-22)

Mr Poots: Currently, my Department has no statutory or other obligation to collate or publish information on the location or volume of commercial peat extraction activities in Northern Ireland. The power to regulate commercial peat extraction rests with the planning authorities of local councils.

Going forward, in the context of the development and implementation of a Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy, it may be useful to have such data in order to define future policy and direction on overall peatland restoration.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for an update on his Department's review of Fixed Penalty Notices for littering and dog fouling; (ii) when he expects the review to be completed; (iii) whether the review will be made public; and (iv) whether the review is likely to bring forward changes to the Fixed Penalty Notice regime before the proposed consultation on his Department's Environment Strategy.
(AQW 8455/17-22)

Mr Poots: I share your concerns regarding the scourge of both dog fouling and littering. My Department is using a combined approach of legislation, education, awareness and enforcement to tackle these issues. As you are aware, the current legislation (the Clean Neighbourhoods & Environment Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 & the Environmental Offences (Fixed

Penalties) (Miscellaneous Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012) enables district councils to issue fixed penalty notices (FPNs) of between £50 and £80 for littering and dog fouling offences, with a reduced fine for early payment. When the case is dealt with by the courts, a fine of up to £1,000 for dog fouling offences, and up to £2,500 for littering offences can be imposed.

The Department keeps this legislation under review and earlier this year appointed Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful to gather data from all councils on their use of FPNs for both litter and dog fouling offences. Feedback was also sought from councils on the effectiveness of the current powers and fines. In addition, several councils have recently independently contacted me about this issue. This data is being used to inform the Department's review of the current FPN regime.

My officials are currently reviewing all of the responses received, both through Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful and those sent directly to myself. It is anticipated that the review will be completed in early 2021.

The findings will be made public and included in the draft Environment Strategy. This will be Northern Ireland's first overarching Environment Strategy and is due to be consulted upon in early 2021. The strategy consultation will consider a range of options for tackling litter and dog fouling offences in the future and will ensure all stakeholders have an input to the process. Any changes to the current FPN regime will only be possible after public consultation.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of how nitrate levels in shellfish water bodies impact E. coli levels.

(AQW 8519/17-22)

Mr Poots: Nitrogen as nitrate is naturally present in the environment and is a necessary nutrient for plant growth and for ecosystems. However, high levels of nitrate are associated with anthropogenic (human-derived) sources such as agricultural runoff, (nitrogen-based fertilizers and animal manure) and sewage discharges.

The presence of E. coli in the environment is an indicator of faecal contamination. It is possible to have elevated nitrate levels in shellfish water bodies without a corresponding increase in E. coli. This can occur where the source is not of faecal origin, for example, where chemical fertilisers are in use.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, with regard to having the worst air pollution in Northern Ireland, what plans he has to improve air quality in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area.

(AQW 8538/17-22)

Mr Poots: In Northern Ireland, District Councils are responsible for reviewing air quality in their district. They do this through monitoring air quality at a number of sites and my Department provides financial assistance to support this monitoring network. There are currently four Air Quality Management Areas and four automatic monitoring stations within the Derry and Strabane District Council area.

The most recent air quality report published in May of this year, relates to the 2018 calendar year. The report found that levels of particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide recorded at the automatic monitoring stations in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area were below the annual mean objective for each pollutant. Levels of Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons, which had exceeded the EU target value in 2016, have now returned to levels lower than that recorded in 2014. You can read the full report here;

https://www.airqualityni.co.uk/documents/technical-reports/Air_Pollution_in_Northern_Ireland_2018_Issue2_screen-optimised.pdf

At present my Department is developing the first Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland. In December 2016, the previous DAERA Minister, Michele McIlveen, gave a commitment to develop an air quality strategy. Since then, my officials have been working on developing a draft Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document.

This work has involved close collaboration with other Departments, in particular the Department for Infrastructure.

The Discussion Document has now been finalised and will be launched shortly for a 12 week public consultation in the coming weeks. The consultation will invite views on a wide range of matters relating to air quality and I encourage everyone to put forward their ideas and suggestions as part of the consultation.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what progress his Department has made on reducing the use of plastics.

(AQW 8573/17-22)

Mr Poots: In the New Decade, New Approach deal, the Executive is tasked with bringing forward actions to address climate change including creating a plan to eliminate plastic pollution.

An Executive paper will be tabled shortly proposing an action plan to eliminate unnecessary single-use plastics in the government estate. If agreed by the Executive, the plan will be introduced in October 2020 and changes to purchasing contracts with suppliers will be phased in over the following 12 months until October 2021.

The Department is now into Year 3 of the Tackling Plastic project with Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful and Sustainable NI providing public messages through social media and giving ongoing support and guidance to local businesses, schools and local councils about how they can reduce their plastic consumption.

DAERA implemented the Carrier Bag Levy for Northern Ireland in 2013. Our latest published figures show that 1.5 billion carrier bags have already been removed from circulation across Northern Ireland. I am presently reviewing this levy as there is evidence that reusable bags are only being used once.

DAERA's College for Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) is working with Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA) food and drink processors to facilitate better engagement between the manufacturing sector and policy-makers to help create an improved, shared understanding of the use and potential reduction of plastic in food packaging.

DAERA has joined the other UK Administrations in becoming a member of the UK Plastics Pact this year. In contributing to the pact, the Department is directly funding the work of its organisers, the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP), to develop and disseminate approaches to reduce the environmental impact of plastic packaging. Membership of the pact also enables the Department to use its contact networks to share innovations, data, analyses and reports with businesses and work is already underway to achieve 4 key industry targets to eliminate unnecessary plastics and/or increase recyclability by 2025.

I am continuing to work closely with my Ministerial colleagues across the UK to introduce a range of legislative drivers to help promote a Circular Economy waste package which will help to keep plastic in the economy and out of the environment. This includes ongoing work with other UK administrations on plans to introduce both an Extended Producer Responsibility scheme and a Deposit Return Scheme which together will contribute to minimising the amount of plastic packaging produced whilst maximising the amount of plastic packaging waste collected for recycling. Further consultations on the proposals are planned for early 2021. With other UK administrations having introduced or consulting on introducing legislative measures on single-use plastics, I am keeping the situation in Northern Ireland under review. In addition, HM Treasury will introduce a plastic packaging tax on plastic with less than 30% recycled content in April 2022 which will encourage a significant increase in the use of recycled plastic in packaging.

I trust this provides reassurance that both I and my officials are using a variety of approaches to engage with the problem of eliminating plastic pollution.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he will make it policy to introduce new metrics to measure improvements in individual aspects of water quality in (i) rivers; and (ii) other inland freshwater bodies.
(AQW 8574/17-22)

Mr Poots: Water quality metrics are set out in legislation under the Water Framework Directive (Classification, Priority Substances and Shellfish Waters) Regulations (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2015. They are in place for both i) rivers and ii) other inland freshwater bodies such as lakes and show both improvements and deterioration in individual aspects of water quality. Metrics are subject to review based on scientific advice and technical improvements in assessment method.

The policy of my Department remains that new metrics will be introduced when the underlying scientific advice supports this. The normal legislative and consultation processes will be followed.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of whether his Department's Going for Growth strategy is leading to an increase in ammonia emissions and, consequently, to poorer air quality.

(AQW 8612/17-22)

Mr Poots: In May 2012, the then Department of Agriculture, Rural Development (DARD) and Department of Enterprise and Department Trade and Investment (DETI) appointed the industry led Agri-Food Strategy Board (AFSB) to make recommendations on a strategic action plan for the agri-food sector. The AFSB published their 'Going for Growth' strategy in May 2013. In October 2014, the NI Executive's response to Going for Growth outlined agreed actions to be taken by a range of NI government departments and agencies to address various AFSB recommendations. DAERA's actions were mainstreamed into core business as usual activities and almost all are now virtually complete.

There was an increase registered in ammonia emissions in Northern Ireland each year from 2011 to 2017, before an annual reduction was reported for 2018. A number of factors may have contributed to these figures. My Department's focus is on developing a comprehensive approach to ammonia which will significantly reduce emissions and we intend to publish these proposals for consultation soon.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many (i) Special Protection Areas; and (ii) Special Areas for Conservation have been designated in Northern Ireland, in each of the last four years.

(AQW 8659/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department has not classified any Special Protection Areas (SPAs) in the last 4 years. Three marine Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) were designated in 2017 and 1 marine SAC in 2018.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the potential for an outdoor recreation bill to (i) address right of way and land ownership issues; and (ii) develop natural green corridors that would connect people and place for green growth and wellbeing.

(AQW 8666/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department is currently reviewing legislation related to public access for outdoor recreation. The review is considering 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.

We are currently drafting a consultation paper to seek ideas from stakeholders on how we can better facilitate outdoor recreation including the development of green corridors for public use.

Consideration will be given to the provision of a recreation bill, if current legislation cannot be suitably amended.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to the NI Audit Office report Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy findings, and in consideration of the fact that his Department are responsible for issuing the appropriate licences, to outline whether his Department was aware that anaerobic digestion plants without licences were operating and receiving renewable energy subsidies.

(AQW 8696/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Department for the Economy (DfE) has overall responsibility for renewable electricity policy and legislation, including the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation Scheme (NIRO). Its administration is fulfilled through an Agency Services Agreement with the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (OFGEM).

As the NIAO report states, there was no requirement in the legislation for planning and environmental regulations to be complied with for a generating station to be accredited and receive Renewables Obligation Certificates (ROCs). However neither anaerobic digestion plants nor the biogas they produce are eligible for support under the NIRO. The NIRO supports the generation of renewable electricity, including electricity generated by stations fuelled by biogas produced through the anaerobic digestion process. This is an important distinction to make as the NIRO legislation and scheme administration is focused solely on the electricity generating station and ROCs are issued only in recognition of the eligible electricity produced.

When it was announced that the NIRO scheme was closing on 31 March 2017, there was a large increase in applications to the scheme and some developers proceeded to construct AD plants without securing the necessary grant of planning permission or waste authorisation where this was required.

While not all anaerobic digestion plants require a waste management licence, as this is dependent on the nature of the feedstock, my Department is aware that a number of Anaerobic Digestion plants have been operating without waste management licences. My officials have worked with colleagues in DfE, DfI and OFGEM to identify the locations of these plants. They have contacted all known operators and applications have now been received from all plants currently operating that require a waste authorisation.

My Department has welcomed the NIAO report's key findings and recommendations, in particular its recommendation that new measures to strengthen partnership arrangements with DfE and other relevant public bodies, to ensure that any future renewable energy schemes are supported at an early stage, with a proactive and joined up approach to accreditation, monitoring and enforcement.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department requires anaerobic digester plants dealing with agricultural waste to have planning permission before the Department will issue them with a waste management licence.

(AQW 8859/17-22)

Mr Poots: Yes, anaerobic digester plants treating agricultural waste must have planning permission in place prior to my Department issuing a waste management licence.

This is a statutory requirement under Article 8 of The Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 which states that a waste management licence shall not be granted for the use of land, plant or equipment, for which planning permission is required, unless such planning permission is in force. My Department therefore requires applicants for all waste management licences to provide evidence that this requirement has been satisfied before a licence is granted.

Department for Communities

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the current number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties that do not have a shower; (ii) any measures being taken by the Department to amend the process surrounding the installation of showers, particularly in cases where residents are suffering health and mental health issues due to their bathing facilities; and (iii) why, in 2020, is it not considered a basic right to have a shower in a Housing Executive property.

(AQW 6204/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): The Housing Executive has provided the following response;

- i) The current number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties that do not have a shower;

The Housing Executive currently records 14,524 properties as having showers installed, which would indicate that some 70,192 properties do not have a shower. However, records on shower installations are incomplete as – except where showers were installed as adaptations - they were not recorded separately as part of bathroom replacement works until recently.

- (ii) any measures being taken by the Department to amend the process surrounding the installation of showers, particularly in cases where residents are suffering health and mental health issues due to their bathing facilities;

In addition to the well-established process for those tenants who receive adaptations following an Occupational Therapist recommendation, there are opportunities for tenants to request alternative bathing facilities through their local office. This may be as a consequence of their mobility deteriorating or due to the normal aging process rather than having a notifiable disability. This usually requires the bath to be removed and a shower installed in the same location if possible. Alternatively, if there are young children in the household, the bath may be retained (or a lower height bath installed) and a shower fitted over the bath, provided this is suitable for all the family needs.

- (iii) Why, in 2020, is it not considered a basic right to have a shower in a Housing Executive property?

Since the recent introduction of the current bathroom, kitchen and rewire (BKR) replacement programme, the Housing Executive has endeavoured to either provide a shower provision over the bath or alternatively install a level access shower to suit the mobility needs of the tenant. This is usually identified during tenant consultation. It should be noted that due to the size restrictions within the majority of bathrooms in Housing Executive properties, it is difficult to install a separate shower cubicle whilst retaining the bath.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities how many searches have been carried out through (i) Public Records Office; and (ii) General Register Office, records in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7345/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: PRONI publishes a range of statistics relating to service delivery in an annual digest of statistics. The latest Digest can be found at <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/topics/proni-statistics>

The number of documents produced for the public was:

2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
32,033	29,802	30,642

The number of public written queries that were responded to was:

2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
3,207	3,903	3,356

In addition the PRONI website received the following page views

2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
10.4 million	9.4 million	10.1 million

This includes searches across Will calendars, Electronic catalogue, Valuation books and other PRONI online applications.

The number of searches carried out through the General Register Office were:

2017/18	1,185,949 searches
2018/19	1,216,273 searches
2019/20	1,135,460 searches

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities how much funding has been provided to Transgender NI in each of the last three years.

(AQW 7371/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has provided no funding to Transgender NI in the last three years.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities to detail any plans for local mitigations to ensure that women and families are protected from poverty while on Universal Credit.

(AQW 7511/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are some welfare mitigation payments available to people who are claiming Universal Credit. This includes financial support for people who are affected by the Social Sector Size Criteria policy (commonly called “the Bedroom Tax”) and for families with children who have their benefit reduced by the Benefit Cap. In addition any person making a new claim to Universal Credit can apply to the Universal Credit Contingency Fund for a non-repayable grant.

I am currently considering options of introducing a scheme to mitigate the restriction on support for a maximum of two children in Child Tax Credit and Universal Credit. It is also anticipated that the forthcoming review of the welfare mitigation measures will consider the provision of new mitigation measures for people who are claiming Universal Credit.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she is considering measures to mitigate and remedy the negative impacts of Universal Credit on women, particularly around the 5-week wait.

(AQW 7513/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are some measures in place to mitigate the impact of the 5 week wait for payment of UC.

Since 22nd July 2020, people who move to Universal Credit will have their existing legacy benefit continue for two weeks with no requirement to repay the overlay.

A similar two week run-on is also in place for Housing Benefit claimants who move to Universal Credit as a result of a change of circumstances.

Any person experiencing financial difficulties can apply for an Advance Payment (an interest free payment) where advances, worth up to 100 per cent of a person’s indicative award, are available, if there is a need. Advance Payments are deducted over a period of 12 months and from October 2021, the payback period for these advances will be extended further, up to sixteen months.

In addition a person claiming UC can apply for a Contingency payment, which is a grant and is not repayable. From 1st January 2020, the Department removed the requirement that people must take out a Universal Credit Advance Payment before being eligible for a payment from the Universal Credit Contingency Fund. It is anticipated that the forthcoming review of the welfare mitigation measures will consider the future design of the Universal Credit Contingency Fund.

My Department continues to monitor the effectiveness of the various support measures that are available for people claiming Universal Credit.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities how she plans to inform Universal Credit claimants about the existence of the Contingency Fund.

(AQW 7586/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Universal Credit Contingency Fund is promoted to people claiming Universal Credit and through the NI Direct website.

Everyone who makes a claim to Universal Credit is informed about the Contingency Fund through a personal welcome message on their online journal. This message includes signposting to the Finance Support Freephone and Textphone numbers, as well a link to the online claim form if they wish to enquire further, or apply directly, to the Contingency Fund.

Our staff also promote the Universal Credit Contingency Fund to anyone contacting them to report financial hardship. The Department also uses its social media channels to highlight the existence of the Contingency Fund, and our partners in the Advice Sector also actively promote its existence.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to simplify the process for making claims to the Universal Credit Contingency Fund.

(AQW 7588/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: To help simplify the process for making claims to the Universal Credit Contingency Fund an online claim form was recently introduced in addition to the pre-existing telephony based application process.

This online form was co-designed in collaboration with the Voluntary and Community Sector.

To help promote the different options available, each person who makes a new claim to Universal Credit is advised of the availability of the Universal Credit Contingency Fund and how to apply via their Universal Credit journal.

The journal entry includes the Finance Support Freephone number and provides a direct link to the online form. Further assistance to complete an application will be provided on request.

Further information on the Universal Credit Contingency Fund is also available on the Extra Finance Support and Universal Credit pages on NI Direct.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities whether she will consider bringing forward a financial package to support sporting bodies and groups who have seen a loss of income in recent months due to the cap in numbers attending sporting fixtures.

(AQW 7690/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have asked my officials and Sport NI to continue to engage with the Governing Bodies for sport to explore the full impact of the reduction in spectators both now and in the coming months.

I have already shown my commitment to supporting the sector through the Sports Hardship Fund. I also recently announced the launch of a programme to provide essential PPE packs to clubs which will help to reduce club expenditure on Covid related supplies.

I can assure the sports sector that I will continue to explore options to support those in financial difficulty and to help sustain and protect sports clubs during these difficult times.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities when she will roll out redundancy support resources into the community; and what role councils will have in this programme.

(AQW 7695/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department works with other departments and stakeholders to provide people facing redundancy with information and advice. This service is often delivered in partnership with the local Councils.

The service can be offered virtually and face to face, to provide the support that best meets the needs of both the employer and employees. On-site Redundancy Clinics can be arranged where social distancing requirements can be adhered to.

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. This is readily available to any employer or anyone facing redundancy.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities whether artists who are prohibited from performing in clubs and bars that sell alcohol will be able to access the £29 million support package announced for the arts sector.

(AQW 7713/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The £29m allocation from the Executive will provide a much needed lifeline and significant boost to our culture, language, arts and heritage organisations, local musicians, freelancers and artists who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

My officials are currently working on proposals for a suite of funding schemes to support these sectors. The schemes will include support for individuals, as well as organisations. Details of the funding schemes including guidance, eligibility and application information will be announced shortly.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the capital funding available from her Department for new community centres.

(AQW 7804/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department, through People and Place, A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, delivers The Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund (NRIF) which considers capital grant applications that meet any of the four overarching strategic objectives of the People and Place strategy. The main objective of capital investment is to promote physical renewal within the Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, where the investment helps create attractive, safe, sustainable community space in the most deprived neighbourhoods.

This can include support for new community centres. While there is no specific budget allocated to new community centres, all capital projects are developed through the respective Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership subject to priority needs, successful business case approval and funding availability.

Over the last three years my Department has issued £10.1M in capital investment through NRIF, a third of which has been for new community centres.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Communities how many households in the Upper Bann constituency pay bedroom tax.
(AQW 7808/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that there are currently 2,701 households in receipt of Housing Benefit affected by Social Sector Size Criteria (Bedroom Tax) within its South Area. This most closely aligns to the Upper Bann constituency and includes Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon. However almost 99% receive Welfare Supplementary Payments to fully compensate for the reduction in their entitlement to Housing Benefit.

The latest available data shows that 34 households in the Area have lost entitlement to Welfare Supplementary Payments.

In addition at 31 March 2020, there were 240 individuals in receipt of Universal Credit in the Upper Bann constituency who were affected by the Social Sector Size Criteria. All 240 were in receipt of Universal Credit administration payments to mitigate its impact and therefore were not required to make up the shortfall in their rent.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on marching bands.

(AQW 7817/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise the challenges that are being faced across the community for all musicians and bands, including marching bands, as we seek to tackle COVID-19.

Restrictions on gatherings and the need for social distancing have had significant impacts on practice, performance and the development of talent. I also recognise the impact that restrictions might have on the sense of community and individual well-being that participation in or listening to performances can bring.

The current situation has also brought financial impacts and so I very much welcome the £29 million allocation from the Executive which will provide a much needed lifeline across the culture, language, arts and heritage sectors, which will support them to resume their activities when it is safe to relax the restrictions.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Communities to list the schools which have secured funding through the Your School, Your Club initiative, including (i) a breakdown of sums secured; and (ii) the nature of the projects funded.

(AQW 7818/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Between 2017/18 and 2019/20, over £1.3m capital funding has been provided for projects completed under Your School Your Club to revitalise existing sports facilities or to develop new/additional provision as part of the initiative. The following table shows a breakdown of funding and projects:

2017/18

School Details	Project Type	Funded Amount
St Marys PS Pomeroy	Upgrade to 3g pitch with floodlights and equipment	£132,925
Parkhill Integrated College	Provision of floodlighting and associated equipment	£135,000
Waringstown PS	Provision of floodlighting and associated equipment	£130,613
Hillcroft Special School	Access works and provision of play equipment	£23,725
	Total	£422,263

2018/19

School Details	Project Type	Funded Amount
Augher Central Primary School	Upgrade of grass playing field to 2G playing surface with floodlights	£150,000
National Autistic Society, Carryduff	Equipment for the indoor gym and Outdoor Space	£30,000
	Total	£180,000

2019/20

School Details	Project Type	Funded Amount
Rainey Endowed School	Cricket Wicket	£67,200
Rainey Endowed School	Security- Access	£29,126
Kings Park Primary School	Sports Hall/Gym equipment	£15,000
Donacloney Primary School (2G synthetic pitch)	Upgrade to 3g pitch and floodlighting	£300,000
Our Ladys Grammar School, Newry	Tennis Bubble	£123,886
Aughnacloy College	Reallocation of changing facilities	£30,000
Holy Trinity College Cookstown	Upgrade to gym facility, security equipment	£35,895
Rathmore Grammar School	Upgrade to gym facility equipment	£29,198
St Colmcilles PS Carrickmore	Construction of Ball Wall and catch net for H&S	£30,557
St Pius X College Magherafelt	Upgrade of sports hall and Basketball equipment	£23,742
St Patricks College Banbridge	Refurbishment of changing rooms	£100,000
	Total	£784,604

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities how many Personal Independence Payment applications are awaiting a decision.

(AQW 7894/17-22)

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 8,470 people who had registered an application to claim Personal Independence Payment 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.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Communities how many benefits appeals have been submitted to the Appeals Service are awaiting a decision.

(AQW 7895/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As a result of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, no appeals were listed for hearings between 18 March 2020 and 6 July 2020. At 31 August 2020 there were 7,731 appeals awaiting a decision.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities whether people who have to self-isolate will be entitled to the same £500 payment that is available in England, from the end of September.

(AQW 7899/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department provides financial support to those required to stay at home and self-isolate through the Discretionary Support Covid-19 living expenses grant introduced on 25 March 2020. This grant is unique to citizens here. Work is ongoing to review and update this process.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what projections she has made of the number of additional claims for Universal Credit between now and December 2020, compared to the same period in 2019.

(AQW 7906/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Universal Credit caseload forecasts are produced by statisticians in my Department and used by my operational staff on an ongoing basis for resource and budgetary planning purposes. However, these forecasts are for internal use only. The member can find detailed official statistics on Universal Credit publically available on my Department's website at: <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/universal-credit-statistics-may-2020>

Management information has also been published on the number of claims made to Universal Credit since Covid-19 began up until 27 September 2020.

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-management-information-uc-021020.pdf>

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the support available to people at risk of losing their homes as a result of being unable to pay their mortgage.

(AQW 7907/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There is support available to homeowners who are unable to pay their mortgage; both those in receipt of benefits and those who are not.

With regards to people claiming benefits, in April 2020, my Department increased the basic rate of Universal Credit by over £80 a month. This has been beneficial to all people claiming Universal Credit, including those who are owner-occupiers.

People who claim Universal Credit, or a legacy income-related benefit, can avail of Support for Mortgage Interest, which is a loan designed to assist with paying home owner mortgage interest payments, with the primary purpose to enable people to stay in their homes without fear of repossession. A loan is available from the date the person starts getting Pension Credit or, if the person is in receipt of another qualifying benefit, they have served a nine month qualifying period.

All homeowners can currently also access payment holidays on their mortgages. In March, a three month mortgage payment holiday for those who were in difficulty due to COVID-19 was announced, which was extended to buy-to-let landlords. Additionally, a three month moratorium began on residential and buy-to let possession action, meaning that no homes will be repossessed during this period.

These two measures prevented both homeowners and landlords from facing unaffordable bills or repossession if they can't work, or if their tenants can't pay rent, during this period.

This gives home owners a much-needed respite period, where no repayments on these products are due. The FCA's guidance sets out that borrowers can access a 3-month payment holiday from their lender until 31 October.

Anyone experiencing financial difficulty with their mortgage should contact their lender as soon as possible to discuss their circumstances and what support might be available.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what engagement she has had with the Department for Work and Pensions to abolish the Social Sector Size Criteria.

(AQW 7922/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department continues to deliver welfare mitigation payments to people who lose benefit as a result of the bedroom tax with £21.3 million paid to more than 38,000 people affected in 2018/19. A small number of people are not currently eligible for a mitigation payment and this is something I intend to address in the forthcoming welfare mitigation legislation.

Engagement with DWP officials by this Department is a regular occurrence.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how many Personal Independence Payment Appeals are currently waiting to be heard since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 7957/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As a result of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic, no appeals were listed for hearings between 18 March 2020 and 6 July 2020. At 31 August 2020 there were 3,773 cases waiting to be heard.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to reduce lone parent poverty.

(AQW 7968/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Work has started on the development of a suite of Social Inclusion Strategies including an Anti-Poverty Strategy.

I have appointed an Anti-Poverty Expert Advisory Panel to make recommendations on the key themes and priorities that the Strategy should address. The recommendations will inform the work of a Co-Design Group made up of a cross section of Voluntary and Community Sector organisations. This group will reach out to people including lone parents affected by poverty to ensure their voices are heard and considered in the development of the Strategy.

My Department is also taking forward work linked to the wider Labour Market Recovery which includes expanding the support available to help people into employment, assisting lone parents to increase their income and move out of poverty.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of pieces of official Ministerial correspondence she has issued since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7991/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Between 11 January 2020 and 1 October 2020 the Department for Communities received and responded to 1653 Ministerial Correspondence cases.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of times she has appeared before her Statutory Committee since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7992/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Minister for Communities has appeared before the Committee for Communities seven times between 11 January 2020 and 1 October 2020.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of appearances she has made since the restoration of devolution (i) before the Assembly; and (ii) before the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response.

(AQW 7993/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Minister for Communities has appeared 36 times before the Assembly and 3 times before the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response, between the restoration of devolution and the 1 October 2020.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what plans exist to introduce a pre-action protocol encouraging mediation in the private rental sector.

(AQW 8007/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for pre-action protocols lies with the Lord Chief Justice and the Court Service. Helping to prevent evictions is a priority for me during this Coronavirus emergency. My officials have consulted with the Lord Chief Justice's Office which has issued clear guidance that when dealing with possession proceedings the courts will take account of all circumstances, including the guidance my Department has produced in this area.

The Member may also wish to note that last year a pilot mediation service for landlords and tenants was launched. This is being delivered by Housing Rights. The Housing Mediation Service will help mediate disputes between landlords and tenants about rent arrears, threatened evictions, repairs, tenancy agreements, anti-social behaviour issues and much more. This pilot will run for 3 years and will help inform any decisions around the establishment of an independent housing panel, which was one of the proposals which was consulted on during the review of the Private Rented Sector in 2017.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how she plans to mitigate against the impact of Social Sector Size Criteria on a more long-term basis.

(AQW 8013/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am committed to the continued mitigation of the Social Sector Size Criteria policy (commonly referred to as the “bedroom tax”). As such my priority is to secure an extension of the existing welfare mitigation package and this will be included in forthcoming legislation.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister for Communities what her Department is doing to financially support musicians who cannot work due to COVID-19 regulations.

(AQW 8045/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise the significant impact that current restrictions are having on musicians. I have welcomed the £29m allocation from the Executive which will provide support across the broad arts, language, culture and heritage sectors.

My officials are engaging with partners across central and local government, as well as arm’s length bodies and sectoral representatives to ensure the funding is distributed quickly, fairly and to maximise its impact. Work on the programme of support is well advanced and details of the new funding schemes, including guidance, eligibility and application information will be available shortly.

This fund is in addition to the £5.5m Creative Support Fund previously established by my Department.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of applications for intimidation points in each of the last five years, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 8090/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has provided the following table which details the numbers of Applicants who have presented as homeless (Homeless Presenters) to the Housing Executive with the stated reason of intimidation, in each of the last five years.

The Housing Executive has advised that this data cannot be extracted from the Housing Management System at constituency level and therefore is provided on the basis of Local Council Area. Where there have been less than 10 Applicants awarded intimidation points this has been denoted by <10 to anonymise this data and mitigate the potential risk of identifying individuals and individual households.

Council Area	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council	54	33	26	27	15
Ards & North Down Borough Council	44	36	64	81	43
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council	14	24	19	19	19
Belfast City Council	284	301	300	156	113
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council	12	16	11	<10	<10
Derry City & Strabane District Council	40	53	54	73	41
Fermanagh & Omagh District Council	<10	<10	<10	<10	<10
Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council	60	103	52	27	33
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	36	63	15	70	44
Mid Ulster District Council	14	14	13	12	<10
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	22	16	0	<10	11
Grand Total	582	661	558	481	335

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail her social housing new build target for the (i) 2020/21; and (ii) 2021/22 financial years.

(AQW 8091/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I can advise that the social housing new build target for 2020/21 is 1,850 social housing units to be started. For the years 2021/22 I can advise that no target has yet been set. I am committed to increasing the amount of social homes; delivery of this commitment will be significantly determined by future decisions on budget.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities whether the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer will commence in the 2020/21, 2021/22 or 2022/23 financial year.

(AQW 8094/17-22)

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 in 2020/21 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 she is working towards introducing a scheme similar to the Green Homes Grant in England.

(AQW 8130/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department of Finance has advised me the British Treasury has indicated that funding for a Green Homes Grant scheme, is to be found from existing budgets for 2020-21. This means that there is no additional funding for the Executive this year. I will continue to keep options under review.

However, my Department currently funds 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 34,683 energy efficiency measures have been installed in 21,027 homes, at a cost of £78.3m. A total of 37,491 boilers have been replaced under the Boiler Replacement Scheme since its introduction in 2012, at a total cost of £20.9m.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities whether she will seek to have the Taekwon Do Alliance Ireland recognised as the sports governing body with Sport NI.

(AQW 8131/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Currently, TANI is recognised as the governing body for the sport of Taekwondo. Only one governing body may be recognised for a sport.

Should another organisation wish to be recognised as the governing body for Taekwondo it should contact Sport NI to apply, where it will be assessed on its own merits and against the incumbent body in line with the Recognition criteria. To date, Taekwon Do Alliance Ireland has not submitted such an application.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities how much community funding has gone into (i) Armoy; (ii) Bushmills; (iii) Dervock; (iv) Mosside; and (v) Stranocum, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 8151/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In the last five years the Department for Communities, including its Arm's-Length Bodies, awarded £221,872.17 of funding to the areas requested. The analysis is set out in the following table.

	Armoy	Bushmills	Dervock	Mosside	Stranocum
2015/16	£16,715.65	£1,200.00	£60,600.00	nil	£1,200.00
2016/17	£21,164.65	£9,985.00	£32,650.00	£5,000.00	nil
2017/18	£ 4,920.00	£6,150.00	£ 9,781.70	nil	nil
2018/19	£ 4,480.00	£9,990.00	£13,569.00	£1,217.17	£ 269.00
2019/20	£ 5,170.00	£ 250.00	£17,560.00	nil	nil
Totals	£52,450.30	£27,575.00	£134,160.70	£6,217.17	£1,469.00

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the measures introduced in response to COVID-19 by her Department to safeguard staff in the workplace.

(AQW 8153/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: During the Covid 19 pandemic period my Department has kept offices open for staff to provide essential benefit and child maintenance services and ensure the continuity of payments to customers. Jobs and Benefits Offices were re-reopened to the public from July 2020 on a restricted basis to ensure that services for vulnerable customers could be provided on a face-to-face basis.

Consequently the Department also put in place a number of measures to protect staff coming to the workplace including the designation of key worker status for benefit and child maintenance staff, the provision of IT equipment to work from home where this was possible, the introduction of rota based systems to ensure minimum staffing levels, the reinforcement of social distancing measures in the workplace and additional cleaning/ sanitising regimes.

The Department has also worked with TU Health & Safety representatives to put in place Covid19 risk assessments for all of its office estate to ensure that staff numbers coming in to the workplace could do so safely and in compliance with all relevant Public Health Agency and Health & Safety Executive guidance.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of departmental staff who are (i) working from home; and (ii) have returned to the workplace.
(AQW 8154/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The position on 6th October 2020 is:

- i 2,982 DfC staff working from home;
- ii 3,405 DfC staff working from their place of work;

Please Note:

- DfC have c 8,397 staff in post.
- On 6th October 2020 there were 1,411 DfC staff not working due to being on either annual leave, flexi leave or part-time (non-working day).
- In addition there were 599 DfC staff not working due to being on either COVID-19 special leave, maternity leave, term-time or sick leave.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities whether she intends to establish a Northern Ireland Green Homes Grant scheme.
(AQW 8155/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department of Finance has advised me the British Treasury has indicated that funding for a Green Homes Grant scheme, is to be found from existing budgets for 2020-21. This means that there is no additional funding for the Executive this year. I will continue to keep options under review.

However, my Department currently funds 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 34,683 energy efficiency measures have been installed in 21,027 homes, at a cost of £78.3m. A total of 37,491 boilers have been replaced under the Boiler Replacement Scheme since its introduction in 2012, at a total cost of £20.9m.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities for an update on work to bring forward legislation to outlaw conversion therapy.
(AQW 8174/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: So-called conversion therapy is an abhorrent and inhuman practice. It is widely opposed by the United Nations, human rights experts and health professionals on the basis that it is a form of torture.

I recently met with Minister Long and Minister Swann, who share my commitment to ensure these harmful practices stop.

As this is a cross-cutting matter, it will be taken forward in the development of the Executive's Sexual Orientation Strategy outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

I recently announced the timetable for developing the Social Inclusion Strategies in my remit, one of which is the Sexual Orientation Strategy. Subject to Executive approval, the Sexual Orientation Strategy and Action Plan will be published and launched in December 2021. The Action Plan will include any legislative requirements that flow from this work.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities how her Department follows up on the implementation of village plans.
(AQW 8237/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Village Plans are developed under the Rural Development Programme (2014-20) Village Regeneration Scheme. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) is the Managing Authority with responsibility for the implementation, monitoring and reporting of the programme.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the total number of Northern Ireland Housing Executive properties which either have inadequate or inefficient cavity wall insulation.
(AQW 8241/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In 2019 the Housing Executive published a research report on Cavity Wall Insulation. The findings for the Housing Executive's stock were based on a sample survey of 825 properties and found that 63% of these properties had cavity wall insulation installations that were non-compliant with modern industry standards because there were found to be voids or debris in the cavity. Although the Housing Executive's data on the construction of all of its stock is not comprehensive, we estimate that if this 63% is extrapolated it would represent some 44,600 of our likely cavity wall constructed properties.

The Housing Executive is currently finalising a Draft Cavity Wall Insulation Action Plan for its stock in response to BBA's findings and recommendations. It will be issued for public consultation in the coming months.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities what progress she is making in bringing about a return of face-to-face benefit appeal panels; and when the panels will be hearing appeals again.

(AQW 8250/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Appeal hearings recommenced on 6 July 2020, for those appellants who opted to have their appeal determined on the papers before the tribunal panel.

Remote oral hearings commenced on 28 September 2020 using telephone conferencing facilities, while video technology hearings commenced on 5 October 2020.

Oral face to face hearings are recommencing in Cleaver House on 19 October 2020.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities how the Job Support Scheme will interact with childcare or other elements of Universal Credit.

(AQW 8327/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Entitlement to the childcare element of Universal Credit will not be affected by the Job Support Scheme.

The support which will be provided to employees who can return to work part-time under the Job Support Scheme will be taken into account in calculating the amount of Universal Credit. This is similar to the position for employees under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme – commonly known as the furlough scheme - which is due to end on 31 October 2020.

Work allowances are provided to those who are responsible for one or more children and/or have limited capability for work. For those with housing costs the work allowance is £287 per month and £503 per month for those without housing costs. Universal Credit is not reduced until earnings exceed these amounts and then by 63 pence in the pound.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities (i) to detail the challenges in implementing The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Act (NI) 2011; (ii) whether she will advise clubs to use an auditor for account preparation rather than the independent examiner method; and (iii) for her assessment of advice given to clubs by the PSNI that they should use the independent examiner method.

(AQW 8337/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- i The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 contained 19 sections.

Sections **5, 11 and 12** of the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 have yet to be commenced.

In respect of Sections **5 and 11**, the Department decided not to invoke its power to make regulations as it has not found it necessary to do so, whilst work is ongoing to commence Section 12 of the Act.
- ii Currently all registered clubs must conduct their accounting requirements in accordance with Article 40 of the Registration of Clubs (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 and the Registration of Clubs (Accounts) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997. Therefore, current legislation does not permit any club to use an independent examiner to carry out accounts preparation. It is only a qualified auditor who is permitted to audit an annual statement of accounts for a registered club.

However, the new accounts regulations and guidance which will revoke the 1997 Accounts Regulations will set out:

 - the documents with respect to transactions, assets and liabilities which a club is required to keep;
 - the manner in which such documents must be kept;
 - the system of control of accounts, cash holdings, receipts and remittances which a club must establish and maintain;
 - the need for a club to complete and the form of and particulars to be contained in, and the annual statement of accounts;
 - the need to have its accounts audited, who may conduct that audit and the manner in which an audit should be conducted; and
 - the need to have its accounts examined by an independent examiner, who may be selected as an independent examiner and the manner in which an independent examination should be conducted.
- iii My officials are continuing to work closely with the PSNI and it is hoped that **Section 12** of the Act will come into operation on 1 April 2021 to coincide with the start of the new financial year. Current legislation does not permit any club to use an independent examiner to carry out accounts preparation.

My officials are currently drafting new accounts regulations, which will make some easements to the accounting requirements of clubs along with associated guidance and a frequently asked questions guide in order to assist

registered clubs with the new accounting procedures. It is envisaged that these regulations will come into force before April 2021.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what the new regulations introduced in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area mean for different sports.

(AQW 8344/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Following an increase in coronavirus (Covid-19) cases, additional restrictions have been introduced for people living in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area.

In terms of what the new restrictions mean for sports:

- Indoor sport is allowed for individual training only (for example, no exercise classes); and
- Outdoor sports training and sporting events are permitted, however they will be required to take place without spectators.

For a full summary of the restrictions that are already in place, along with the additional restrictions for the affected area, please visit the following link: www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-and-localised-restrictions

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what is the public housing stock in (i) Armoy; (ii) Bushmills; (iii) Dervock; (iv) Mosside; and (v) Stranocum.

(AQW 8352/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Public Housing Stock is managed by two bodies:-

- 1 Regional Housing Associations have provided the following figures for their Housing Stock in the areas requested.
 - (i) Armoy - 6 (Rural Housing Association)
 - (ii) Bushmills – 17 (14 – Radius; 3 – Choice)
 - (iii) Dervock – 0
 - (iv) Mosside – 0
 - (v) Stranocum – 8 (Triangle)
- 2 The Housing Executive has provided the following table which details their Housing Stock in the areas requested.

Common Landlord Area	Bungalow	Flat	House	Maisonette	Cottage	Total	Void
Armoy	29	0	36	0	9	74	0
Bushmills	51	10	161	0	12	234	2
Dervock	40	0	68	0	20	128	0
Mosside	15	0	46	0	6	67	1
Stranocum	9	0	9	0	7	25	0

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Communities what measures her Department can bring forward to address the lack of parking areas in estates with a high proportion of Housing Executive properties.

(AQW 8373/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive recognises that many of the estates it inherited were constructed at a time when car ownership was significantly lower than it is today and where such provision would therefore not have been to today's standards, or whose now unpopular design and layout were specifically intended to separate vehicles and parking from dwellings.

Consequently the Housing Executive has historically implemented minor and major schemes to introduce increased or more appropriate parking provision in many such estates; for example, through in-curtilage parking, the reconfiguration of existing parking areas and the creation of new parking areas (where land availability and planning approval permits, and the Department for Infrastructure is prepared to adopt these). However, such activity has been reduced in recent years.

Now that estates are mixed tenure areas such works will be considered if Housing Executive owns over 50% of the properties in the area.

Schemes where the level of Housing Executive ownership is lower can be considered, but only on the proviso that there is a contribution to the costs from Roads Service. In some cases this has been done with funding support from Departmental programmes, such as Neighbourhood Renewal and TBUC, where works are part of area regeneration proposals.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities whether she will retain the Model Engineers Society Northern Ireland organisation at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, Cultra.

(AQW 8402/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: This is an operational decision for the Management of National Museums. National Museums have developed a masterplan for the Cultra site which will more fully unlock its potential to meet long term objectives. With these considerations in mind, National Museums indicated to the Model Engineer's Society in October 2019 that their continued use of the Walled Garden would not form part of the future plans for the site.

On 12th October 2020 National Museums issued the Model Engineers Society with notice of termination of their licence and this will start the formal 6-month period of notice to vacate the site. National Museums have offered to meet Model Engineers Society at their earliest convenience to discuss their relocation plans and how National Museums may be able to facilitate and support them.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 7517/17-22, (i) for a breakdown of the amount by constituency area; and (ii) how many people are currently on the waiting list in each area.

(AQW 8417/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has provided the following updated figures for the number of applicants on the waiting list and the number of voids broken down by constituency area.

Parliamentary Constituency	Applicants on Waiting List	Voids
Belfast East	1963	121
Belfast East/South*	397	N/A
Belfast North	4251	277
Belfast South	2585	107
Belfast South/Strangford*	109	N/A
Belfast West	3553	70
Belfast West/North*	126	N/A
Belfast West/South*	25	N/A
East Antrim	1641	100
East Derry	2273	34
Fermanagh South Tyrone	1858	37
Foyle	4187	50
Lagan Valley	1947	86
Mid Ulster	1215	24
Newry & Armagh	2184	48
North Antrim	2126	116
North Down	1749	40
South Antrim	1580	64
South Down	1959	40
Strangford	1537	69
Upper Bann	2683	60
West Tyrone	1632	45
Grand Total	41580	1388

*The following CLA Areas cross Parliamentary Constituency Boundaries:

NIHE CLA Parliamentary Constituency

Cregagh Castlereagh	Belfast East/South
Willowfield/Upper Castlereagh Road	Belfast East/South
Carryduff	Belfast South/Strangford

Ainsworth	Belfast West/North
Twaddell/Upper Woodvale	Belfast West/North
Hamill St / John St	Belfast West/South
Carrick Hill / Unity Flats	Belfast West/North
Bridge End / Rotherdam Court	Belfast East/South

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how many new claims for Universal Credit have been unsuccessful, since 16 March 2020.

(AQW 8427/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There may be several reasons why someone is not eligible to receive Universal Credit. Between 16 March and 8 September there were 87,555 claims made for Universal Credit of which 18,835 were unsuccessful for various reasons

- 51% of those were either withdrawn by the person claiming or the individual did not provide enough evidence for an assessment to be made; and
- 49% were closed as the person did not meet the eligibility criteria, e.g. excess capital, income, in full time education, residency.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what additional public housing stock is planned for (i) Armoyle; (ii) Bushmills; (iii) Dervock; (iv) Mosside; and (v) Stranocum.

(AQW 8429/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are 9 social housing units programmed to start in Armoyle as part of the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) 2020/21 – 2022/23. The detail of these units are included in Table 1 below.

The Housing Executive have also engaged with communities within the Bushmills, Dervock, Mosside & Stranocum areas to help them examine the needs for social housing. There are currently no social housing schemes planned in these areas.

The Housing Executive is currently in the process of updating the Social Housing Need Assessment Net Projection for the next 5 Year Period (2020-2025). Planned new social housing for these areas will be reviewed following confirmation of the updated projections.

Table 1: Social housing units programmed to start in Armoyle 2020/21 - 2022/23 (9 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Location	Type	Units	Onsite Year	Completion Year
Triangle	New Street	Armoyle	New Build	9	2021/22	2022/23

Programmed schemes can be lost or slip to future programme years for a variety of reasons, for example, relating to delays in acquiring sites and/or failure to secure Planning Permission.

Additional schemes can also be added to the SHDP in-year through the purchase of Existing Satisfactory / Off-the-shelf properties.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the habitability of each of the high rise flats in East Belfast.

(AQW 8434/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has six tower blocks in East Belfast: Kilbroney House, Woodstock House, Willowbrook House, Clarawood House, Carnet House and Whincroft House.

The Housing Executive has advised that these blocks would now require very significant investment in order to both extend their service lives and achieve and maintain a quality of accommodation expected of modern social housing.

The Housing Executive has developed a Tower Blocks Action Plan for its Tower Blocks portfolio which was approved by its Board in March 2019 and by the Department for Communities in August 2019. The Action Plan comprises a mix of retention and investment, re-provision and disposal at various points in a timeline. Given the complexity and scale of this plan the blocks have been categorised into 3 phases:

- Phase 1: Demolition (or disposal in some cases) in a 1 to 5 year time period - 14 'Short' term blocks
- Phase 2: Demolition in a 6 to 10 year period, with remedial works to be carried out in the interim - 7 'Medium' term blocks
- Phase 3: Demolition at a point beyond a 10 year period, with improvement works carried out as required - 12 'Long' term blocks.

As regards the East Belfast blocks the Action Plan proposes that Kilbroney House and Clarawood House, which have been categorised as 'Short' term blocks, should be demolished with new social housing built on the cleared sites subject to housing need. The remaining four blocks - Willowbrook, Woodstock, Carnet and Whincroft - have been categorised as 'Long' term and it is proposed that these blocks will have full improvements carried out (Carnet and Whincroft Houses have already had major works completed to the exterior of the blocks).

Implementation of these proposals will be subject to approval of business cases for individual blocks or groups of blocks as appropriate. The Housing Executive has advised that the programme of business cases is already underway and is currently focused on the 'Short' term blocks. It is envisaged that the business cases for Kilbroney House and Clarawood House will be finalised over the next few months. It is expected that the Housing Executive will approach the Department for Communities for approval of the detailed plans early next year.

An indicative programme for the refurbishment of the 'Long' term blocks has been drawn up. This is a seven and a half year programme in total, albeit timescales could slip due to the impact of Covid-19. A brief has been prepared by the Housing Executive for a procurement exercise to appoint consultant(s) to undertake detailed condition surveys for the first tranche of blocks to be refurbished. Woodstock House is included in the first tranche of blocks.

As regards the 'habitability' of these blocks, the statutory test as to whether a dwelling is fit for human habitation is the Fitness Standard as set out in Schedule 5 of the Housing (NI) Order 1992. I am informed that the Housing Executive is of the opinion that the six East Belfast blocks do not fail this standard.

I am advised by the Housing Executive that some of the windows in Kilbroney House are in a poor condition and that there are a number of repair issues within the block. Given that the block has been categorised for 'Short' term action, spending significant money to replace elements such as windows at this stage could be considered nugatory expenditure. The Housing Executive's South & East Belfast Area Office is therefore making assessments on the habitability of individual flats once they become vacant, pending the business case setting out the future plan for the block being approved. The Area Office continues to provide a response maintenance service to deal with day to day repairs to tenants in all of its blocks.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities how her Department will alleviate housing stress in East Belfast.
(AQW 8436/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am acutely aware that the numbers of people currently on the waiting list and those deemed to be in housing stress remains very challenging. I am focused on seeking to deliver as many new social homes as possible with the funding available.

In terms of new social homes in the East Belfast Parliamentary Constituency I have been advised by the Housing Executive that there have been 26 social housing units completed to date in 2020/21, with a further 130 social housing units currently under construction.

There are 233 new social housing units programmed to start through the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) between 2020/21 and 2022/23.

I am committed to delivering on the commitments within the "New Decade, New Approach" and will be taking steps to protect existing Housing Executive homes for future generations by actively progressing solutions to tackle the investment challenge faced. I will be laying out my plans very soon to commence a process of revitalisation.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities (i) for an update on the redevelopment of the King's Road flats, East Belfast; and (ii) how she will progress this project as quickly as possible to avoid cost increases.
(AQW 8437/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive tendered a multi element improvement programme for Kings Road in late 2019. Upon examining the compliant tenders it was found that the bids submitted significantly exceeded the budget estimate and the Business Case approval limit for the project from the Department for Communities. As a consequence of this and the likely impact of Covid on the working arrangements, the Housing Executive in April 2020 decided not to award the contract.

I am informed that it is the Housing Executive's intention to retender the project in late 2020 with a commencement on site in quarter 1 of the 21/22 financial year. This is only on the basis that the tenders are compliant and that they fall within the approved expenditure limits.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she will remove the loophole in the mitigations package which sees families claiming after 2016 being subject to the bedroom tax.
(AQW 8481/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I will be bringing forward new legislation to extend and improve the existing welfare mitigation schemes. The legislation will include proposed amendments to the Benefit Cap mitigation scheme to remove restrictions on entitlement. This will ensure that all families with children who are affected by the Benefit Cap will receive a mitigation payment equivalent to the capped amount.

I will also be bringing forward an amendment to the so called "bedroom tax" mitigation scheme to remove an anomaly in the current legislation that acts to end entitlement when a person moves home and continues to under-occupy by at least the

same number of bedrooms. This will ensure that in future all tenants affected by the “bedroom tax” will receive full mitigation for the associated loss of benefit. Both these proposed amendments will be subject to the approval of Assembly.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she has plans to mitigate the two child tax cap.
(AQW 8482/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am considering the feasibility of introducing a scheme to mitigate the restriction on support for a maximum of two children in Child Tax Credit and Universal Credit. The proposal is at an early stage of development with the estimated costs for delivering any additional welfare mitigation schemes currently being assessed.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Communities what support she can provide to students in regards to the cost and burden of contracts for private accommodation.
(AQW 8485/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The main source of support for students facing genuine financial hardship is the Department for Economy led Student Hardship Fund which is allocated to the local Higher Education Institutions (HEI) for distribution to students who can demonstrate genuine financial hardship. Each HEI is responsible for assessing student’s need and issuing support within the guidelines of the scheme.

Any students who may be experiencing financial hardship, should contact their Higher Education Institution to determine if they are eligible to receive support.

The obligation to fulfil a contract between individuals is legally binding and it is outside the powers of my Department to change this.

Since the outbreak of this pandemic the Department has put in place a number of provisions to assist private renters. Some students may be eligible to receive Housing Benefit if they already receive certain benefits or have parental or caring responsibilities.

An increase in Local Housing Allowance rates from 1 April has provided additional financial support for private tenants including any students in receipt of Housing Benefit or the housing costs element of Universal Credit.

In addition, anyone who has lost their job and who signed on to Universal Credit can apply for a Discretionary Housing Payment to have their full rent paid for 13 weeks.

Discretionary Support is available to provide financial assistance in extreme, exceptional or crisis situations where there is significant risk to the health, safety or well-being of a person or a member of their immediate family.

A person who is in full time third level education is normally not eligible for Discretionary Support. However, a student who is experiencing financial hardship as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic may be entitled to Discretionary Support including a grant for short term living expenses if they, or any member of their immediate family, are diagnosed with COVID-19 or are advised to self-isolate in accordance with the latest public health guidance.

In addition to this I also worked with local student representatives to ensure that students facing hardship were able to access food parcels.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities what Barnett consequentials are available as a result of the Kickstart programme in the UK; and how much of the allocation has been allocated to her Department to support the Communities Jobstart programme due to commence in November 2020.
(AQW 8488/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Following the British Chancellor’s update the Executive received Barnett consequential of £6.116m of Resource DEL in 2020/21 for New Jobs for Young People. It is for the Executive to decide how this is allocated.

My Department bid for £4.8m for Labour Market Inventions in 2020/21 but to date has received no Executive allocation. My Department is now seeking to manage this pressure internally through reprioritising and reallocating funding. A further bid will be considered as part of January Monitoring for any pressure remaining to 31 March 2021.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities how the recently announced £40 million support for local councils is being allocated.
(AQW 8530/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is carrying out an analysis of the figures provided by each council reflecting their projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs for the period 1 July 2020 to 30 September 2020 and actual spend for the period mid-March 2020 to 30 June 2020.

Once my Department has carried out a due diligence exercise on the information provided by councils, the figures will be signed off by individual Council Chief Executives. Final consultation with ALGFO and SOLACE will also take place.

This will provide a basis for allocation that will be consistent with the original bid for support as approved by the Executive. Allocations of funding will be confirmed once the due diligence exercise has been completed.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she will write-off social housing rent arrears for people who incurred these arrears due to cuts to their benefits beyond their control.

(AQW 8556/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that its staff are in regular contact with tenants to ensure that they are receiving their correct entitlement to the relevant benefits and mitigations to assist with their housing costs.

If their entitlement is reduced and that is causing an arrear to accrue the Housing Executive will seek to offer tenants advice and assistance through a “Making Your Money Work” Assessment. This Assessment includes basic budgeting help, a referral to Advice NI if other significant debts exist, a referral for Floating Support if factors affecting their housing situation have been identified, a referral to the Department’s Make the Call Wraparound Service who will carry out a Needs Assessment to ensure people are receiving all the benefits, supports and services to which they are entitled, and/or a referral to the Department’s in-house Financial Inclusion Managers who provide expert benefits, income maximisation and money and debt advice.

Under existing Housing Executive policy, and in line with the guidelines in Managing Public Money, the write off of rent arrears is only permissible when they are deemed to be irrecoverable. The Housing Executive must be satisfied that every reasonable and cost effective attempt has been made to recover a debt, using the available recovery methods.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities what additional (i) powers; and (ii) resources she has made available to local councils for the enforcement of Health Protection Regulations.

(AQW 8604/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Executive has agreed to introduce new powers which will allow council enforcement officers to issue improvement notices on premises giving the owner/occupier 48 hours to comply with the instructions in the notice. Regulations are currently being drafted.

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. The Executive then allocated a further £40m to councils, on 24 September 2020, to help address their financial pressures as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

My Department continues to liaise with councils through Association of Local Government Finance Officers and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives to ascertain their needs going forward, including the costs to councils of responding to the COVID-19 emergency such as the deployment of enforcement officers to issue improvement notices.

The Executive will shortly be commencing their consideration of the Budget 2021-24 period. This will allow the Executive to consider future year pressures, including those presented on behalf of Councils by my Department and enable the Executive to agree a budget settlement for future years. It will then be for my Department to prioritise funding requirements, including consideration of any proposal to provide additional financial support to Councils, within the context of that budget settlement

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for Communities whether the GAA proposed any sites other than Casement Park for a new stadium.

(AQW 8653/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Alternative sites for a regional scale Ulster Council GAA stadium were considered within the Regional Stadia Programme Outline Business Case in June 2010. The Ulster Council GAA proposal contained an assessment of other site options.

These other sites were excluded on the basis that they were not able to satisfy the criteria required to deliver a regional stadium: to facilitate the development of a facility capable of hosting Club, County, Provincial and National fixtures. They were therefore unable to satisfy the project objectives, the objectives of the Regional Stadia Programme and inherently, the wider community benefits contained within the programme.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for Communities what discussions (i) have been held; and (ii) are planned, with the GAA regarding increasing the Association’s contribution to the Casement Park project.

(AQW 8654/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My departmental officials, in conjunction with officials in the Department of Finance, are currently completing a review of the latest version of the draft Full Business Case for the Casement Park Project. Alongside this, a due diligence exercise is underway reviewing the estimated construction cost, which has risen due to the passage of time since the original estimate. There is also potential for any conditions associated with the planning approval process to impact on the projected costs for the project. UCGAA has continued to engage with the Department throughout this process.

Discussions have taken place, and will continue, with the GAA in respect of all these and associated matters, including the apportionment of any projected increased project costs.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities what support will be provided to people who lose their job but do not receive assistance from the Government’s new Job Support Scheme.

(AQW 8657/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is committed to supporting people at this difficult time and a series of changes have been put in place to ensure that the social security system is more flexible, to relieve hardship and to ensure people most in need get the help and support they require.

Those on low incomes or out of work can get support by applying for Universal Credit. Claims can be made online and a step by step guide on how to make a claim is available on the Department's website at <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-universal-credit-step-by-step-guide.pdf>.

Anyone currently in receipt of Tax Credits should read the information on www.gov.uk/working-tax-credit/further-information before making a claim to Universal Credit.

A person considering making a claim for benefit can access the 'entitled to' benefit calculator to get an estimate of how much Universal Credit they may be entitled to <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/benefits-adviser>

Immediate financial support is available for anyone struggling financially while waiting for their first payment of Universal Credit by applying through their online account for a repayable advance payment of up to 100% of their estimated entitlement. In addition, and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Universal Credit standard allowance increased for everyone by £86.67 a month from 6 April 2020 for one year.

People making a claim to Universal Credit can also apply for a non-repayable grant from the Universal Credit Contingency Fund through the Discretionary Support Scheme. An online application form can be found at:

www.nidirect.gov.uk/publications/discretionary-support-form. Further details on the Discretionary Support Scheme can be found at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/extra-financial-support>.

If a person satisfies the National Insurance Contributions (NICs) criteria, they may also be able to apply for New Style Jobseeker's Allowance. Details, including access to an on-line form, can be found at:

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/jobseekers-allowance>

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how many Universal Credit claims have been made in the last twelve months, broken down by the time it has taken to process each claim.

(AQW 8688/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Official statistics on the number of households on Universal Credit each month since October 2017 to May 2020 are detailed in the official Universal Credit publications available on my Department's website at:

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/universal-credit-statistics-may-2020>

Unlike many other social security benefits, Universal Credit is based on Assessment Periods. These are rolling one month periods that start on the day a Universal Credit claim is made. For example, if a claim is made on 1st September, the first assessment period will cover the period 1st September to 30 September. A new assessment period will begin on 1 October.

Up to the end of September 2020, over 90% of new claims were paid in full and on time by the end of their first assessment period. It is important to note that the Department will be unable to pay a person their full Universal Credit entitlement if they have not provided all the relevant information before the end of their assessment period.

Management Information providing weekly information on the numbers of people claiming Universal Credit, payments made, advances approved and payment timeliness for new claims is published on the Department's website and can be found at:

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/system/files/publications/communities/dfc-management-information-uc-021020.pdf>

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities what actions she will take to ensure the Model Engineers Society NI will be able to stay at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum.

(AQW 8729/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: This is an operational matter for the Management of National Museums to decide upon. However, it is acknowledged that their decision will have far reaching implications for the Model Engineers Society.

Acting on my direction, Departmental Officials have been in regular contact with National Museums as this matter has developed and they have sought assurance from National Museums that consideration had been given to the possibility of maintaining MESNI's relationship with Cultra by resettling the Model Engineers elsewhere on the estate.

I have been advised by National Museums that the possibility of retaining the link between the Society and the Ulster Folk & Transport Museum had been considered but they concluded that this could not be achieved.

NMNI are keen to conclude the relationship on amicable terms and have again offered to meet the Society at their earliest convenience to discuss their relocation plans and how National Museums NI may be able to facilitate and support them.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for Communities what support is available to students to offset rent for accommodation they are not using due to COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 8741/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The main source of support for students facing genuine financial hardship is the Department for Economy led Student Hardship Fund which is allocated to the local Higher Education Institutions (HEI) for distribution to students who can demonstrate genuine financial hardship. Each HEI is responsible for assessing student's need and issuing support within the guidelines of the scheme.

Any students who may be experiencing financial hardship, should contact their Higher Education Institution to determine if they are eligible to receive support.

The obligation to fulfil a contract between individuals is legally binding and it is outside the powers of my Department to change this.

Since the outbreak of this pandemic the Department has put in place a number of provisions to assist private renters. Some students may be eligible to receive Housing Benefit if they already receive certain benefits or have parental or caring responsibilities.

An increase in Local Housing Allowance rates from 1 April has provided additional financial support for private tenants including any students in receipt of Housing Benefit or the housing costs element of Universal Credit.

In addition, anyone who has lost their job and who signed on to Universal Credit can apply for a Discretionary Housing Payment to have their full rent paid for 13 weeks.

Discretionary Support is available to provide financial assistance in extreme, exceptional or crisis situations where there is significant risk to the health, safety or well-being of a person or a member of their immediate family.

A person who is in full time third level education is normally not eligible for Discretionary Support. However, a student who is experiencing financial hardship as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic may be entitled to Discretionary Support including a grant for short term living expenses if they, or any member of their immediate family, are diagnosed with COVID-19 or are advised to self-isolate in accordance with the latest public health guidance.

In addition to this I also worked with local student representatives to ensure that students facing hardship were able to access food parcels.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the review of the Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy. (AQW 8758/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A review of People and Place, a Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal is currently ongoing involving a co-design approach with key stakeholders. The foundation of the review are the lessons learnt and key recommendations of the independent Evaluation (2014) of the Strategy along with feedback from key stakeholder engagement events.

To help inform and shape the Review a Partnership Forum, comprising representatives from each Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership and Areas at Risk project, has been established to secure the views of those delivering Neighbourhood Renewal on the ground.

Unfortunately the work of the Forum has been impacted by the efforts required on the Covid response however it has met twice to date, with a third meeting arranged for early November.

It is expected that the Review will be completed within the current Assembly mandate, whilst findings from the Review will be directly fed into the development of the Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities for her Department's definition of community development. (AQW 8759/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department for Communities has not adopted a single definition for the term community development.

The United Nations defines community development as "a process where community members come together to take collective action and generate solutions to common problems".

Within this broad definition, the Department for Communities supports community development approaches to improving outcomes for citizens and communities through a number of different mechanisms involving local and central government in partnership with the community and voluntary sector.

The skills and knowledge of the community and voluntary sector have been to the fore in working with government departments and council colleagues during the pandemic. This approach will be built into planning recovery and renewal.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Communities what financial help is under consideration for Irish League football clubs to address restricted income. (AQW 8761/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise that the continued restrictions on sport are making it extremely difficult for organisations and clubs across the sector which depend on ticket sales and sponsorship from fixtures and events, to generate the income they need to survive.

DfC Officials and Sport NI have been engaging with the Sports Governing Bodies, District Councils and the Sports Ground Safety Authority in terms of the safe return of spectators to sport, which in the case of the Irish League football clubs, will go some way to address restricted income.

I have alerted the Executive to the level of support we estimate the sector to need during this time and in the future.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Communities how much of the additional £40 million support for local councils is earmarked for Belfast City Council.

(AQW 8763/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is carrying out an analysis of the figures provided by each council reflecting their projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs for the period July 2020 to September 2020 and actual spend for the period mid-March 2020 to June 2020.

Once my Department has carried out a due diligence exercise on the information provided by councils, the figures are to be signed off by individual Council Chief Executives.

This will provide a basis for allocation that will be consistent with the original bid for support as approved by the Executive. Allocations of funding will be confirmed once the due diligence exercise has been completed.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities whether she will bring forward a funding package for local charity groups, such as Gateway Clubs, who support children and adults with learning disabilities and who have had their fundraising activities curtailed as a result of the pandemic.

(AQW 8809/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I launched the Executive's £15.5 million Covid-19 Charities Fund on 15 June 2020 to help local charities facing financial difficulties as a result of the current public health pandemic. Although this Fund has since closed, I recognise further needs are emerging and I have asked my officials to explore options for providing additional support.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities whether any orders have been made pursuant to section 109 of the Local Government Act (NI) 2014.

(AQW 8836/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has not made any orders pursuant to section 109 of the Local Government Act (NI) 2014.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how many discretionary support decision appeals have been lodged in each of the last three years, broken down by the outcome.

(AQW 8846/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The decision to award a Discretionary Support grant or loan is not subject to appeals rights however, the decision can be reviewed on request.

The number of Discretionary Support internal reviews carried out in each of the last 2 years and their outcomes are provided in the Department's published Annual Reports on Welfare Supplementary Payments, Discretionary Support, Standards of Advice and Assistance and Sanctions. These reports can be found by accessing the following links:

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-annual-report-welfare-supplementary-payments-2017-2018.pdf>

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/communities/dfc-annual-report-welfare-supplementary-payments-2018-2019.pdf>

In 19/20 a total of 72,183 Discretionary Support decisions were made of which only 2,826 (4%) asked for an internal review; and 768 (27%) of the reviews overturned the original decision made primarily as a result of additional information being provided during the review. This information will be included in the Department's published Annual Report on Welfare Supplementary Payments, Discretionary Support, Standards of Advice and Assistance and Sanctions for 19/20.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the amount of funding from the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Scheme received by each council.

(AQW 8849/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The amount of funding each council received under the first tranche of the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme is set out in the table below:

COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme – First tranche

Council Area	Amount Received
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council	£255,000

Council Area	Amount Received
Ards and North Down Borough Council	£561,000
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council	£690,000
Belfast City Council	£1,338,000
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council	£449,000
Derry City and Strabane District Council	£529,000
Fermanagh and Omagh District Council	£342,000
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council	£279,000
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	£428,000
Mid Ulster District Council	£429,000
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	£590,000
Total	£5,890,000

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities for an update on (i) the £29 million support package for the wider arts sector; and (ii) the allocation of funding through the Arts Council's individuals emergency resilience programme.

(AQW 8850/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The £29m funding package agreed by the Executive will provide a significant boost across our culture, language, heritage and arts sectors.

On 19 October I made the first allocation from that package with £3m being directed to the Individual Emergency Resilience Fund, administered on my department's behalf by the Arts Council. This will allow immediate offers of assistance to be provided to over 1,000 people working in a wide range of roles across the creative and arts economy.

My officials are working in close collaboration across central and local government, as well as with arm's length bodies and sectoral representatives to develop further programmes which will be funded through the remaining £26m. Work is well advanced and I expect to make further announcements before the end of the October.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Communities how the Housing Executive is addressing the maintenance backlog.

(AQO 886/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In keeping with Public Health guidance the Housing Executive were restricted to undertaking only emergency repairs between the middle of March and the eighth of July. This resulted in a significant backlog of non-emergency repairs and the Housing Executive in conjunction with their contractors are currently addressing all outstanding repair requests. The backlog in repair requests has been reduced by approximately seventy five percent over the last three months and the majority of Areas should be returning to a normal repair service within the next two months.

Prior to the Covid-19 lockdown, the Housing Executive had a planned maintenance backlog of approximately three hundred and twenty million pounds going into this financial year. This is largely a legacy of insufficient funding to meet the required investment. While the Housing Executive has been attempting to address this backlog there are financial, procurement and delivery difficulties which have hampered its ability to do so. The Housing Executive is currently procuring a new Planned Maintenance Contract that is intended to address the latter, but ensuring adequate funding for long term investment in the stock remains an issue.

The commitment within New Decade, New Approach to tackle the maintenance backlog for Housing Executive's properties reflects a much wider revitalisation programme aimed at securing the long term future of social housing stock.

The backlog of maintenance referenced in New Decade, New Approach, is significant. Estimates in 2018, showed that £7.1 billion of investment is required over the next thirty years, with £3 billion required in the next eleven years to deal with the urgent backlog.

I will be laying out my plans very soon on how I intend to take forward the very significant investment challenge with which we are faced. I have already begun working towards ending the grossly unfair situation that means the Housing Executive is the only social landlord which pays Corporation Tax and exploring the removal of historical debt.

Finally, I know the member has a particular concern regarding the properties in Clooney Terrance, Dungen Road and Duddy's Court. I can confirm that the business case for an improvement scheme for these properties has been considered by Housing Division within my Department. They are awaiting further input from the Housing Executive which should be received this week. Once this is received the business case will be sent to Department of Finance for final approval.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities following the Court of Appeal judgment in the case of McKee & Others v Charity Commission for Northern Ireland., for her assessment of the ability of the Charity Commission to carry out its statutory duties.

(AQO 887/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am currently considering the full implications of the Judgment for the Commission and the charity sector generally and hope to make an announcement on the way forward shortly.

Any remedial action will be fully ECHR compliant.

In the interim, the Commission is operating a decision making Committee in compliance with the Judgments to ensure that their oversight of the charity sector continues.

While some Commission decisions may be delayed and the volume of decisions made has been reduced, the work on applications, requests and queries is ongoing.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Strategic Investment Board's evaluation of the Social Supermarkets Pilot Programme.

(AQO 891/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: At the outset of the Social Supermarket Pilot programme the Strategic Investment Board were contracted to provide a rolling evaluation of the programme, including an OBA approach.

This has been informed by site visits, network meetings and the gathering of monthly monitoring data. In addition to this each Social Supermarket member completes an entry and exit questionnaire to track the impact of the intervention on individual Social Supermarket members.

Analysis of this information has now been completed up to 31st March 2020 and demonstrates the positive impact of the model and its potential to deliver against a range of Programme for Government outcomes. A summary of this information is available in a report card and I will undertake to share that with members.

As of the 31st of March 2020 in excess of one thousand individuals had accessed the service across the five pilot sites and the evaluation indicates that access to affordable food produce and wrap-around supports has helped to positively change the life circumstances of members and their families. Alongside evidence of increased financial security the support has increased resilience and self-efficacy.

I believe the Social Supermarket model offers a sustainable, holistic approach to tackling food insecurity. As we continue to face restrictions and the consequences of the crisis they have an important role to play in supporting those facing food insecurity/food poverty.

As a result my officials are currently undertaking a business case to roll the model out. This will be informed by a co-design process with local Councils and other stakeholders over the coming months with a view to launch a full programme for the first of April 2021.

In the interim period support to the existing five pilots has been extended.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities how much of the additional £40 million support for local councils is earmarked to go to Ards and North Down Borough Council.

(AQW 8884/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is carrying out an analysis of the figures provided by each council reflecting their projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs for the period July 2020 to September 2020 and updated estimates / actual spend for the period mid- March 2020 to June 2020.

Once my Department has carried out a due diligence exercise on the information provided by councils, the figures are to be signed off by individual Council Chief Executives. Final consultation with Association of Local Government Finance Officers and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives will also take place.

This will provide a basis for allocation that will be consistent with the original bid for support as approved by the Executive. Allocations of funding will be confirmed once the due diligence exercise has been completed.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities (i) for an update on the Capital COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Scheme that her Department administered via the 11 District Councils; (ii) for a breakdown of funds available per council area; (iii) how many grant applications have been received per Council; (iv) what is the total amount sought from eligible applicants; and (v) how Tranche 2 will be administered.

(AQW 8895/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) Payments totalling almost £6m for the first Tranche of the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme have been made to councils to provide much needed support to local businesses as they recover and adapt to the impact of

Covid-19. The development of Tranche 2 is at an advanced stage and I hope to make further announcements about this in the near future.

- (ii) A breakdown of the funding issued to date is set out in the table below:

COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme – First tranche

Council Area	Amount Received
Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council	£255,000
Ards and North Down Borough Council	£561,000
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council	£690,000
Belfast City Council	£1,338,000
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council	£449,000
Derry City and Strabane District Council	£529,000
Fermanagh and Omagh District Council	£342,000
Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council	£279,000
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	£428,000
Mid Ulster District Council	£429,000
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	£590,000
Total	£5,890,000

- (iii) & (iv) Councils have decided to use part of their allocations to provide small grants to local businesses. The allocation and eligibility for the grants is a matter for each council to determine and as they are at various stages of administering their grant schemes, I am unable to provide the requested information at this time.
- (v) The second tranche of the Programme will again be paid to councils using powers granted by s.29 of the Local Government (Finance) Act (NI) 2011. Each council is responsible for administering their allocation and delivering the projects set out in their Revitalisation Plan. The Plan for each council has been developed following engagement with local stakeholders and identifies the interventions planned for each tranche within the council area.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Communities what discussions she has had with National Museums NI regarding Model Engineers Society of NI remaining within the site of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum; and what action is being taken as a result.

(AQW 8904/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Whilst this is an operational matter for the Management of National Museums to decide upon it is acknowledged that their decision will have far reaching implications for the Model Engineers Society.

Officials on my behalf sought clarification from National Museums to determine what consideration had been given to resettling MESNI elsewhere on the Cultra estate as part of the decision making process.

National Museums advised that due consideration was given to the resettlement of the Society elsewhere on the estate and it was concluded this could not be achieved.

National Museums NI have since issued the Model Engineers Society with notice of termination of their licence and this will start the formal 6-month period of notice to vacate the site. NMNI are keen to work with the Society, and have offered to meet with them to discuss their relocation plans and how National Museums NI may be able to facilitate and support.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Communities, during the 4 week lockdown period and under the restrictions placed on sporting activity, how many matches will be played in (i) GAA Football; (ii) GAA Hurling; (iii) GAA camogie; (iv) Rugby; (v) Hockey; (vi) Football; (vii) Cricket; (viii) Netball; and (ix) Basketball.

(AQW 8928/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The scheduling of sports competitions during the 4 week lockdown period is a matter for the respective Governing Bodies

The Department does not keep a record of matches planned by the sports Governing Bodies.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Communities what engagement her Department has had with local councils about devolution of further regeneration powers.

(AQW 9024/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: A number of attempts have been made to date to transfer regeneration powers and associated resources to local councils as part of the wider Reform of Public Administration (RPA) – 2011, 2015 and 2016. On each occasion this did not progress due to a lack of consensus on the issue.

Since 2016, DfC Development Offices have been working ever more closely with councils and this collaboration is working well at present, but we will seek to strengthen this further.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities whether she will propose emergency legislation to prevent street drinking by people who are circumventing regulations relating to drinking in bars and the purchase of alcohol after 8:00pm.

(AQW 9049/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Under the current local government structure all 11 councils have bye-laws that make it an offence to consume alcoholic drinks in council designated public places.

Enforcement of the bye-laws rests with the PSNI and councils. In practice, the police take names and addresses of offenders and councils are responsible for prosecution proceedings.

As the legislation is already in place I have no plans to propose any changes to this. The issues regarding problems associated with drinking in public places relate to enforcement of the current bye laws.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 323/17-22, for an update on her Department's engagement with key stakeholders in respect of the Sub-Regional Stadia programme for Soccer.

(AQW 9094/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Sub Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer is one of the commitments in the "New Decade, New Approach" Deal and as such my Department has been working to refresh and re-engage with the programme to provide a robust evidence base on the challenges, strategic priorities and needs of soccer at all levels.

A range of primary and secondary research tools have been adopted to inform the evidence base. This work is ongoing and has utilised a club survey along with discussions with key stakeholders including governing bodies of football, Sport NI, councils and Disability Sport NI. The analysis stage has begun and will inform the shape and scope of the programme going forward.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities when her Department decided further consultation on the Sub-Regional Stadia Programme for Soccer was required.

(AQW 9095/17-22)

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.

There have been a number of significant changes within the football landscape since the 2015/16 consultation and the need for further consultation will depend on the impact this has had on the need and therefore the investment plans.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities when AQW 8505/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 9169/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: AQW 8505/17-22 was answered on 21 October 2020.

Department of Education

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education what guidance he has issued to schools regarding Parent/Teacher meetings scheduled for this term.

(AQW 7615/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): An updated version of 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland' was published on 29 September 2020.

Section 1 of this guidance provides information on parent-teacher meetings with a recommendation that tele-conference or video-conference be used for parent-teacher meetings or staff meetings in schools. When face to face meetings are required, the current public health advice on social distancing must be followed.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education why clear face masks have not been provided to schools and for school transport staff where there are children who are deaf and need to see a teacher and classroom assistant's face for communication or for children with learning disabilities.

(AQW 7889/17-22)

Mr Weir: Clear face masks have not been provided to schools on the basis of public health guidance that face coverings are not recommended for children in Primary schools, whilst in post-primary schools face coverings are strongly recommended to be worn where adults and young people are moving about the school in corridors and confined communal areas (including toilets) where physical distancing is particularly difficult to maintain as set in the Department's Education Restart guidance (issued 29 September)

The EA advises that in relation to Classroom Assistants, face coverings are not required when working with a deaf child if they can adhere to social distancing. If the child uses a radio aid, this should be used to overcome the effect of distance. Alternatively, one meter distance and side to side working is acceptable.

If face coverings are worn, educational services are required to make reasonable adjustments to ensure deaf children are not disadvantaged.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pieces of official Ministerial correspondence he has issued since the restoration of devolution.

(AQW 7983/17-22)

Mr Weir: Between 11 January 2020 and 1 October 2020 I have received and responded to 1145 official correspondence cases. This total does not include Assembly Questions, Executive cases, Committee Chair enquiries or press enquiries. During this period a further 1161 Treat Official cases were answered on my behalf by officials.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education how many additional school service buses have been introduced this year to allow for social distancing and COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 8197/17-22)

Mr Weir: The operation and delivery of home to school transport is the responsibility of the Education Authority and its delivery partners, including Translink. Under current DE guidance, while pupils should always seek to maintain a social distance from each other wherever possible, the guidance for public transport on social distancing will not apply on dedicated home to school transport. This means that Education Authority buses, Translink's school only services, privately operated buses and taxis are able to operate at their normal capacity.

The Education Authority continues to work closely with Translink and the Department for Infrastructure to ensure sufficient transport capacity is available to meet the needs of pupils allocated a bus pass for use on either a public bus service or a dedicated school only service, whilst also maintaining bus service capacity for the general public. The provision of school transport whether on dedicated school buses or public buses has been provided through the flexible use of the Translink fleet.

The Department for Infrastructure has informed me that Translink has worked with the Education Authority and local schools to add additional dedicated school services and has advised that Translink is also providing over 500 additional bus services to supplement the public transport network to facilitate social distancing for all passengers, including school children.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how many (i) teaching staff; and (ii) non-teaching staff; and (iii) pupils have been or are in self-isolation this academic year, broken down by (a) pre-school; (b) primary school; (c) P7; and (d) post-primary school.

(AQW 8224/17-22)

Mr Weir:

(i) and (ii) As part of a survey currently being undertaken each Tuesday, educational settings are being asked to report teaching and non-teaching staff who have been "Identified by PHA Testing and Tracing to self-isolate". The information reported for teaching and non-teaching staff is presented in the tables below.

At present it is not possible to distinguish between primary and post-primary settings. However, a parallel survey is sent to pre-school settings. It should be noted that the information relates only to the day of the survey and individual staff members are likely to appear in the figures for more than one week. The main survey has a typical response rate of approximately 65% of schools (i.e. around 680 schools) and that for the pre-school survey is approximately 55% of settings (i.e. around 250 settings).

Pre-School settings

Date of survey	Staff type	Staff not on site	Of which: "Identified by PHA Testing and Tracing to self-isolate"
25 Aug 2020	Teaching	3.4%	0.0%
	Non-teaching	4.4%	0.0%
01 Sep 2020	Teaching	1.3%	0.0%
	Non-teaching	1.0%	0.0%
08 Sep 2020	Teaching	3.5%	11.5%
	Non-teaching	4.0%	0.0%

Date of survey	Staff type	Staff not on site	Of which: "Identified by PHA Testing and Tracing to self-isolate"
15 Sep 2020	Teaching	2.6%	11.1%
	Non-teaching	4.0%	0.0%
22 Sep 2020	Teaching	3.8%	3.7%
	Non-teaching	5.0%	5.6%
29 Sep 2020	Teaching	3.9%	11.5%
	Non-teaching	5.5%	14.3%
06 Oct 2020	Teaching	5.5%	13.1%
	Non-teaching	7.0%	17.9%
13 Oct 2020	Teaching	8.0%	27.0%
	Non-teaching	12.1%	39.2%

Primary, Post-Primary, Special and Educated Other Than at School (EOTAS) settings

Date of survey	Staff type	Staff not on site	Of which: "Identified by PHA Testing and Tracing to self-isolate"
25 Aug 2020	Teaching	3.9%	4.9%
	Non-teaching	3.6%	2.9%
01 Sep 2020	Teaching	3.7%	12.3%
	Non-teaching	2.7%	8.6%
08 Sep 2020	Teaching	5.0%	11.0%
	Non-teaching	4.7%	11.9%
15 Sep 2020	Teaching	5.6%	11.3%
	Non-teaching	5.0%	11.8%
22 Sep 2020	Teaching	5.6%	11.1%
	Non-teaching	4.6%	13.2%
29 Sep 2020	Teaching	6.1%	14.2%
	Non-teaching	5.5%	17.8%
06 Oct 2020	Teaching	8.0%	25.2%
	Non-teaching	7.9%	31.3%
13 Oct 2020	Teaching	10.7%	34.2%
	Non-teaching	10.3%	36.4%

- (iii) Pupil attendance data by school type is captured using standard reports from the Schools Information Management System (SIMS) of all primary, post primary, special and Educated Other Than at School (EOTAS) settings. However we do not hold specific information on self-isolating. Self-isolating is recorded on SIMS using a reappropriated code. These codes continue to be used for their original purpose and therefore are not solely specific to COVID-19. Therefore it is not possible to provide the number of pupils who have been or are in self-isolation this academic year.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how many (i) teaching staff; and (ii) non-teaching staff; and (iii) pupils have tested positive for COVID-19 this academic year, broken down by (a) pre-school; (b) primary school; (c) P7; and (d) post-primary school.

(AQW 8225/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Public Health Agency (PHA) has been collecting data on the number of COVID school incidents reported to the PHA COVID School Team since schools reopened. By the 13 October 2020 they had received 1,491 reported cases by schools (both pupils and staff).

At present it is not possible to provide this information by year group, school type or distinguish between pupils and staff.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education to detail how the £7 million for cleaning schools has been allocated and spent.
(AQW 8313/17-22)

Mr Weir: All grant aided schools are funded under the Common Funding Scheme in accordance with the Local Management of Schools arrangements. Schools are therefore responsible for meeting normal cleaning costs from within their delegated budgets. Cleaning costs are not separately identified, nor are they separately reported on.

To help support schools in addressing 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. To date, £18.3m has been allocated to schools to mitigate additional costs in this respect.

As Funding Authority for grant aided schools, the Education Authority has advised schools of the mechanism for recording the costs associated with Covid-19, although this does not specifically identify expenditure for cleaning. Instead, it is to allow me to continue to monitor our schools' funding requirements as the pandemic progresses in order to secure adequate funding to keep our schools open and protect our children and young people.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education to detail the total figure of COVID-19 cases in schools, broken down by constituency area.
(AQW 8418/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Public Health Agency (PHA) has been collecting data on the number of COVID school incidents reported to the PHA COVID School Team since schools reopened. By the 13 October 2020 they had received 1,491 reported cases by schools (both pupils and staff). At present it is not possible to provide this information by constituency.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education (i) how many children within Upper Bann are currently waiting for a Statement of Educational Needs; and (ii) how long they have been waiting.
(AQW 8419/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) 119 children within the Upper Bann area are currently undergoing a statutory assessment at Stage 4 of the Code of Practice (at 9 October),
- (ii) Waiting times are:

0 – 26 weeks	96
27 – 40 weeks	20
41 – 60 weeks	1
61 – 80 weeks	2
81+ weeks	0
Total	119

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether the Engage Programme funding will include special schools.
(AQW 8425/17-22)

Mr Weir: Special schools are not included in the Engage programme as they don't receive a delegated budget; rather their staffing complement is provided according to identified and individual pupil need, often with one to one or small group adult to child ratios.

I have asked the EA to consider options for a similar model to the Engage programme, subject to securing funding, to help address the impact of school closures, in terms of lost learning, on children and young people with complex needs in Special Schools.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 7827/17-22, what has been paid to date to the contracted party.
(AQW 8509/17-22)

Mr Weir: Since the award of the contract to Fujitsu in November 2015, the Education Authority has paid a total of £17.1m to date to Fujitsu. This has included:

- the design, build and implementation of the Finance & Procurement system;
- the design, build and implementation of the Online Recruitment system;
- the ongoing design, build and implementation of the core HR & Payroll system; and
- the support for the live Finance, Procurement and Recruitment modules to date.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education (i) what was the total saving to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in payments to examination teams in 2020 due to the cancellation of (a) GCSE; (b) AS; and (c) A level examinations; and (ii) whether these monies were returned by CCEA to his Department.

(AQW 8510/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have been advised by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) that in 2020, against its budget it spent £945k in examination contractor costs representing a reduction of £4.33 million compared to 2019.

To date, no monies have been returned to the Department. However, CCEA has been working closely with my officials in relation to the cost and income impact of the disruption caused by Covid-19.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Education whether a Sustainable Transport Plan will be developed in due course for the new Bangor Central Integrated Primary School Site at Balloo Road, Bangor[R]

(AQW 8535/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority coordinates transport for eligible pupils based on the demand for services in the area and within the resources available in the greater transport network.

I am advised by the EA that at this time there are only a small number of eligible applications received for transport assistance to Bangor Central IPS. This volume of eligible applications does not warrant dedicated transport provision and applicants are awarded a parental payment to contribute to transport costs. These arrangements will continue to be reviewed should demand increase as the school relocates to the new site.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education for a breakdown of the amount of COVID-19 cases in schools; and what plans he has to mitigate the spread of the virus in classrooms.

(AQW 8558/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Public Health Agency (PHA) has been collecting data on the number of COVID school incidents reported to the PHA COVID School Team since schools reopened. By the 13 October 2020 they had received 1,491 reported cases by schools (both pupils and staff). At present it is not possible to break this information down any further.

To mitigate the spread of Coronavirus within classrooms, my Department has published Coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance for educational settings. This is regularly updated to reflect changes in public health advice with the support of colleagues in the Public Health Agency for Northern Ireland and the Chief Medical Officer.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail his contingency plan for curriculum delivery and assessment in the event of even greater COVID-19 disruption to learning and teaching than at present over the winter period.

(AQW 8565/17-22)

Mr Weir: In the event of a school closure, or that a class or group of pupils need to self-isolate, my Department has asked schools to have contingency plans in place for the delivery of remote learning. In order to support schools to take forward this work, my Department has relaxed a range of statutory requirements, for example School Development Planning, to reduce the bureaucratic burden and free up time for curriculum planning.

Practical advice and support is available to schools from their COVID-19 Link Officer and from both the Education and Training Inspectorate and Education Authority (EA) more generally.

In addition, my Department has provided guidance for schools on both Remote Learning and Curriculum Planning and Blended Learning for 2020/21. Further resources, guidance materials and case studies have also been produced by my Department's Continuity of Learning Project. The EA has developed a website to host resources and to provide access to a range of online Teacher Professional Learning sessions on issues pertinent to the COVID-19 context. New resources will be added on a regular basis.

The scheme to provide IT devices and WIFI access (vouchers or MiFi devices) to educationally disadvantaged and vulnerable learners remains open.

The changes I announced last week set out the initial arrangements for exams and assessments across GCSE and A Level qualifications. I have commissioned CCEA to consider contingency arrangements. Back-up plans are being developed and will be enacted if required. CCEA has commenced work with schools to inform its planning.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, where pregnant teachers need to take additional time off work owing to COVID-19 restrictions, whether his Department or the Education Authority will cover the substitute teacher costs centrally or whether it is taken from the school budget.

(AQW 8568/17-22)

Mr Weir: I can confirm that a fund for teacher substitution costs, to support existing staff absences specifically as a result of Covid-19, is being centrally managed by the Education Authority, and will be allocated to schools based on verified costs.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the nature of the indemnification for schools in relation to COVID-19; and (ii) whether the indemnification changed in any way since March 2020.

(AQW 8569/17-22)

Mr Weir: In August, schools were notified that the letters of indemnity, which they received in March 2020, remain in effect.

On the advice of the Departmental Solicitor's Office, the letters included a confidentiality clause. As such, I am unable to detail the nature of the indemnification.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education, given that up to 64 per cent of children and young people in disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland have a communication need which is likely to be further exacerbated due to COVID-19, whether he will follow the lead from Department of Education in England to allocate funding to support language development in early years in schools.

(AQW 8571/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am aware that the Department for Education in England is funding one-to-one support for Reception pupils as part of their investment in tutoring. This will deliver one-to-one and small-group support for some five-year-olds.

The equivalent programme here in Northern Ireland is the Engage Programme, which I launched on 23 September 2020. Through this programme all primary and post primary schools in Northern Ireland will receive funding to provide additional teaching resources. The programme is both targeted at those schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantage but also provides universal support across all primary and post-primary schools in recognition of the wider impact of Covid-19.

Through the Engage programme qualified teachers will provide child centred one to one, small group or team teaching support to those pupils identified by schools as most benefiting from additional support following the Covid-19 period of lockdown, including Year 1 pupils.

The programme offers a high degree of autonomy and flexibility on how schools use their funding and the content and structure of the programme delivery will be based on each school's unique circumstances and assessment of their pupils' particular needs.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Education to detail the extra costs to childcare providers in operating pod systems that ensure the maximum safety of and minimal risk to children, families and staff members.

(AQW 8598/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Childcare Recovery Support Fund provided financial support to assist the re-opening of childcare provision in July and August 2020 to ensure childcare was available as far as possible for parents who needed it, to support economic recovery and return to work in line with the Executive Recovery Plan. £10.5m funding was allocated to this Fund which closed to applications on 11 September (2 October for childminders).

One of the objectives of the Childcare Recovery Support Fund was to provide a level of financial support to childcare providers to assist with the additional costs of operating within DoH Covid-19 guidance, ie operating in play pods with room dividers, maximising outdoor space etc and support their financial viability in the re-opening phase, recognising that many providers may not be able to operate at full capacity. A flat rate amount was paid to settings that applied to the Scheme based on the type of setting (i.e Day Care, School-Age Childcare, Playgroups) and the number of registered places in each setting. A tiered funding model was developed for different types and sizes of settings.

The latest version of the DoH guidance for childcare providers issued on 2 October. This guidance stated that the requirement to maintain children in Play Pods of 12 is no longer required. Instead, childcare settings are required to organise children and adults in consistently constituted groups in line with Department of Health Minimum Standards for Childminding and Daycare and to prevent the mixing of these consistently constituted groups.

Work is ongoing with sector representatives to consider any additional funding required from September onwards. This includes further funding for the ongoing sustainability of the sector due to reduced capacity and associated costs, including additional staffing, to operate in line with Department of Health guidance on infection control and prevention measures.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) current enrolments; (ii) number of applications received for 2020/21 entry; and (ii) numbers accepted for 2020/21 entry for each primary school in North Down.

(AQW 8609/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is not possible to provide accurate current enrolment numbers for the 2020/21 school year until the annual census exercise completes in December 2020.

The attached table sets out the total number of applications received by each primary school in North Down for entry in the 2020/21 academic year and the number of pupils accepted. This information has been provided by the Education Authority.

School	Total number of admission applications received	Total number of P1 pupils admitted
Ballyvester Primary School	14	14
Hollywood Primary School	73	73
Crawfordsburn Primary School	39	30
Ballyholme Primary School	101	90
Donaghadee Primary School	55	55
Clandeboye Primary School	44	44
Millisle Primary School	29	29
Bloomfield Primary School	61	60
Grange Park Primary School	67	60
Kilcooley Primary School	16	16
Rathmore Primary School	89	89
Towerview Primary School	59	59
Kilmaine Primary School	91	87
Ballymagee Primary School	78	58
St Patrick's Primary School	33	33
St Anne's Primary School	9	9
St Comgall's Primary School	60	41
St Malachy's Primary School	48	48
Bangor Central Integrated Primary School	64	64
Glencraig Integrated Primary School	44	30

* The total number of admissions applications received relates to all applications received by a school at any preference – i.e. not just first preference applications. As a result, totalling the number of applications in the column does not equate to the number of individual applicants.

** These figures do not include children with a statement of special educational needs, who do not apply for a school place through the competitive admissions process.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education why no mitigations will be put in place for GCSE english and maths 2021, despite the Committee for Education expression of concern on this matter.
(AQW 8665/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have decided that students will be assessed in all written units of the qualification in GCSE English Language and GCSE Mathematics, but the speaking and listening unit of GCSE English Language will not be assessed.

As I set out in my letter to the Education Committee on 9 October 2020, in taking this decision, I have had to balance the merits of reducing the assessment burden, with a need to protect the interests of our young people going forward.

GCSE English and Mathematics are key 'passport qualifications', which are required for a number of higher level qualifications, such as nursing and teaching qualifications. The risk that young people from Northern Ireland would be disadvantaged for entry to university in the future is simply too great, bearing in mind that England and Wales have made limited or no adaptations to these qualifications.

To reduce examination assessment in these two key qualifications to one high stakes exam could conversely increase pressure on young people. Under the current arrangements, young people will have the opportunity to sit some or all units in English and Maths in January 2021, and if necessary repeat them in the summer series. This has the potential to ease the assessment process for the young people.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Education why his Department has made no provision for childcare since the end of August 2020.
(AQW 8697/17-22)

Mr Weir: To date, no further funding has been allocated to my Department for the childcare sector post August.

My officials continue to work with sector representatives in considering the support required by the childcare sector going forward. This includes both ongoing sustainability issues such as additional staffing, reduced capacity and increased costs, in operating within Department of Health guidance on infection control and prevention, and where a provider is forced to close, either fully or partially due to Covid-19 related issues within the setting.

Further support is, however, subject to funding being made available by the Executive for the childcare sector post August and will take into consideration other government support schemes potentially available to the sector, including the recently announced Job Support Scheme (JSS) from 1 November and the ongoing Self-Employment Income Support Scheme. Other NI-wide funding support schemes for business that childcare providers may be eligible for will also be taken into account.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Education whether his Department is considering guaranteeing full wages to childcare staff in the event of closures due to COVID-19, similar to that of school staff.
(AQW 8698/17-22)

Mr Weir: To date, no further funding has been allocated to my Department for the childcare sector post August.

My officials continue to work with sector representatives in considering the support required by the childcare sector going forward. This includes both ongoing sustainability issues such as additional staffing, reduced capacity and increased costs, in operating within Department of Health guidance on infection control and prevention, and where a provider is forced to close, either fully or partially due to Covid-19 related issues within the setting.

Further support is, however, subject to funding being made available by the Executive for the childcare sector post August and will take into consideration other government support schemes potentially available to the sector, including the recently announced Job Support Scheme (JSS) from 1 November and the ongoing Self-Employment Income Support Scheme. Other NI-wide funding support schemes for business that childcare providers may be eligible for will also be taken into account.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Education whether his Department will take into consideration the need for additional financial support for the childcare sector, as pods require more staff to cover less children.
(AQW 8699/17-22)

Mr Weir: To date, no further funding has been allocated to my Department for the childcare sector post August.

My officials continue to work with sector representatives in considering the support required by the childcare sector going forward. This includes both ongoing sustainability issues such as additional staffing, reduced capacity and increased costs, in operating within Department of Health guidance on infection control and prevention, and where a provider is forced to close, either fully or partially due to Covid-19 related issues within the setting.

Further support is, however, subject to funding being made available by the Executive for the childcare sector post August and will take into consideration other government support schemes potentially available to the sector, including the recently announced Job Support Scheme (JSS) from 1 November and the ongoing Self-Employment Income Support Scheme. Other NI-wide funding support schemes for business that childcare providers may be eligible for will also be taken into account.

Ms C Kelly asked the Minister of Education to detail how his Department will support childcare settings and parents in the event of pod or setting closures.
(AQW 8700/17-22)

Mr Weir: To date, no further funding has been allocated to my Department for the childcare sector post August.

My officials continue to work with sector representatives in considering the support required by the childcare sector going forward. This includes both ongoing sustainability issues such as additional staffing, reduced capacity and increased costs, in operating within Department of Health guidance on infection control and prevention, and where a provider is forced to close, either fully or partially due to Covid-19 related issues within the setting.

Further support is, however, subject to funding being made available by the Executive for the childcare sector post August and will take into consideration other government support schemes potentially available to the sector, including the recently announced Job Support Scheme (JSS) from 1 November and the ongoing Self-Employment Income Support Scheme. Other NI-wide funding support schemes for business that childcare providers may be eligible for will also be taken into account.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education whether he will ensure all those substitute teachers on contract or hired under the Northern Ireland Substitute Teacher Register are paid for the period schools are closed during the circuit breaker lockdown, outside of Halloween holidays.
(AQW 8738/17-22)

Mr Weir: I can confirm that any substitute teacher who was booked to work during this extended half-term will be paid as normal for the period of their engagement.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education what contingency plans he is putting in place to ensure the education of children continues should the current restrictions be extended.
(AQW 8808/17-22)

Mr Weir: The member will be aware that schools have closed for a 2-week period, including the half-term break, until Monday 2 November.

Schools should have plans in place to cope with such disruptions when they occur. This is detailed in the Coronavirus COVID-19) Guidance for Schools and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland.

To help manage a period of disruption to attendance at schools and educational settings, my Department and the Education Authority have provided a list of useful resources to support teachers, parents and pupils with learning. This includes specific guidance to schools on supporting remote learning.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education what support he intends to put in place for children from disadvantaged backgrounds by way of a catch-up programme to help them recover academically from the hours of lost education due to the pandemic.

(AQW 8810/17-22)

Mr Weir: I secured £12m of funding from the Executive in June to support schools and pupils to address lost learning arising from the period of school closures associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. In doing so, and in putting in place support measures, I have ensured that the needs of children and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are recognised and given due prominence.

The most significant element of that funding package, the Engage programme, seeks to limit any long-term adverse impact on educational standards by supporting pupils' learning and engagement on their return to school. Launched in September, it enables every primary and post primary school to secure additional qualified teaching resource to provide high quality one to one, small group or team teaching support, thus allowing extra help to reach those pupils identified by schools as most benefiting from additional teaching support.

To ensure that children and young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are supported, the level of Engage funding available to each school is weighted according to both the number of pupils enrolled and the proportion entitled to free school meals.

Children from disadvantaged backgrounds will also benefit throughout the 2020/21 academic year from the Virtual Learning programme, which enables schools to purchase online literacy and numeracy resources for current Year 7 pupils. In addition, many pupils were supported through Summer Schools which operated during July and August in those primary schools that wished to participate, enabling pupils to take part in a range of activities to get them socialising again, learning and having fun.

I have also supported the lending of digital devices to vulnerable and disadvantaged young people in order to assist with their learning from home. Many thousands of digital devices have been delivered so far.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education what contingency planning and support will be provided to assist parents and families of children with Special Educational Needs, specifically those with complex needs during and after the current restrictions.

(AQW 8811/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) is maintaining support services during the current restrictions for vulnerable children and their families. These services include counselling, child protection, welfare, health & wellbeing and Special Educational Needs (SEN) specific supports.

Health services and local trusts are continuing to work with parents during the restrictions to provide therapeutic supports that best meets the child's needs, where it is safe and appropriate to do so, in line with the NI Executive's new Covid regulations and restrictions introduced on 16 October and public health guidance.

I have asked the EA to develop options for a similar model to the Engage Programme, subject to securing funding, to help address the impact of school closures, in terms of lost learning, on children and young people with complex needs in Special Schools.

The joint Health & Education oversight arrangements continue to monitor support for those families and put in place multi-disciplinary local level solutions where it is safe and appropriate to do so.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education (i) whether a development proposal is needed to enable a school to discontinue using academic selection, even for one year; (ii) how long this process will take from application to completion; and (iii) what will be involved for (a) the school; (b) the Education Authority; (c) CCMS; (d) his Department; and (e) other relevant parties.

(AQW 8825/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department has carried out an exercise to gather evidence to assess the significance of each of the 12 schools removing academic selection from their admissions criteria on a temporary basis.

Due to the temporary nature of such a decision and taking account of the current difficult circumstances that schools are operating in, created by the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as the potential impact on the children applying to these schools, the Department assessed that for these schools to discontinue using academic selection on a temporary basis was not considered to be of such significance as to require a Development Proposal.

If a school wishes to make such a change on a permanent basis, however, a Development Proposal would be required and the Department's 'Guidance on the Publication of a Development Proposal' should be followed.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether public funding from the Engage Programme can be used to procure private academic selection transfer test tutoring for some children.

(AQW 8829/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Engage Programme cannot be used to procure private academic selection transfer test tutoring for children.

The programme supports schools in securing additional qualified teachers to provide high quality one to one, small group or team teaching support in primary and post-primary schools. The purpose is to limit any long-term adverse impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on educational standards by supporting pupils' learning and engagement.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what guidance he will give to post-primary schools on the use of transfer tests as a means of selection, given it may not be possible to stage these tests within public health guidance.

(AQW 8835/17-22)

Mr Weir: Boards of Governors of schools are responsible for setting and applying the admissions criteria they use to select children for admission. My Department will write to post-primary schools that are using academic selection in 2021 to advise them of the importance of ensuring alternative methods of selecting children are available if required.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education what measures are being taken to ensure departmental and Education Authority staff have the necessary resources to work from home while maintaining an adequate function for schools and parents.

(AQW 8887/17-22)

Mr Weir: Throughout the period of the pandemic, the health, safety and well-being of staff has continued to be a priority for my Department and the Education Authority (EA). Both organisations have continued to review working arrangements and put in place a range of measures to ensure and prioritise the delivery of services for schools, parents and young people.

Department of Education

My Department's arrangements have included, deployment of necessary IT equipment and home office items to staff homes and an increase in the NICS bandwidth provision to support robust secure remote access to the network. In addition, a number of processes and procedures have been introduced to support staff working from home, such as, audio and video meeting and conferencing facilities, regular links and interaction with line managers, a "keeping in touch" IT application, health and wellbeing sessions, learning and development opportunities, communication and information available through a COVID-19 staff hub and updates from the Permanent Secretary.

Education Authority

In order to ensure that staff can deliver services and work safely and effectively from home, a number of measures have been put in place to date and a range of other solutions are being scoped and developed to support and improve continued remote working. Working from home guidance has been developed and disseminated through line management structures. EA staff have been provided with appropriate IT equipment to enable home working, which includes a mixture of laptops and PCs. Mobile phones have been provided on a priority basis. Other office equipment such as office chairs are available and have been provided to staff to ensure the health and safety of all involved. All measures are reviewed on a regular basis to ensure that they are fit for purpose and enable staff to support schools and services effectively.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education whether, in partnership with the Department of Health, he will provide a programme of additional and intensive support for children with Special Educational Needs who have lost out many hours of education due to the pandemic in areas around (i) speech and language therapy; (ii) physio therapy; (iii) literacy support (iv) general educational catch-up; and (v) emotional health and wellbeing.

(AQW 8896/17-22)

Mr Weir: (i) Speech and language therapy and (ii) physiotherapy are a matter for the Minister of Health.

I have asked the Education Authority (EA) to develop options to help address the impact of school closures, in terms of lost learning, on children and young people with complex needs in Special Schools.

The Department is currently working with EA colleagues to consider a bespoke package of support for Special Schools.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether it is correct that the Department of Education spends £4,500 per year per child with statement of special educational need in Northern Ireland compared with £29,000 in England.

(AQW 8914/17-22)

Mr Weir: I would advise that the correct figure is £14,058 per year per child with a statement of special educational need in Northern Ireland compared with £29,000 in England.

It is important to note that these figures are based on 2017 data and that the structure and mechanism of the Northern Ireland funding system and how funding is allocated to schools in England is different.

Consequently, in the absence of directly comparable SEN expenditure data for England, certain proxies and assumptions were used in calculating these figures.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education to detail his contingency plans for A levels, taking account of the ongoing potential for disruption to education taking place in schools during the current academic year.

(AQW 8918/17-22)

Mr Weir: My officials are working closely with CCEA to develop contingency arrangements for examinations in 2021.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what discussions he has held with counterparts elsewhere in the UK to discuss contingencies for A levels given the current and likely future levels of absence from schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 8919/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have ongoing discussions with my counterparts in other jurisdictions on a range of issues, including work on examination arrangements for this academic year.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what guidance he will give to post-primary schools on their use or otherwise of transfer tests as a means of selection, given the ongoing disruption and uncertainty around educational arrangements for pupils in their final year of primary school and the potential that it will not be practically possible to run such tests at all within public health guidance.

(AQW 8922/17-22)

Mr Weir: Boards of Governors of schools are responsible for setting and applying the admissions criteria they use to select children for admission. My Department will write to post-primary schools that are using academic selection in 2021 to advise them of the importance of ensuring alternative methods of selecting children are available if required.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Education whether (i) the Education Authority; (ii) the Department of Education; (iii) school caretaker; or (iv) a specialist cleaning company is responsible for the deep cleaning of school premises once a positive case of COVID-19 has been confirmed.

(AQW 8966/17-22)

Mr Weir: Should a COVID-19 confirmed case occur, the Education Authority (EA) cleaning service should be notified. Schools should liaise with the EA cleaning service in relation to any requirement for enhanced cleaning.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what advice he has taken on extending the compulsory wearing of masks in schools to the classroom.

(AQW 8997/17-22)

Mr Weir: Public Health advice states that Coronavirus (COVID-19) usually spreads by droplets from coughs, sneezes and speaking. These droplets can also be picked up from surfaces, if you touch a surface and then your face without washing your hands first. This is why social distancing, regular hand hygiene, and covering coughs and sneezes is important in controlling the spread of the virus.

The best available scientific evidence is that, when used correctly, wearing a face covering may reduce the spread of coronavirus droplets in certain circumstances, helping to protect others. Because face coverings are mainly intended to protect others, not the wearer, from coronavirus (COVID-19) they're not a replacement for social distancing and regular hand washing.

The Department's revised Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for School and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland was published on 29 September 2020. It has been informed by advice provided by the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor.

The guidance provides an overarching framework for how schools and education settings in Northern Ireland can operate in an ongoing COVID environment, with the aim of ensuring broad consistency and equity across local areas, but is sufficiently flexible to allow education settings and staff to adapt and adopt approaches that best suit their needs.

Within education settings it is mandatory for all pupils aged 13 and over to wear a face covering on public transport. It is also strongly recommended that all pupils, regardless of age, should wear a face covering on all buses, trains or taxis for the journey to school where it is appropriate for them to do so and they are able to handle them as directed.

Face coverings must be worn in staff rooms and during adult to adult meetings lasting more than 15 minutes and by adults visiting the school site.

Face coverings are strongly encouraged for activities that entail large numbers of staff or pupils within an enclosed space where social distancing is not possible.

It is recommended that pupils and teachers wear a face covering in corridors and other communal areas of post-primary schools.

Given the risk mitigations in place in schools to limit and contain the spread of COVID-19, face coverings are not generally recommended for routine use in schools. Staff and pupils may wish to use them during the routine school day and this is acceptable. Schools should also be aware that some persons (including children) are exempt from wearing face coverings.

It is not mandatory for pupils to wear face coverings in school and no child will be excluded from school for not wearing a mask. Some schools have taken the decision to make masks mandatory however that is an operational issue for the individual schools.

My Department will continue to be led by the public health advice, and any guidance will be reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure it remains in line with the wider health position.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education what process or mechanism exists within his Department whereby a written record is kept of any lobbying of the Minister or special adviser in relation to departmental functions, policies or proposals. **(AQW 9003/17-22)**

Mr Weir: My Department holds records of all correspondence, lobbying or otherwise using the HP Records Management System.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Education whether he intends to actively explore enhanced Home to School Provision to provide greater social distancing in order to limit the transmission of COVID-19 via (i) increased Translink services; (ii) utilisation of Private Coach Operators; (iii) engagement of private taxis, where relevant regulatory arrangements permit. **[R]** **(AQW 9044/17-22)**

Mr Weir: My Department's current guidance states that pupils on all buses should always seek to maintain a social distance from others wherever possible, however the guidance for public transport on social distancing does not apply on dedicated school transport. A range of associated mitigating measures have been put in place to minimise the risks. This guidance was developed in consultation with the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor.

Any form of social distancing on home to school transport vehicles would dramatically reduce the available capacity to a fraction of that required. As a result it would not be possible to transport over 80,000 pupils each day and it would be likely that many pupils would be unable to attend school in this scenario. The risks to pupils' mental health, social development and educational outcomes for such pupils would be significant.

The Education Authority continues to work closely with Translink and the Department for Infrastructure to ensure sufficient transport capacity is available to meet the needs of pupils allocated a bus pass for use on either a public bus service or a dedicated school only service, whilst also maintaining bus service capacity for the general public. The provision of school transport whether on dedicated school buses or public buses has been provided through the flexible use of the Translink fleet.

The Department for Infrastructure has informed me that Translink has worked with the Education Authority and local schools to add additional dedicated school services and has advised that Translink is also providing over 500 additional bus services to supplement the public transport network to facilitate social distancing for all passengers, including school children.

I believe that the range of additional services that have been put in place are sufficient to ensure the implementation of the current guidance, however I will continue to be guided by the relevant medical and scientific advice.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the total number of incidents of COVID-19 there have been in schools; and (ii) how many schools have had more than one case. **(AQW 9083/17-22)**

Mr Weir: The Public Health Agency (PHA) has been collecting data on the number of COVID school incidents reported to the PHA COVID School Team since schools reopened. By the 13 October 2020 they had received 1,491 reported cases by schools (both pupils and staff) with 247 schools reporting more than one case.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education (i) whether pupils, absent due to a positive diagnosis of COVID-19 or self isolating in line with Departmental and Public Health Agency advice, are coded 8, meaning that their absence is not counted against their attendance; and (ii) how many pupils have been absent under code 8 since the 24 August 2020. **(AQW 9102/17-22)**

Mr Weir: If a pupil is absent due to a positive diagnosis or symptoms of COVID-19 then their attendance is recorded as Code 1 – illness. If a pupil is absent due to self-isolation in line with PHA advice and they continue to work remotely, then they will be coded as Code 8, which in these cases is an Approved Educational Activity and will not adversely impact their attendance. If a pupil fails to engage in remote learning during the period of self-isolation then they will be marked as an unauthorised absence, as set out in DE Circular 2020/08.

Pupil attendance data by school type is captured using standard reports from the Schools Information Management System (SIMS) of all primary, post primary, special and Educated Other Than at School (EOTAS) settings. However we do not hold specific information on self-isolating. Self-isolating is recorded on SIMS using a reappropriated code. These codes continue to be used for their original purpose and therefore are not solely specific to COVID-19. Therefore it is not possible to provide the number of pupils who have been or are in self-isolation this academic year.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Education, following the Executive announcement that those who work from home should work from home, whether all officials and staff members in his Department, who can work from home, are working from home. (AQW 9234/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department is consistent with the Executive position that staff who can work from home should work from home. All staff who can work from home have been provided with the capability to do so.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Education what engagement he has had with his counterpart in the Irish government in relation to potential closure of schools in border areas which enrol pupils from both sides of the border.

(AQO 909/17-22)

Mr Weir: Currently there are no plans to close schools. This would significantly undermine education provision and damage school and parental confidence.

My officials have been in contact with counterparts in the Irish government in relation to the response to COVID-19 and have shared information and guidance where this has been helpful.

I will attend an Education sectoral meeting of the North South Ministerial Council in early November which will consider a number of agenda items. This will provide a further opportunity for engagement and information sharing on the response to COVID-19.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the review of CCEA awarding arrangements for AS and A level qualifications in 2020.

(AQO 916/17-22)

Mr Weir: Arrangements for appointing a team, external to both the Department and CCEA, to take forward a review of the summer 2020 awarding arrangements are at an advanced stage. There remain a couple of final steps to be completed before the contract can be awarded.

Once the contract is awarded the review should then take six weeks to complete.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Education to outline the cleansing regime deployed in the schools' estate before the phased return of children in August 2020.

(AQO 918/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has confirmed that the normal summer clean was undertaken in all schools throughout Northern Ireland, in preparation for schools returning in August 2020.

Department of Finance

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail his current position concerning the designation of Foyle Port as a Free Port. (AQW 8106/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): Policy on Freeports is being developed by the Treasury and I wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in August to call for substantive engagement on this so that the Executive can assess their potential.

While my department, in conjunction with relevant Executive departments, has been engaging with the Treasury, limited detail has been shared at this point. My officials continue to press for that to understand fully the implications for our economy and any potential role the Executive might have in creating Freeports locally.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 6775/17-22, why Barnett consequentials of only £6.0 million for 2020/21 arose when HM Treasury issued statement on 2 September 2020 costing Kickstart Scheme at £2 billion.

(AQW 8177/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Chancellor announced a total of £2 billion, at his Summer Economic Update, for a Kickstart Scheme for 16-24 year olds. This funding covered England, Scotland and Wales, and is phased across three years: £215 million for 2020-21, £1,670 million for 2021-22 and £110 million for 2022-23.

The Barnett consequential of the £215 million for 2020-21 is £6 million. Funding for future years to be included in the Spending Review.

Barnett consequentials are not hypothecated, meaning they do not have to be used for the purpose which gave rise to the consequential.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Finance to detail the process for completing an asset transfer between two government agencies in which the potential development of the site would lead to a land valuation in excess of the original Land and Property Services valuation.

(AQW 8309/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Land & Property Services' Central Advisory Unit (CAU) administers the process of the disposal of surplus government property in accordance with the Guidance on Disposal of Public Sector Surplus Land and Property in Northern Ireland. All Government departments and bodies that are subject to public procurement rules are advised to use this process, and a list of organisations that are subject to these rules can be found in the CAU Guidance.

An asset that has been declared surplus is firstly circulated within the Public Sector to determine if there is a need to retain it within the wider public sector. A body proposing to acquire the asset must demonstrate that they meet the criteria set out in Section 6 of the guidance to purchase the asset which is:

- a strong, immediate need and/or exceptional reasons in the public interest to acquire the land;
- the allocation of available and approved funding for the purchase where applicable; and
- that it could have exercised compulsory powers of acquisition in respect of the subject land for the intended purpose; OR
- has the confirmed support of a sponsor body with the necessary compulsory purchase powers.

LPS would usually act as an honest broker between two government departments.

The disposal guidelines recommend asset owners transfer / dispose of the asset at market value as assessed by LPS.

In some instances, a clawback or overage clause may be recommended in the case of disposals involving land with development potential. This is intended to safeguard a share of potential gains and ensure maximum value to the public purse from the disposal. Chapter 12 of the guidance contains further information on the use of clawback and overage clauses.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance (i) to detail the number of spaces, annual costs and location of carparks provided for civil servants that are (a) leased; and (b) publically owned within city centres; and (ii) how this encourages the use of public transport and car sharing.

(AQW 8315/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) There is a total of 1,027 parking spaces at buildings owned or leased by DoF in city centres – these are managed and allocated by the departments occupying the building. DoF leases collaboratively a further 287 spaces in Belfast city centre on behalf of departments. Departments are responsible for, and each holds details relating to, the allocation of spaces to their staff. The number of spaces, annual costs and location of carparks provided for civil servants by my Department in city centres is shown in tables (a) and (b) below. These tables also identify spaces allocated to DoF staff.
- (ii) Spaces utilised by my Department are allocated in line with DoF's Car Parking Policy to Essential business users and to staff with a requirement due to disability. Essential business users are required to travel as part of their role. Currently each department has its own Car Parking Policy.

My Permanent Secretary is working with the other departments to review car parking policies across the civil service with the aim of encouraging greater use of public transport, walking and cycling and reducing the requirement for spaces and I have asked that she keep me informed.

(a) Leased

No of spaces allocated to DoF Staff	No. of spaces provided for other Departments	Annual Costs	Location of Carparks
18	0	Included in annual building lease rental costs	Goodwood House, 10 - 18 Adelaide Street, Belfast
11	0	£15,293.80	Space 12, 2-8 Seymour Row, Belfast
89	82	£136,800.00	APOCA, 6 Lanyon Place Belfast
29	61	£87,750.00	Hipark, 59 - 93 High Street, Belfast
0	26	£25,350.00	Donegall Quay Car Park, 5 Donegall Quay, Belfast
0	4	Included in annual building lease rental costs	Shaftsbury Square JBO, 107 Great Victoria Street, Belfast

No of spaces allocated to DoF Staff	No. of spaces provided for other Departments	Annual Costs	Location of Carparks
0	5	Included in annual building lease rental costs	Park House, 87-91 Great Victoria Street, Belfast
0	53	Included in annual building lease rental costs	Design Centre, 39 Corporation Street, Belfast
0	26	Included in annual building lease rental costs	Klondyke Building, Cromac Avenue, Belfast
0	15	Included in annual building lease rental costs	Killymeal House, 2 Cromac Quay, Belfast
0	8	Included in annual building lease rental costs	Carlisle House, 16A Carlisle Road, Londonderry
0	33	Included in annual building lease rental costs	Atek Building, Armagh,

1 Not used for car parking, provides building emergency evacuation route.

(b) Owned

No of spaces allocated to DoF Staff	No. of spaces provided for other Departments	Annual Costs	Location of Carparks
3	0	£1,533.77	Seatem House, 34 Alfred Street, Belfast
25	0	£8,072.49	Bruce Street, 2-4 Bruce Street, Belfast
38	222	N/A	Clarence Court, 10-18 Adelaide Street, Belfast
11	0	N/A	Queens Court, 56-66 Upper Queen Street, Belfast
0	27	N/A	34 College Street, Belfast
0	22	N/A	DVA Corporation Street, Belfast
0	2	N/A	Adelaide House, 39-49 Adelaide Street, Belfast
0	103	N/A	James House, Cromac Avenue, Belfast
0	83	N/A	Foyle JBO, Asylum Road, Londonderry
0	29	N/A	1 Crescent Road, Londonderry
0	32	N/A	Lisnagelvin JBO, 2 Crescent Road, Londonderry
3	24	N/A	Orchard House, 40 Foyle Street, Londonderry
29	8	N/A	Waterside House, 75 Duke Street, Londonderry
0	85	N/A	Armagh JBO, Springhill Road, Newry
0	30	N/A	Newry JBO, 40 Bridge Street, Newry
0	89	N/A	Glenree House, Springhill Road, Newry

Note: Not all spaces will be available as some may have been repurposed for other uses, e.g. cycle storage, electric vehicle charge point.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the CBI's report which concludes that the business rates system is archaic and unsustainable.

(AQW 8385/17-22)

Mr Murphy: This latest CBI report is a response to the Treasury's call for evidence in respect of the current further fundamental review of business rates in England. The CBI report recognises business rates as an important source of revenue for government, and rather than seeking its replacement, makes a series of recommendations for improvements. It also recognises that a business rates system should be predictable, stable, simple and fair.

The public consultation conducted here last year by my Department heard clear calls for the business rate multiplier to be lowered to reduce the burden of rates, with more regular revaluations to restore fairness, and ongoing reviews of reliefs and exemptions. This was the clear rationale behind the Executive's Budget decision this year to reduce the regional rate multiplier by 18%. The level of district rates must also be at a fair level. I am also in favour of regular revaluations.

While there are some issues with the current system of business rates here and there are some opportunities to make improvements, the system also has many strengths. It is based on an assessed property rental value, provides certainty for both government and businesses, is difficult to evade, and achieves fairness through regular revaluations and a tailored system of reliefs which must be kept under review.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what recovery there has been in respect of COVID-19 assistance to businesses for which they turned out to be ineligible; and whether such recovered funds stay within the Northern Ireland budget.

(AQW 8431/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Minister for the Economy has been responsible for the recovery in respect of Covid-19 assistances paid out to ineligible businesses to date under the three schemes her Department has administered.

My Department has been assisting the Department for the Economy (DfE) in the recouping of ineligible payments of the £10,000 Small Business Support Grant.

I can advise that to date, 72 grants have been recovered in full and 3 partially with a total value of £737,000. These monies have been returned directly to DfE's budget.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether (i) he is considering a bid of £20 million for COVID-19 funding for Translink; and (ii) any such money would come from the £55 million pot established for personal protective equipment and sectoral support.*[R]*

(AQW 8457/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In addition to £20m allocated in the 2020-21 Budget to address Translink's underlying deficit, I understand that the Infrastructure Minister has already allocated £70 million to Translink from the additional allocations provided to her Department in response to COVID-19.

The Department for Infrastructure had originally submitted a further bid of £20 million for Translink in the recent October Monitoring Round exercise, however following the introduction of greater Covid-19 restrictions Departments have been asked to reconsider their Covid-19 bids as a matter of urgency.

It is my intention to bring all October Monitoring bids to the Executive for consideration as soon as possible once a clearer picture is known.

In light of the emerging Covid-19 situation, the Executive will also have to reconsider how much money is being held for specific purposes such as personal protective equipment and sectoral support, and how this is to be used.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Finance how many women, who were diagnosed with a perinatal mental illness, died by suicide in each year since 2015.

(AQW 8466/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The information requested is not available. The Northern Ireland General Register Office's Registration System (NIROS) as analysed by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) does not hold information relating to women, who were diagnosed with a perinatal mental illness, in which deaths from suicide have occurred.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance what work has been done by Land and Property Services with local councils to develop a robust rate forecasting model in order to assess potential loss of rates income in future years as a result of the economic impact of COVID-19.

(AQW 8490/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Land & Property Services (LPS) already has a well-established annual rate forecasting methodology in place. This has been developed in collaboration with District Councils and builds upon the lessons learnt from the last recession over a decade ago.

The methodology includes a detailed analysis of the next year's estimated revenue gains from growth in the Council's property tax base and the corresponding potential revenue losses arising from vacant property and bad debt write-off. This is

based on LPS data trends and local knowledge from Councils on planning and building control profiles and details of possible business closures and vacancies.

This year, both LPS and Council efforts have been jointly focussed on assessing the impacts of Covid-19 on next year's Council funding by undertaking additional and more frequent modelling, and scenario framing of the potential Council revenue losses as the economic impacts of the pandemic continue to emerge and be understood.

Following the savings delivered to businesses from the non-domestic regional rate cut announced in the Executive's 2020/21 Budget, I am keen that the wider impact of the pandemic, and district rate decisions taken on foot of that backdrop, doesn't result in a rate hike at District Council level in 2021/22 which would undo that saving for business. To that end, my officials are working with counterparts in the Department for Communities to look at options to provide Councils with both greater flexibilities and options in relation to the setting of rates in the post-Covid-19 landscape.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance what communication he has had with local councils to extend the timeframe for setting the rate for 2021/22 to align with the regional rate setting process.

(AQW 8491/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My officials have already started to engage with counterparts in Local Government Finance Division within the Department for Communities to consider the options around adjusting the date by which the 2021/22 district rates must be set. There is currently a statutory deadline of 15th February in each year, but I am open to providing greater flexibility for Councils in light of the challenges that face us all in the year ahead due to the pandemic.

The rate setting process for the regional rate is a distinct process and is linked with the wider Budget set by the Executive. I do, however, see a great deal of value in the district rate and regional rate processes being broadly aligned both in terms of timing and in terms of their combined effect on businesses and households. In particular, I am very keen to preserve the savings provided by the Executive to businesses through last year's Executive Budget which reduced the non-domestic regional rate by 18%. The strong message from business that there needed to be a reduction in the poundage rate was a headline finding from last year's Business Rate Review and I am determined that we collectively act to bring that about.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance what work has been done with local councils to take forward their request for a guarantee from government that rates paid to councils will be based on the estimated figure agreed as part of the rate setting process for this financial year and the next two financial years.

(AQW 8492/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I have had a number of representations about this matter from individual Councils, SOLACE, and the Committee for Communities, and following consideration I am not minded to provide this guarantee. As I continue to review the emerging situation my position remains unchanged.

I have already put together a number of measures to benefit and protect Councils' non-domestic rates bases. This has included the rates holiday support package for business worth £313 million, the full cost of which is borne by the Executive and therefore protects Councils' income this year, and an emergency package of funding for Councils worth £20 million. In addition, the Executive has invested in an extensive range of schemes aimed at limiting the damage that the pandemic will cause to the economy. This support will help to reduce the number of business failures that result and, therefore, help to protect the rates revenue which Councils rely upon.

The focus for my officials now is on working in collaboration with counterparts in the local Councils to review and build on the well-established model for rate forecasting to take account of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the property tax base, to support a robust rate striking process for the 2021/22 rating year.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 7702/17-22, whether there is an opportunity to reassess means to apply for Low Income Rate Relief after the rates bill has been issued, thereby reducing the amount payable in one payment or through multiple payments in the same year.

(AQW 8503/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Awards of Housing Benefit (Rates) and Low Income Rate Relief are subject to regular reassessment of claimants circumstances. While Housing Benefit Regulations allow for retrospective reassessments, for many, changes are applied going forward from the Monday after the change has been notified to the Authority.

The assessment of entitlement to Low Income Rate Relief is determined by entitlement to Housing Benefit in accordance with Regulation 7(c) of The Rate Relief (General) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2007. As Low Income Rate Relief is intrinsically based on Housing Benefit entitlement, my Department does not intend to review the Low Income Rate Relief Scheme.

New applications for Housing Benefit (Rates) and Low Income Rate Relief can be made by for non-working age citizens, those in supported accommodation and those receiving a severe disability premium as part of their benefit package.

As a result of Welfare Reform, Universal Credit has replaced six social security benefits for working age citizens seeking help through the welfare system. Housing Benefit is one of the six legacy benefits replaced by Universal Credit. Working age citizens are not eligible to make a new claim for Housing Benefit (Rates) or, by extension, Low Income Rate Relief. However, claimants in receipt of Universal Credit can apply online for help with rates through the Rate Rebate Scheme administered by Land & Property Services.

If a person believes that they may be eligible for either Housing Benefit (Rates) and Low Income Rate Relief or the Rate Rebate Scheme, an application can be made at any time. If approved, Housing Benefit (Rates) and Low Income Rate Relief awards may be backdated a maximum of one month for working age claimants or three months for non-working age claimants. Awards of Rate Rebate are linked to entitlement to Universal Credit and it may be possible for claims to be awarded for a period of up to three months prior to the date the claim was received.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance whether businesses supplying the hospitality sector, that have been impacted by the pandemic, are eligible for the recently announced rates holiday.

(AQW 8516/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As part of the response to Covid-19, I took the decision to support all businesses here with a 4 months rates holiday from 1 April. A further 8 months rates holiday was then granted to specified business uses within the hospitality, leisure and tourism sectors which were identified, following research undertaken by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre, as being of the greatest need of support and which were used wholly or mainly for the purposes laid out in the legislation, namely, The Rates (Coronavirus) (Emergency Relief) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 [SR 2020 No.144]. Regrettably funds were not available to extend this relief further.

I know that there are many businesses who haven't benefitted from previous support schemes. I have asked Executive colleagues to urgently bring forward proposals for sectors they have responsibility for.

Businesses may avail of the Hardship Rate Relief Scheme which provides support for businesses and organisations that are in crisis because of an exceptional circumstance and supports them 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 on the NI Business Info website at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/hardship-rate-relief>.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance whether he will extend the timeline for setting of rates by councils for 2021/22.

(AQW 8543/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My officials have already started to engage with counterparts in Local Government Finance Division within the Department for Communities to consider the options around adjusting the date by which the 2021/22 district rates must be set. There is currently a statutory deadline of 15th February in each year, but I am open to providing greater flexibility for Councils in light of the challenges that face us all in the year ahead due to the pandemic.

The rate setting process for the Regional Rate is a distinct process and is linked with the wider Budget set by the Executive. I do, however, see a great deal of value in the District Rate and Regional Rate processes being broadly aligned both in terms of timing and in terms of their combined effect on businesses and households. In particular, I am very keen to preserve the savings provided by the Executive to businesses through last year's Executive Budget which reduced the non-domestic regional rate by 18%. The strong message from business that there needed to be a reduction in the poundage rate was a headline finding from last year's Business Rate Review and I am determined that we collectively act to bring that about.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance what guarantee he can give that rates income paid to councils will be protected for 2020/21.

(AQW 8545/17-22)

Mr Murphy: During 2020/21 Councils will continue to be paid in twelve equal monthly instalments based on what they determined was required during the rate setting process. As in previous years, at the end of the rating year, my Department will calculate how much rate revenue has actually been raised and where this exceeds the estimate, a balancing payment will be made; conversely, where the estimate is higher than the actual amount raised, the shortfall will be clawed back.

Officials in Land & Property Services prepare monthly forecasts of the actual revenue which is expected to be raised and provide these to Councils. This arrangement has been well received by Councils. I am pleased to advise that as at the end of September the position for all Councils looks promising. This positive result is largely due to the business rates support package that I have put in place during the current year. You will be aware that this package provides for a four month rate holiday to all non-domestic properties excluding public bodies and utility companies, and a full annual exclusion from paying rates for those businesses operating in the childcare, retail, leisure, hospitality or tourism sectors, as well as the 3 airports. This package could cost up to £317 million and is being met completely by the Executive and as such Councils face no revenue reduction as a result.

My officials will continue to monitor the revenue position for all Councils and to engage and update the relevant Council officials accordingly.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Finance what bids he has received from the Minister for the Economy for additional COVID-19 support.

(AQW 8562/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The COVID-19 related bids submitted by the Department for the Economy are detailed in the attached Annex.

In addition the Department received initial allocations of £411.4 million for business support schemes. There have been some reduced requirements in relation to these schemes and the position at 22 September is shown, along with other COVID-19 allocations, in the table published by my department at

https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dfp/Covid-19%20funding%20allocations%20table%2022.09.20%20D9_0.pdf

ANNEX

Department for the Economy	Resource bids £'000	Capital bids £'000
June Monitoring		
HE Commercial Research	10,740	
HE Teaching Grant	1,574	
Invest NI – SME Process and Organisational Improvement Grant Support	1,500	
Invest NI Communication Campaigns	876	
FTC Invest NI		10,000
FTC Tourism NI		10,000
Total COVID-19 Bids Submitted in June Monitoring	14,690	20,000
Summer Economic Recovery Exercise - part 1		
Fast Start: Northern Ireland Companies in the Blue Zone	2,500	
Catalyst Co-Founders Initiative	250	
Support for University R&D	13,000	
Additional corporate function related costs (GAE & Salary) to ensure the DfE Emergency Response to Covid-19	320	
Challenge Fund	500	
All age apprenticeships	1,300	
Youth Training demand pressure	3,500	
Training for Success increased demand & extended age eligibility	5,000	
Advanced Vocational and Technical Award at Level 3	300	
Hydrogen economy – electrolyser factory and Power to X portfolio	1,350	4,825
COVID Digital Innovation and Productivity Programme	250	
Robust Research, Insights and Market Intelligence Programme	225	
Short term skills interventions	3,000	
Additional Budget for Skills Focus Programme	300	
Screen Industry Reboot	400	
Additional funding for Invest NI Innovation Support Schemes	3,100	
Additional support under Invest NI Skills Intervention Programme including Skills for Growth & Skills Advancement Grant	2,300	
Additional funding for the InnovateUs programme	300	
COVID International Market Access Programme	200	
COVID Market Led Product Development Programme	1,500	
COVID Recovery – Tour Operator and Destination Management Company Support	550	
SFA Project Acceleration	2,500	300
Additional staffing to provide post-furlough employment support	195	
Additional Teaching Grant – 5% Phased Increase to Maximum Student Numbers (MaSN)	74	

Department for the Economy	Resource bids £'000	Capital bids £'000
Additional staffing for Industrial Tribunals	150	
GB – Rebuilding Over The Winter & Stimulating Demand for 2021	6,000	
Mainland Europe – Restarting Business from Germany, France & The Netherlands	2,500	
NI Industry & Overseas Trade Partners Driving Recovery	1,500	
Regional Skills Hubs	500	
Small Business Accelerator	375	
Extension of ESF	22,595	
COVID Recovery – Business Tourism and Conference Support	900	
Project Spring	1,000	
Increasing NI Consumer Confidence	243	
Stranmillis Resource Pressure – Loss of Income due to Covid-19	1,109	
Additional Teaching Grant – Funding to support part time provision at Open University	750	
COVID-19 Related Additional Expenditure To Provide Safe Learning Environment	6,508	
Free School Meals (FSM) Allowances Pressure	430	
Loss of Income Due to COVID-19	3,630	
Retain your Apprentice – Return, Retention, Result	8,400	
Incentives to support the recruitment of new apprenticeships	12,500	
A COVID Recovery heavyweight consumer advertising programme across NI and ROI.	4,000	
Stimulating Air Access Restoration	2,000	
COVID Holiday At Home Vouchers Campaign	1,300	
Promotion of “We’re Good to Go” Industry Standard & Consumer Mark	350	
Total COVID-19 Bids Submitted in Summer Exercise Part 1	119,654	5,125
Summer Economic Recovery Exercise - part 2		
Assistance to Business	8,550	
Skills and Youth Training	12,100	
Assistance to Tourism	9,850	
Hydrogen economy – electrolyser factory and Power to X portfolio	1,350	
Support for university R&D	13,000	
Further Assistance to Business	2,875	
Assistance to Tourism	5,900	
Additional Staffing	345	
Extension of ESF	22,595	
Additional Teaching Grant – 5% Phased Increase to Maximum Student Numbers (MaSN)	74	
Increasing NI Consumer Confidence	243	
Covid Cruise Hub Investment	70	
Project Spring	1,000	

Department for the Economy	Resource bids £'000	Capital bids £'000
COVID-19 Related Additional Expenditure To Provide Safe Learning Environment	1,000	
Stranmillis College Loss of Income due to Covid-19	1,109	
Additional Teaching Grant – Funding to support part time provision at Open University	750	
Loss of Income Due to COVID-19	3,500	
Additional corporate function related costs (GAE & Salary) to ensure the DfE Emergency Response to Covid-19	311	
Additional Higher Education (HE) Teaching Grant due to change in policy on awarding of A-Level Results in 2020	3,175	
Additional Exercise - HE safe learning environment	2,500	
Total COVID-19 Bids Submitted in Summer Exercise Part 1	90,297	0
October Monitoring		
Support for university R&D	7,200	
Further Assistance to Business	2,875	
Assistance to Tourism	4,050	
Additional Staffing	345	
Additional Teaching Grant – 5% Phased Increase to Maximum Student Numbers (MaSN)	74	
Increasing NI Consumer Confidence	143	
Covid Cruise Hub Investment	70	
Project Spring	1,000	
Loss of Income Due to COVID-19	2,500	
Free School Meals (FSM) Allowances Pressure Term 1	171	
Total COVID-19 Bids Submitted in October Monitoring	18,428	
Total COVID-19 Bids Submitted	243,069	25,125

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance whether the Barnett consequentials scheduled to be received in regard to renewable heat provision will be available for new renewable heat programmes after this financial year, if a new scheme is not yet in place.

(AQW 8591/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Energy is a devolved matter and as such, additional spend in England would normally attract a Barnett consequential in Departmental Expenditure Limits (DEL) for the Executive. In that circumstance consequentials are unhypothecated meaning it is for the Executive to decide how to allocate based on local needs and priorities.

The exception to this is the funding for the Renewable Heat Incentive which does not attract a Barnett consequential but has a population based cap within Annually Managed Expenditure.

A new renewable heat incentive scheme will be informed by the wider Energy Strategy which is anticipated to be coming before the Executive shortly. It is anticipated that a new scheme will be able to utilise the population-based funding in AME.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the advice to governments from the International Monetary Fund to accelerate capital projects to create jobs in response to the Coronavirus crisis; and how that advice will influence his public spending plans.

(AQW 8614/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The IMF report refers to the reduction of public investment to manage the COVID-19 response as well as accelerating investment as part of government response to recovery.

The Executive is unable to unilaterally set its Capital Budget. It is the British Government Spending Review which will determine both the Resource and Capital funding envelopes available to the Executive for 2021-22 and potentially future years.

Within the context of the funding envelope, the Executive will develop its Capital investment programme. In doing so the Executive will take local decisions in line with local needs and priorities and consider all relevant factors in its social and economic response to COVID-19.

In considering its investment programme the Executive will continue to make decisions based on strong prioritisation and project selection processes in light of clear policy objectives.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he will lobby the Westminster government for increased corporation tax; and whether he will lobby his Executive colleagues to support devolved corporation tax powers.

(AQW 8641/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Increases in public spending under the Barnett Formula are based on changes in planned spending on comparable public services in England, not taxation levels. Therefore an increase in Corporation Tax would not increase the block grant.

The devolution of Corporation Tax is best considered not in isolation, but as part of a comprehensive review of taxation in the north.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he plans to provide financing for free face masks for the public to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

(AQW 8642/17-22)

Mr Murphy: To date, no Executive Ministers have put forward proposals to provide free face masks to the wider public. Should a bid for such funding be proposed, it would be a matter for the Executive to consider alongside other competing priorities.

I would however draw your attention to the initiative to provide up to 40,000 face coverings to vulnerable groups which is supported by the Department for Communities.

Further detail can be found at the following link:

<https://www.simoncommunity.org/about/news/communities-minister-joins-forces-with-the-big-community-sew-to-help-the-vulnerable>

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Finance to detail the October Monitoring Round bids submitted by the Department of Health.

(AQW 8705/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department of Health submitted four resource bids and two capital bids as part of the October Monitoring Round.

The four resource bids are: Provision of Critical Health Services (£15m); Non – Agenda for Change (AfC) pay (£6.3m); Palliative and End of Life Care (£1.5m); and, Elective Care (£1.5m).

The two capital bids are: COVID response and Rebuilding Services (£32.4m); and, General Capital and Serious Risks (£6.7m).

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance for an update on engagement with district Councils concerning restructuring of loans to aid financial circumstances being experienced as a result of the pandemic. *[R]*

(AQW 8717/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Any engagement around this issue would be with the Communities Minister, who has responsibility for the sector. I would be happy to consider any proposal that is brought forward by the Minister for Communities.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether consideration has been given to assisting district Councils with the cost of Voluntary Severance Schemes via utilisation of Capital Borrowing Powers. *[R]*

(AQW 8718/17-22)

Mr Murphy: It would be for the Department for Communities to bring forward any proposals in relation to District Councils' borrowing powers. I would be happy to consider any proposal that is brought forward, although this would also require Treasury agreement.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether he will publish the advisory guidance and regulations for commercial tenants and commercial landlords on rent collection while COVID-19 public health restrictions are in place.

(AQW 8780/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Both the regulations and the guidance have been published.

My Department inserted a special provision into the Coronavirus Act 2020 to ensure that business tenants here are protected from the threat of eviction because of non-payment of rent at this difficult time. The special provision initially applied during the period from 25 March 2020 to 30 June 2020; I subsequently extended the protection by legislation until 30 September and then recently under to 31 December 2020 under The Business Tenancies (Coronavirus) (Restriction on Forfeiture: Relevant

Period) (Northern Ireland) (No 2) Regulations 2020. The regulations have been published at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2020/209/contents/made>.

In my Press Release on 19 June I welcomed and referenced the publication of the voluntary Code of Practice for landlords and tenants by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which seeks to promote good practice between tenants and landlords, working together to get through the pandemic. The published guidance remains available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/code-of-practice-for-the-commercial-property-sector>

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether he will be recommending that the £200million in Barnett consequentials announced by the UK Government on the 9 October 2020 be allocated to economic support for businesses affected by COVID-19 public health restrictions.

(AQW 8781/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The additional funding of £200 million allocated to the Executive on 9 October 2020 is an uplift to the guaranteed amount of additional Resource DEL funding for 2020-21 announced in the Spring Economic Update. This brings the total funding made available by the British Government to the Executive for its COVID-19 response to £2.4 billion.

It will be for the Executive to decide on how the additional funding is allocated, based on assessments of need from all Ministers, including the Economy Minister.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance how much public money has been paid to employment agencies recruiting on behalf of the Civil Service since 2015.

(AQW 8799/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Corporation Tax

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance what are the Barnett consequentials of a 10 per cent corporation tax increase.

(AQW 8800/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer the Member to the answer previously provided to Assembly Question, AQW 7969/17-22.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Finance what role his Department had in the tendering of the Department for the Economy research into the economic, societal and environmental impacts of future onshore petroleum exploration and production, including Unconventional Oil and Gas.

(AQW 8816/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Minister of Finance was not involved at any stage during the tendering process.

Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) within the Department of Finance provide procurement related services in line with the Executive's Public Procurement Policy. This is typically for requirements valued at above £30,000 and procurement services are delivered to a large number of public sector organisations, including the Department for the Economy (DfE).

CPD's role was to facilitate the competitive tender process for the procurement titled: Research study into the potential economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and production in Northern Ireland.

CPD is required to provide this service regardless of the Minister's views on the procurement and the Minister was not consulted at any stage.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister of Finance to detail his role in the tender process for the specification for research into the economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and production in Northern Ireland by the Department for the Economy.

(AQW 8854/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Minister of Finance was not directly involved at any stage during the tendering process.

Departments are obliged to come to CPD to facilitate the procurement of any goods or services required over a whole life cost value of £30k.

CPD is obliged to facilitate that tender on behalf of Departments regardless of the Finance Minister's personal views on the tender.

On the 11 May 2020, the DfE contacted CPD Supplies and Services division in relation to progressing a procurement titled: - Research study into the potential economic, societal and environmental impacts of onshore petroleum exploration and production in Northern Ireland.

CPD's role was to facilitate the competitive tender process. The tender award process has now been completed on behalf of DfE.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the Translation Hub provided for in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQO 934/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The establishment of a central Translation Hub to provide language translation services is a key action in the New Decade New Approach (NDNA) agreement. My Department has completed a review to assess the options for establishing a Translation Hub, including looking at how others provide these services, for example in Wales, Scotland and the South of Ireland as well as in local government here. I have recently circulated a draft Executive Paper with the recommendations from this review and I look forward to working collectively with my Executive colleagues to deliver this important NDNA commitment.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the work of the Renewable Heat Incentive Executive sub-committee. (AQO 933/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In line with the NDNA commitment, the Executive Sub Committee on Reform was established to consider the recommendations of the RHI Report in full, and to oversee their implementation. The Subcommittee met for the first time in July 2020 and was scheduled to meet again on 14th October. This meeting was postponed and will be rearranged.

The recommendations have been brigaded under seven key themes and at the October meeting the Subcommittee heard from each theme lead. The Leads highlighted the significant work already done and presented for approval an Action Plan detailing the work ahead.

The Executive Sub-Committee plans to bring a full report on the actions taken and proposed for each recommendation to the Assembly before the Christmas recess.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Finance what additional financial support has been requested from HM Treasury in this financial year to deal with COVID-19.

(AQO 932/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Following the Chancellor's 9 October announcement of the extension of the Treasury guarantee the Executive has now received £2.4 billion in funding related to COVID-19.

As set out in my 24 September statement to the Assembly, some £1,670 million has been allocated to departments including £120 million of Executive funding.

A further £35 million was allocated on 15 October for lockdown support measures.

No additional funding has been requested from Treasury, however I have pressed Treasury Ministers for a continuation of the British Government support schemes.

Department of Health

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health how many cases of Metastatic spinal cord compression have been diagnosed in the last five years.

(AQW 3024/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The tabulated information overleaf details the number of diagnoses of Spinal Cord Compression in Northern Ireland in the last five years 2015/16 to 2019/20. (Table A). For the diagnosis of metastatic spinal cord compression, there is no ICD-10 code which denotes whether the episode was related to cancer or not, due to this ICD-10 code G95.2 was used to identify a diagnosis of Spinal Cord Compression.

¹Admissions where there was a recorded diagnoses of ²Spinal Cord Compression in each of the last 5 years 2015/16 - 2019/20

Year	Diagnoses of Spinal Cord Compression
2015/16	104
2016/17	159
2017/18	113
2018/19	129
2019/20	114

Source: Hospital Inpatient System, Hospital Information Branch, Information & Analysis Directorate, Department of Health, NI.

- 1 Figures do not include admissions to mental health or learning disability programmes of care which account for less than 1% of all hospital admissions.
- 2 The ICD-10 codes G95.2 was used to identify a diagnosis of Spinal Cord Compression in each of the 17 diagnostic fields of the Hospital Inpatient System

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health whether his Department has accepted and implements NICE CG75 Metastatic spinal cord compression in adults: risk assessment, diagnosis and management; and, if so, on what date it was adopted.

(AQW 3025/17-22)

Mr Swann: I can advise that my Department on 22 September 2009 endorsed for implementation NICE Clinical Guideline CG75 on Metastatic spinal cord compression in adults: risk assessment, diagnosis and management.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of face-to-face GP appointments held each month between 1 January 2019 and 31 August 2020.

(AQW 6376/17-22)

Mr Swann: As independent contractors, GPs are responsible for the day to day management of their practice, including patient appointment arrangements. Information on the number of GP face-to-face appointments held each month is not collated centrally and is consequently not available.

GP practices are open and are providing face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them. All practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to allow them to do so safely.

GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients and the current pandemic does not negate this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how best to prioritise patients to provide this core service whilst maintaining patient safety.

GP practices are currently operating a telephone first triage system which allows patients to seek medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP then uses their clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be safely managed over the telephone or whether a face to face appointment is required. This approach ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential. This helps to ensure infection control and social distancing keeping both patients and staff safe.

The telephone first triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face to face assessment to one of the Primary Care COVID-19 centres. This ensures that these patients do not attend the GP Practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimal disruption.

GPs are still expected to clinically assess for risk of serious illness and refer as clinically appropriate for diagnostic tests and to specialist services, such as an outpatient clinic, as they have always done.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices in Northern Ireland on 30 July asking that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices were advised to communicate to patients about the practice services that are available and how to access them with the recommendation that these communications make clear that GP practices are open.

On 7 September, GP leaders from the Health and Social Care Board, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association issued a statement to reassure patients that, whilst patients may be seen in a different way, by phone or video-link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and issue prescriptions. GPs want anyone who has a health concern to feel reassured that they will be able to get an appointment and see a GP if necessary. If people have symptoms or an unexplained illness or have any reason to be concerned, they should in the first instance contact their GP who will be able to provide advice.

A letter was also issued to MLAs and other local political representatives on 7 September providing an update on the current arrangements and asking that they share the key message with constituents that GP practices are open, but working differently.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what is the current timescale for the availability of Kaftrio for people living with cystic fibrosis.

(AQW 6589/17-22)

Mr Swann: Kaftrio is now approved for use in the HSC and is therefore added to the range of cutting-edge medicines available to treat cystic fibrosis. In effect, this means that potentially all cystic fibrosis patients in Northern Ireland who are clinically suitable for treatment may now have access to one of the novel therapies produced by Vertex. This includes Kaftrio as well as Kalydeco, Orkambi and Symkevi. I am assured that all necessary arrangements are now in place and patients have begun to get access to this therapy.

However, there are over 500 children and adults who suffer from cystic fibrosis in Northern Ireland. Not all will be clinically suitable for treatment with Kaftrio and not everyone can be treated immediately. Clinical teams are working on the prioritisation of those patients most likely to see the greatest benefit. I have asked Trusts to contact cystic fibrosis patients as soon as possible to let them know what steps are being put in place to assess and prioritise patients, and so avoid unnecessary worry.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health whether people diagnosed with cystic fibrosis will be able to avail of Kaftrio through the Health Service.

(AQW 6590/17-22)

Mr Swann: Kaftrio is now approved for use in the HSC and is therefore added to the range of cutting-edge medicines available to treat cystic fibrosis. In effect, this means that potentially all cystic fibrosis patients in Northern Ireland who are clinically suitable for treatment may now have access to one of the novel therapies produced by Vertex. This includes Kaftrio as well as Kalydeco, Orkambi and Symkevi. I am assured that all necessary arrangements are now in place and patients have begun to get access to this therapy.

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Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of times he has officially visited each constituency in his role as Minister, broken down by (i) month; and (ii) constituency since January 2020.

(AQW 6709/17-22)

Mr Swann: As Minister of Health, I have visited each constituency as detailed in the table below. Unfortunately, a significant number of other visits that had already been planned during the period March-June had to be unavoidably postponed.

(i) Month	(2) Constituency Visited
January	Belfast East
	Belfast South x 2
	Newry and Mourne
	North Antrim
February	Belfast South x 2
	Belfast North
	Belfast West x 2
	Foyle x 2
	North Antrim x 3
	South Antrim x 3
March	Upper Bann
	Belfast East
	Foyle
	Newry & Armagh
April	Upper Bann
	Belfast East
	Belfast South x 2
	Belfast West
May	Strangford
	Belfast South x 2
	North Antrim
June	Upper Bann x 2
	Belfast East
	Belfast South
	Foyle
July	North Antrim
	Belfast East

(i) Month	(2) Constituency Visited
	North Antrim x 2
	Fermanagh & South Tyrone
August	Belfast North
	Belfast South
	Lagan Valley

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health at what capacity hospital outpatient appointments are currently operating.
(AQW 6721/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care Board has advised that, compared with the June – August period in 2019, there has regionally been a 40% reduction in new outpatient activity; and a 23% reduction in review outpatient activity.

The Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care (HSC) Services which I published in June recognised the severe impact of COVID-19 on waiting times. Under this Framework each Trust has produced plans to rebuild services as quickly as possible in an environment which is safe for both staff and patients, however it is now likely that these plans will be set back by the current surge in hospital admissions due to COVID-19. In response to this I have also published a new Surge Planning Strategic Framework and individual Trust Surge Plans, which aim to respond to additional demand pressures arising during winter and any subsequent waves of transmission of COVID-19 waves.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health whether there is a disparity between the resumption of Health Service and private appointments within dental practices; and whether he will ensure that this disparity is addressed.
(AQW 6910/17-22)

Mr Swann: As part of the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) commission, dental treatment provided on behalf of the Health Service in primary care setting is closely monitored. Dental care provided under private arrangements between the dentist and the patient is not monitored on an ongoing basis, as it does not come under the purview of the HSCB.

If a patient is registered with the practice as a Health Service patient they are entitled to Health Service treatment as required, however the restrictions placed upon practices have reduced the number of patients that can be treated each day. As a result, practices are following HSCB guidance in terms of treating patients with the greatest oral health needs.

The HSCB are aware that a number of complaints have been received from patients regarding access to Health Service dentistry and being referred to private care as an alternative. In response the HSCB have written to the General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) about whom complaints have been received and reminded them of their duty to Health Service patients, the conditions of the considerable financial support that has been provided to date and the consequences of not providing the required level of service.

The HSCB have also reminded the profession that other associated payments, such as the practice allowance, will not be payable to dentists who do not continue to provide health service dental care to the full range of their registered patients in line with HSCB guidance.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the (i) working; and (ii) required, ambulance crews for the months of August 2020 and September 2020, broken down by location.
(AQW 7167/17-22)

Mr Swann: Please find detailed below data based on planned versus actual resource cover for Accident and Emergency (AE) ambulances (with a crew of two) and Rapid Response Vehicles (RRV) (with one paramedic). Since figures for the entire month of September are not available, three weeks data has been provided from 1 September 2020 to 21 September 2020.

August 2020 – AE Resources

Division	Planned	Actual	Vacant
Northern	923	816	107
Southern	632	478	154
Belfast	465	317	148
South Eastern	681	526	155
Western	748	654	94

August 2020 – RRV Resources

Division	Planned	Actual	Vacant
Northern	217	90	127
Southern	217	65	152
Belfast	248	109	139
South Eastern	239	61	178
Western	186	139	47

1 September 2020 to 21 September 2020 – AE Resources

Division	Planned	Actual	Vacant
Northern	625	504	121
Southern	430	292	138
Belfast	315	304	11
South Eastern	465	323	142
Western	501	437	64

1 September 2020 to 21 September 2020– RRV Resources

Division	Planned	Actual	Vacant
Northern	147	60	87
Southern	147	59	88
Belfast	168	76	92
South Eastern	159	42	117
Western	126	104	22

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) are taking all possible steps to address any occasions of shortfall, such as managing calls dynamically across the region, extending rapid response paramedic hours, using non-emergency crews, employing private ambulance services and providing telephone support to callers.

While NIAS are continuing to recruit and train additional staff, I have made it clear that only significant additional investment will address these ongoing issues.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Health what support, financial or otherwise, is in place for private dental practitioners.
(AQW 7276/17-22)

Mr Swann: At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I established a General Dental Services Financial Support Scheme (FSS) to support the industry. Since the inception of the scheme the combined level of FSS and net Item of Service (IoS) payments made to GDPs is approximately £32 million. This compares with the £24 million worth of net IoS payments made in the same period in 2019-20. Further, I have approved the availability of a further £5m to address the reduction in revenue from patients, resulting in an additional investment of £13m.

Most dental practices in Northern Ireland provide both private and Health Service Dentistry. There are only a small number of fully private dental practices in Northern Ireland and as such most General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) have been able to avail of the FSS.

In terms of the private proportion of dental activity, my Department does not have the legal authority to provide a similar scheme, only having powers to do so in respect of General Dental Services.

I have written to the Minister for the Economy however suggesting that consideration be given to establishing a grant scheme to assist practices in respect of private dentistry. I have made clear I am happy however for my officials to work with their colleagues in the Department for the Economy to develop support arrangements and for Business Services Organisation to help administer such a scheme.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health what discussions he has had with the Health Service Executive in order to find an all-island approach to dealing with hospital waiting lists.
(AQW 7300/17-22)

Mr Swann: My officials held an exploratory discussion on this issue with the Department of Health, Ireland, in early 2020, however, at that stage they were advised that the Health Service Executive was not in a position to support an all-island approach due to similar challenges of demand exceeding capacity. This has been exacerbated by the detrimental impact of COVID-19 on waiting times for elective care, which prior to the pandemic were already unacceptable.

My Department will consider all feasible options to reduce waiting times in Northern Ireland, however I have made it clear that only significant additional investment will address these ongoing issues.

My focus now is on the rebuilding of services and to increase health service activity as quickly as possible across all programmes of care, including elective services. However, this remains extremely challenging as we face a further peak in community transmission of COVID-19, due to the need for our health service to respond to the current surge in hospital admissions.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health why access to the anti-fibrotic drugs, Pirfenidone and Nintedanib, is delayed for people diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis until lung function has declined to 80 per cent.

(AQW 7459/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer to my answer to AQW 7217/17-22 & AQW 7218/17-22 combined.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what steps he is taking to assist people diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis to obtain early and effective access to the anti-fibrotic drugs, Pirfenidone and Nintedanib.

(AQW 7460/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer to my answer to AQW 7217/17-22 & AQW 7218/17-22 combined.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health how many women are currently on a waiting list for a hysterectomy, broken down by (i) Health and Social Care Trust; and (ii) length of waiting time.

(AQW 7532/17-22)

Mr Swann: On the 30th June 2020, there were 1,239 patients waiting for a hysterectomy. These cases are broken down by HSC Trust and number of weeks waiting in Table 1 overleaf.

Table 1: Number of patients waiting for a hysterectomy as at 30th June 2020

HSC Trust	Number of Weeks Waiting						Total Waiting
	0-6 weeks	6-13 weeks	13-21 weeks	21-26 weeks	26-52 weeks	>52 weeks	
Belfast	19	4	30	17	88	129	287
Northern	20	5	28	29	61	36	179
South Eastern	18	13	19	14	68	305	437
Southern	13	8	27	12	69	54	183
Western	9	5	23	16	48	52	153
Total	79	35	127	88	334	576	1,239

Source: DoH Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to extend access to Pirfenidone and Nintedanib drugs for people diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis, regardless of lung function.

(AQW 7621/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer to my answer to AQW 7217/17-22 & AQW 7218/17-22 combined.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health whether the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust are on target to reopen the Downe Hospital Emergency Department on 19 October 2020 as planned; and whether the rise in COVID-19 cases will impact on the planned opening.

(AQW 7723/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer you to the statement published by the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust on 6 October 2020 regarding the Downe Hospital Emergency Department.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what is the quantified impact on prostate cancer diagnoses in 2020 of the focus on COVID-19.

(AQW 7725/17-22)

Mr Swann: The NI Cancer Registry (NICR) reported in August 2020 that, for the period from 1st March to 15th August 2020, the number of patients with first pathology samples indicating prostate cancer is 22% lower than the annual average in 2017-2019. This is mainly due to a 34% reduction in referrals for urology cancers over the COVID-19 surge period up to August 2020.

Cancer diagnostic services have been restarted as part of Trust plans under the Strategic Rebuilding Framework which I published in June. This recognised the severe impact of COVID-19 and challenged Trusts to reset these services as quickly and as safely as possible. Red flag cancer referrals are now recovering to near usual levels and this is being monitored.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health to detail the services that are (i) located in; and (ii) planned to be located, in the Mid-Ulster Hospital.

(AQW 7750/17-22)

Mr Swann:

(i) The following services are provided at Mid Ulster Hospital:

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| ■ Cataract centre | ■ Minor Injuries Unit |
| ■ Children's unit | ■ Occupational therapy |
| ■ Continence service | ■ Ophthalmology |
| ■ Community dental services | ■ Orthoptics |
| ■ Community integrated teams | ■ Outpatients services |
| ■ Community rehabilitation ward | ■ Physiotherapy |
| ■ Day Surgery Unit | ■ Podiatry |
| ■ Dietetics | ■ Psychological therapy services |
| ■ Endoscopy Suite | ■ Radiology and diagnostics |
| ■ Hospital Diversion Nursing Team | ■ Recovery services |
| ■ Mental health clinics | ■ Rheumatology and Neurology OT |
| ■ Midwifery clinics | ■ Sexual health |

There is also a Minor injuries unit which is open Monday to Friday from 9 am – 5 pm and is closed on Bank Holidays.

(ii) There are no plans to change the service provision on the Mid-Ulster site at present.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to protect rehabilitation services as the pandemic enters its next phase and to address the issues faced by people indirectly impacted by COVID-19.

(AQW 7785/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department continues to work closely with health service colleagues to ensure the delivery of rehabilitation services during the pandemic. Innovative practices such as virtual technology have been used, where appropriate, across the HSC Trusts to deliver rehabilitation services to meet service-users' needs.

All HSC Trusts will continue to monitor the ever-changing challenges arising from the pandemic and they have robust mechanisms in place to assess their capacity to deal with the number and acuity of COVID-19 cases amongst patients and service users and the number of staff absences as a result of COVID-19.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how he will improve access to rehabilitation for people with neurological conditions like multiple sclerosis.

(AQW 7786/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Regional Review of Neurology Services is tasked with identifying the optimum configuration of neurology services for the next 10-15 years. As outlined in the Review's interim report a work stream, chaired by Dr Gavin McDonnell, has been established to improve care pathways for people with long term neurological conditions. This includes MS, Epilepsy, Parkinson's and Functional Neurological Disorders. As outlined in the Rebuilding HSC Services Strategic Framework, however, the Regional Review is currently paused, with resources redirected to rebuilding and surge planning.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health what action he is taking to help older people who are more likely to be at risk from extended periods of loneliness as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 7839/17-22)

Mr Swann: Addressing loneliness and social isolation is a vital theme within a number of existing Department of Health policies which have the overall objective of improving the health and wellbeing of the population.

The Department is represented on the All Party Group on Loneliness which was formed following a series of all-party roundtables and policy events at Stormont in 2019 and 2020. In addition the Department is now part of a 4-country Group in the UK and we are liaising with counterpart policy leads to learn and share best practice.

The Department are also seeking partnership with counterparts in ROI, and beyond, to learn and share from others experiences and innovative approaches to tackle loneliness and social isolation in relation to health and wellbeing.

The Institute of Public Health in Ireland is represented on my Department's Reform Board for Adult Social Care. They have carried out research into loneliness on an all island basis. We are liaising with them to further investigate their research and specifically the research that relates to Northern Ireland.

The Department has set up monitoring of loneliness via different surveys for adults and children. This will allow us to look at loneliness in conjunction with other health information, including general health and mental health as well as health behaviours.

A scoping exercise within the Department's policy areas and across the HSC including Trusts and DOH ALBs, is underway, to further identify policies; strategies, programmes and initiatives in place (including funding/investment) and those that are under development that contribute to addressing loneliness and isolation that impact on health and wellbeing, linked to the Department's priorities and outcomes.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health why there is a delay in the roll out of the winter flu vaccine.
(AQW 7953/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is no delay. The seasonal flu vaccination programme commenced on time in keeping with its official start date of 1 October. Some elements of the programme commenced slightly earlier as an amount of vaccine stock was received in the latter half of September.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health what measures are in place to monitor the other impacts of lockdown, in terms of issues such as mental health and economic wellbeing.
(AQW 8060/17-22)

Mr Swann: The potential impact of lockdown on the mental wellbeing of our population is addressed in the Covid 19 Mental Health Response Plan published on 19 May. A mental health and resilience work stream has been created to ensure a coherent, cross-departmental and cross-sectoral strategic approach, and the need to respond using evidence based support and interventions is a theme of the plan.

To ensure that the response to the impact on mental health is evidence based my Department are monitoring key statistics in mental health services, such as referrals to secondary care, waiting lists, the number of in-patient admissions and discharges and daily receive updates of mental health bed usage. My Department is also working closely with the HSC Board and HSC Trusts to understand the demand on services.

Further to this, my Department has close relationships with external actors that are actively engaging in research into the impact of the pandemic on mental health. Data from such research help to inform the development of my Department's mental health response.

My Department also works with key stakeholders to ensure that the most relevant new research and analysis is being considered.

In terms of economic wellbeing, this is a matter for the Department of Economy.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health what capital investment is planned for (i) Craigavon Area Hospital; and (ii) Lurgan Hospital, in each of the next five years, broken down project.
(AQW 8076/17-22)

Mr Swann:

(i) The table below details the planned capital investment at Craigavon Area Hospital in each of the next 5 years;

Project	21/22 £'000	22/23 £'000	23/24 £'000	24/25 £'000	25/26 £'000
2nd CT Scanner	5,684	176			
Low Voltage Works	1,500	2,000	1,500	1,500	644

The Trust has also identified £8.3m of refurbishment and estates projects at Craigavon Area Hospital to be progressed over the next 5 years from general capital allocations, subject to future budget availability.

In response to the Department's 10 year capital planning exercise earlier this year, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust submitted the following proposals for Craigavon Area Hospital:

- Redevelopment of Craigavon Area Hospital Phase 1
- Additional bed Capacity
- Re-provide Day Surgery Unit.

I will consider these proposals alongside other capital investment priorities. However the ability to take forward new capital projects will only be possible if significant additional capital resources are made available.

- (ii) The Trust has also identified £1.4m of refurbishment and estates projects at Lurgan Hospital to be progressed over the next 5 years from general capital allocations, subject to future budget availability.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health, in light of residents' concerns of noxious gas odours in the Colin area, West Belfast, for his assessment of the associated health risks.

(AQW 8110/17-22)

Mr Swann: Neither the Public Health Agency nor my Department have received any information regarding odours in the Colin area of West Belfast.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to develop an autonomous surgical podiatry service.

(AQW 8113/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have established a Regional Orthopaedic Network which is working to rebuild and transform elective orthopaedic services across Health and Social Care Trusts and to ensure all available theatre capacity is used as effectively as possible. As part of that work, the Network will consider new models of care for Orthopaedic Surgery, and has agreed to establish a work stream which will consider the potential to establish a podiatric surgery service in Northern Ireland. The most appropriate model for the service will be subject to clinical advice.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health how effective face coverings are in preventing the spread of viruses other than COVID-19.

(AQW 8118/17-22)

Mr Swann: Face coverings are one element in the range of public health measures that everyone is advised to adhere to in order to minimise the risk of infection from the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Face coverings provide additional protection in combination with hand washing, social distancing and contact surface hygiene in preventing the spread of any viruses. They can help on occasions when social distancing may not be possible or practicable.

However it is still very important to follow existing guidance to:

- maintain social distancing
- wash your hands frequently
- don't touch your face
- avoid touching shared surfaces if you are out of your home and wash your hands afterwards if this has been unavoidable.

More information is available at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/health-protection-coronavirus-restrictions-northern-ireland-regulations-2020>

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Health what guidance his Department or the Public Health Agency has given to GPs regarding the part they play in risk assessments for the return to school of clinically vulnerable children, or children from households with a clinically vulnerable individual residing there.

(AQW 8140/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Education has published 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for School and Educational Settings in Northern Ireland'. The guidance is available at the link below:

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-school-and-educational-settings-northern-ireland>

The guidance provides information to help mitigate risk in schools and includes the requirement for risk assessments of individual school settings to ensure that health and safety legislation and guidance is fully adhered to. The responsibility for the risk assessment lies with the school.

Section 7 of the guidance - 'Pupil Attendance' - underlines the general expectation that all pupils should return to their school setting even if they are clinically extremely vulnerable and were previously shielding or have family members who are clinically extremely vulnerable who were previously shielding.

The guidance states that if pupils who have been previously shielding or those with a family member who was previously shielding have particular concerns, advice may be sought from the pupil's/their family member's GP or hospital consultant. This may be shared with the school so that the school can determine whether it is appropriate to take any additional actions over and above those already in place in order to reduce the risk further or if the existing actions that are in place within the school setting are sufficient.

Whilst a GP/clinician can advise an extremely vulnerable person about their own medical condition, particular risks related to this and how these might be mitigated by the individual themselves, it is not for the GP/clinician to assess the level of

risk within the school setting in relation to a clinically extremely vulnerable pupil or to their household contacts. Nor is the extremely vulnerable person's GP/clinician in a position to advise school principals/leaders on specific actions to be implemented in the school setting.

The DE guidance recognises that there will be a small number of children where medical guidance would be to refrain from attending school. The vast majority of these children would routinely be advised not to attend school even outside pandemic period due to the risk of infections other than COVID-19.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health whether group training sessions for City of Derry Swimming Club can continue under the new restrictions introduced in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area.

(AQW 8141/17-22)

Mr Swann: The restrictions introduced in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area on 6 October prohibited group indoor training sessions in that area. The Northern Ireland wide restrictions introduced on 16 October replace the Derry City and Strabane restrictions and these new restrictions also prohibit group indoor training sessions, including in swimming pools.

Further information is available at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-guidance>

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health, in light of the ending of early medical abortion provision by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust on 5 October, whether he will commission abortion services to which women are legally entitled.

(AQW 8168/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Ministerial Code requires me to bring the commissioning of Abortion services to the attention of the Executive Committee as it is a significant and controversial matter and outside the scope of the Programme for Government. It also cuts across the responsibilities of two or more Ministers. As such, it is a matter to be discussed and agreed by the Executive Committee.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Health what is the current overall waiting time for outpatients.

(AQW 8210/17-22)

Mr Swann: Outpatient waiting times are reported by my Department on a monthly and quarterly basis. These publications refer to the position at the end of a given month/quarter, detailing how many patients are still waiting for a first consultant led outpatient appointment broken down by HSC Trust, Specialty and length of time waiting.

Provisional monthly Outpatient Waiting Times information is published at the following link:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/interim-waiting-times-reports>

Quarterly National Statistics on Outpatient Waiting Times Information is published at the following link:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/outpatient-waiting-times>

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact self-isolation has had on peoples' mental health, especially those already suffering from mental illness.

(AQW 8219/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am fully aware of the impact self isolation has had on people's mental health, especially those already suffering from mental illness during Covid-19 restrictions. Since the beginning of the pandemic I have been mindful that the measures that we have needed to impose to control the spread of the virus need to be mitigated as much as possible in order to protect from the effect of restrictions, including self isolation, on people's daily lives. I have also clearly indicated, along with my Executive colleagues, that mental health is a priority, and that the restrictions will not be kept in place for any longer than is absolutely necessary.

To mitigate the effect of restrictions including self isolation, a mental Health and Resilience Strategic Working group has been established to coordinate, support and drive the short, medium and longer term response to the psychological impact of the pandemic. A Mental health and Emotional Wellbeing Surge Cell is also in place with partners from statutory and non-statutory sectors.

In acknowledgment of the extra pressure placed on the population's mental health during the pandemic, 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.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on bringing uplifts in dental pay into line with the rest of the UK.
(AQW 8233/17-22)

Mr Swann: 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 Mullan asked the Minister of Health whether staff at Altnagelvin, who are employed by the Western Health and Social Care Trust, have to use their annual leave in instances where they are required to self-isolate for 14 days; and to detail the policy in terms of taking leave in this regard.
(AQW 8267/17-22)

Mr Swann: Staff who are employed by the Western Health and Social Care Trust and who have to self-isolate are not expected to use Annual Leave. Line Managers will record this absence as COVID Special Leave.

Staff must contact their Manager as soon as they are symptomatic. If this occurs at work, staff should self-isolate and immediately telephone their Manager before they go home. Staff will be advised of local testing arrangements for COVID-19 by their Line Manager.

Staff are advised that they must comply with the COVID advice and isolate for the required duration.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health what bids he is planning to submit for the October Monitoring round which will assist, support and enhance mental health and suicide prevention work.
(AQW 8293/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have bid for Covid-19 funding for mental health and suicide prevention - this process runs alongside, but is separate to, the October Monitoring Round. This includes £222k for an adult acute mental health bed management network, £1m for additional nurses and £0.98m for psychological therapies waiting lists.

This bid builds on my successful bid the June Monitoring round for approximately £2m for mental health and suicide prevention. This includes funding for the Mental Health Action Plan published on 19 May 2020.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many ambulance staff in each Health and Social Care Trust have tested positive for COVID-19.
(AQW 8296/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information provided by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) indicates that 69 of their staff had tested positive for COVID-19 up to 14th October 2020. This information is not available broken down by Health & Social Care Trust.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health (i) how much Personal Protective Equipment is stored in Health and Social Care facilities; (ii) how much is being stored in private/rented storage; and (iii) what is the cost of such storage.
(AQW 8320/17-22)

Mr Swann: Due to the volumes of PPE required, particularly during the current Covid-19 pandemic, it has been necessary for Health and Social Care (HSC) organisations to store goods in both health owned premises as well as commercially rented property. While there has been an increase in the use of commercially rented storage facilities, HSC organisations also rent commercial premises for storage as part of normal business. Therefore, the costs presented below include normal business costs as well as those costs incurred specifically as a result of Covid-19.

Stock in hand of PPE is currently 368 million items of PPE of which 97% is centrally stored for onward distribution..

The split of storage of PPE and commercial cost of storage is as follows:

Organisation	Percentage (%) PPE in HSC owned storage	Percentage (%) PPE in Commercial Storage	Commercial Rent Costs per annum (£000)**
Belfast Trust	100	N/A	N/A
Business Services Organisation	-	100*	1,608
Northern Trust	12	88	90
NI Ambulance Service Trust	-	100	19

Organisation	Percentage (%) PPE in HSC owned storage	Percentage (%) PPE in Commercial Storage	Commercial Rent Costs per annum (£000)**
South Eastern Trust	100	N/A	N/A
Southern Trust***	-	100	40
Western Trust	6	94	37

* includes PPE stored in business as usual properties

** includes rates costs where applicable/known

*** Southern Trust is currently in the process of moving all PPE stocks to commercial storage as a temporary measure

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when he will sign off on overtime rates to be paid to Community Dentists who were redeployed to work in urgent dental care centres since the start of the pandemic.

(AQW 8347/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department is currently looking at a proposal to make a temporary amendment to Community Dentists Terms and Conditions of Service, which will allow for the payment of an additional hours rate. A proposal has been sent to the Department of Finance and correspondence is continuing between officials to come to a resolution.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail the support and advice available for people living with diabetes and their carers during the period of the Surge Plan.

(AQW 8348/17-22)

Mr Swann: Support and advice continue to be available for people living with diabetes during the current pandemic and diabetes services continue to be provided, although as in other areas of health and social care, these may be delivered differently with greater use made of technology and virtual clinics.

In respect of patient education to support people living with diabetes to self-manage their condition, educators have been trained to deliver more patient education programmes remotely and various online platforms are used to facilitate this, such as MyDESMOND, remote DAFNE and CHOICE programmes delivered via Zoom.

Dietetic input to treatment and care has continued via virtual clinics or follow-up on-line or via telephone, with urgent face to face contacts where necessary. In terms of podiatry, arrangements are in place to ensure that emergencies are seen within 48 hours, face to face contacts have also continued in addition to virtual contacts.

New and review appointments in Secondary Care have been uncompromised by COVID-19 and have continued as necessary. Newly diagnosed patients continue to be seen face to face with information and advice available through virtual and telephone follow-on reviews. Consultants can refer patients to a Diabetes Specialist Nurse and Diabetes Specialist Dietitian for follow-up. In antenatal/ gestational diabetes care, effective use has been made of virtual/remote sessions with speciality doctors to provide support and information to patients.

Insulin Pumps/Continuous Glucose Monitoring services have continued or re-commenced with virtual pre-pump assessments, pump starts and follow-ups in place and with home delivery for consumables where possible. Virtual sessions are in place to support the use of Freestyle Libre glucose monitoring system.

Any patient who has concerns about their diabetes can also engage with their GP, District Nurse or Health and Social Care Trust Diabetes team for support and information as necessary.

During the initial surge period, a Regional COVID-19 Diabetes Clinical Helpline was put in place to provide advice and support to people living with diabetes. The helpline, which operated between 7 April and 28 June, supported over 400 people and also provided advice and information to support health and social care professionals. The helpline is an example of the flexible and timely response of health and social care to ensure resilience in diabetes services. The potential to reinstate the helpline in the future is being kept under review.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail each occasion he formally agreed that the Westminster government would introduce a statutory instrument since taking up office.

(AQW 8367/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information requested is provided in the table below:

Date Agreed	Title of Statutory Instrument
24 Jun 2020	The European Qualifications (Health And Social Care Professionals) (EFTA States And Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020.

Date Agreed	Title of Statutory Instrument
15 Sep 2020	The Reciprocal and Cross-Border Healthcare (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020.
22 Sep 2020	The Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020.
23 Sep 2020	The Blood Safety and Quality (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020.
23 Sep 2020	The Quality and Safety of Organs Intended for Transplantation (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020.
23 Sep 2020	The Human Tissue (Quality and Safety for Human Application) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020.
13 Oct 2020	The Human Medicines (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020.
13 Oct 2020	Human Medicines (Coronavirus and Influenza) (Amendment) Regulations 2020.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail each occasion he has formally discussed the impact of Brexit with the Department of Health and Social Care.

(AQW 8369/17-22)

Mr Swann: Engagements of this nature take place at official level, are frequent, and cover all areas in relation to the delivery of Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland following the end of the Transition Period.

My officials brief me as to progress on these matters, and in turn, I and my Department provide regular updates to both the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Health.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health what his Department will do to support the Southern Health and Social Care Trust to recruit surgeons in order to sustain long-term surgical cover for Daisy Hill Hospital.

(AQW 8383/17-22)

Mr Swann: The general Surgical Department in Daisy Hill Hospital has funding for 6 consultant surgeons. Currently there are 5 substantive and one locum surgeon in post.

Acknowledging this position is set to change in the coming months, the Southern Trust have confirmed that they have made offers to 3 locum surgeons who were deemed to be suitable. The Trust is also proceeding to advertise 3 permanent posts.

In addition, under the Strategic Rebuilding Framework which I published in June, my Department oversees collaboration across all Trusts in order to maximise the continued delivery of surgical services on an equitable basis across the region within the prevailing COVID-19 challenges.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health what assurances he can give that the Emergency Department at the Royal Victoria Hospital is fully compliant with COVID-19 control measures at all times, including PPE and deep cleaning.

(AQW 8400/17-22)

Mr Swann: All staff working in the Emergency Department in the Royal Victoria Hospital have been trained in the principles of good infection control, personal protective equipment and are aware of the importance of deep cleaning.

The Emergency Department is reviewing its compliance with COVID-19 control measures on an ongoing basis.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many influenza vaccines will be administered this year.

(AQW 8406/17-22)

Mr Swann: Just over one million doses of influenza vaccine have been procured this year for use in the public flu vaccination programme. Additional support has been provided to help ensure that these vaccines are administered to those in the eligible groups. The programme commenced formally on the 1st of October. Ultimately, the number of doses administered will depend on the level of demand.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health to outline (i) what acute psychiatry services are currently delivered at the Downe Hospital; (ii) whether there is any plan to reconfigure acute psychiatry services in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust area; and (iii) how this reconfiguration will impact upon acute psychiatry services currently located in Downpatrick.

(AQW 8438/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- i There is an acute Mental Health Inpatient Unit (MHIPU) located within the confines of the Downe Hospital in Downpatrick. This unit was purpose built and opened in 2009, comprising 25 individual bedrooms with ensuite facilities.

- ii. The South Eastern Health and Social Care Board have submitted an Outline Business Case (OBC) for the relocation of all three of its geographically separate acute mental health inpatient units and its Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) onto the Tor Bank site in Dundonald, adjacent to the Ulster Hospital. The vision of this OBC is consistent with the mental health reform and modernisation agenda, in line with best practice developed elsewhere in the UK and the Trust continues to work with Commissioners and the Department of Health to bring this plan to fruition. No reconfiguration of community and outpatient services is planned.
- iii. It is planned that when the new single Inpatient Service is established, the MHIPU in Downpatrick will be used for the relocation and further development of the low secure/rehabilitation inpatient service, ensuring the continued presence of inpatient mental health care at the Downe Hospital.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health how many women were referred out of the jurisdiction of the Health and Social Care area in which they live for perinatal mental health inpatient services in each year since 2015.
(AQW 8465/17-22)

Mr Swann: At present in Northern Ireland, mental health support for new or expectant mothers is provided in the community through general mental health services.

One patient transferred on an Extra Contractual Referral to a facility in Scotland for perinatal care and treatment in 2016/17. Trust information systems do not hold the level of detail required to provide a response to the number of out of trust admissions within Northern Ireland.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the facilities and arrangements in place in each Health and Social Care Trust for mental health inpatient services to cater for new mothers and fathers who are seeking treatment to continue to have access to their children.

(AQW 8468/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information that you have requested is detailed in the table below.

HSC Trust	Facilities
Northern	Each of the 4 acute admissions wards have a designated family room.
Southern	Within the inpatient wards in Bluestone Hospital (with the exception of the Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit), there is a designated family room. Specialist teleconferencing equipment has been purchased and installed in Silverwood ward for the specific purpose of promoting post-natal visiting within the Unit. There is also virtual visiting equipment available through the Virtual Visiting Service in Craigavon Area Hospital, which has been accessed by patients in the Bluestone Unit.
Western	Grangewood Hospital and the admissions wards at Tyrone and Fermanagh Hospital each have dedicated family rooms. In addition, there is one dedicated single en suite bedroom with a living room and enclosed outdoor area at Grangewood for mother and baby admissions.
South Eastern	There are designated family rooms within each ward. Although unable to accommodate overnight stays, all new mothers are allocated a single room to facilitate regular and extended bonding visits.
Belfast	A child contact room is available in both Shannon Clinic and the Adult Mental Health Inpatient Centre at Belfast City Hospital. CAMHS regional facility Beechcroft, has a parents' overnight room and a family flat.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 2222/17-22, whether he plans to review the funding arrangements for hospice and palliative care services, including plans to fully fund adult and children's hospice care.
(AQW 8522/17-22)

Mr Swann: Guidance put in place in 2004 introduced 50/50 funding for agreed adult inpatient hospice services with effect from 2004/05 and 50% funding for agreed adult community hospice services with effect from 2005/06.

The Health and Social Care Board has recently completed a review of its contract funding for adult hospice services as a result of which a total funding shortfall of £867,360 was identified between the 2019/20 funding provided to hospices when compared against benchmarked costs assessed as part of the review process. This additional funding will be provided to hospices backdated to 1 April 2019 and uplifted in line with annual inflationary uplift thereafter. The review also proposed that any uplift to the baseline contract funding based on the review analysis should be applied to those contracts that are in place with Health and Social Care Trusts.

The Health and Social Care Board has recently approved a 4% uplift for 2020/21 to the value of its Service Level Agreements held with hospices in Northern Ireland (for Northern Ireland Hospice this includes both adult and children's services).

The 50/50 funding arrangement does not apply to children's hospice services. Separate commissioning and funding arrangements are in place with the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice for children's services. In addition to the core contract

funding, following the closure of the Horizon West children's hospice, my Department agreed to fund an additional bed at the NI Children's Hospice at Horizon House for 3 years from 2018/19 on a 50:50 basis.

Since 2018, a Paediatric and Life Limited Service (PALLs) has been commissioned from the NI Children's Hospice. The service provides a specialist nursing role to support children, families and clinicians in recognising and managing end of life needs as well as access to a dedicated bed in the NI Children's Hospice or in the child's own home. The funding for the PALLs service was made available initially through Confidence and Supply transformation funding. My Department has made this funding available for a further year in 2020/21 to ensure the continued delivery of the service by the NI Children's hospice.

Given the current funding arrangements for adult hospice services date back to 2004, consideration will be given to reviewing these in light of the changing context and demographics for palliative care.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health for an update on discussions on updated advice for individuals who were shielding until 1 August given the increase in COVID-19 cases recently.

(AQW 8551/17-22)

Mr Swann: At this point in time, there is no change to the decision to pause shielding which came into effect from 1 August 2020. It is important to note however, that those who were shielding still need to be extremely careful because they remain more vulnerable than the general population.

I am very mindful of the increasing risk posed by the level of community transmission we now have and of the need to reduce this to help protect those who are most vulnerable. As the rate of infection has begun to increase, a range of actions have been taken to address this, including introducing the restrictions that are now in place across Northern Ireland

My Department continues to monitor the situation and the need for further advice for those who were shielding is being kept under continuous review. The Chief Medical Officer and his team are working to assess our approach to the current risks presented by COVID-19 and advice will be updated as appropriate if necessary.

In the meantime, people who are clinically extremely vulnerable should continue to scrupulously follow the advice we have given to help keep themselves safe, including limiting household contacts, social distancing, hand washing and wearing a face covering. In addition, it is vital that everyone in our community plays their part in keeping themselves and others safe by following the public health advice and adhering to the regulations and guidance.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health on what date was he made aware of the proposal for an urgent care centre at the Downe Hospital.

(AQW 8583/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department was advised on 2 October of the plans to open an urgent care centre at the Downe Hospital.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health for the location of the new acute psychiatric unit in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust; and whether its opening will result in the closure of other units in the area.

(AQW 8585/17-22)

Mr Swann: The South Eastern Health and Social Care Board have submitted an Outline Business Case for the relocation of all three of its geographically separate acute mental health inpatient units and its Psychiatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) onto the Tor Bank site in Dundonald, adjacent to the Ulster Hospital.

The Trust's Business Case is currently with Department of Finance for approval but this will not be approved until an updated commissioner's support letter is received into the Department. The project will be funded on a phased basis subject to availability of funding.

The acute mental health wards in the Downe Hospital, Lagan Valley Hospital and Ulster Hospital, and the PICU in Downshire Hospital will relocate to the new unit.

The existing low secure / rehabilitation provisions in the Downshire Hospital will be moved to the mental health unit in the Downe hospital, ensuring the continued presence of inpatient mental health care at the Downe Hospital.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health to detail the cost to his Department of procedures and treatments on patients carried out by each private health provider in Northern Ireland in (i) 2015; (ii) 2016; (iii) 2017; (iii) 2018; (iv) 2019; and (v) 2020 to date.

(AQW 8615/17-22)

Mr Swann: HSC Trusts contract directly with private health care providers. My Department can supply information on the total amount paid to the private health care sector in each of the last five years, and to date in 2020/21. Details are provided in the table below:

	2015/16 £m	2016/17 £m	2017/18 £m	2018/19 £m	2019/20 £m	2020/21 (to date) £m
Total	35.15	23.53	8.29	17.41	9.39	C16.42

Note: includes costs for assessments, diagnostics and treatments.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health whether nurses and Health Service staff, on any kind of employment contract working with the Health Service, including those working on the ward and administrative workers, and who have been in contact with a positive COVID-19 person, will be instructed to self-isolate for 14 days.

(AQW 8619/17-22)

Mr Swann: If a nurse or other healthcare worker has had close recent contact with someone in the community who has COVID-19, they will be contacted by a representative from the Public Health Agency.

If as a consequence they are advised by the Public Health Agency to self-isolate for 14 days, they must do so. It is important that they notify their line manager and Occupational Health as soon as possible. Where they can be facilitated to work from home, they should do so.

If a HSC work colleague has received a positive COVID-19 test result and following a risk assessment the healthcare worker is deemed to be a close contact, they will be contacted by their employer's contact tracing team.

The same guidance applies, where if they are advised to self-isolate for 14 days they must do so. Again it is important that they notify their line manager and Occupational Health as soon as possible. Where they can be facilitated to work from home they should do so.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether he will consider a dedicated dual diagnosis team, along with smaller assertive outreach team in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 8621/17-22)

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.

To ensure that those with dual diagnosis get the best care and treatment available, both the upcoming substance use strategy and mental health strategy will consider the issue of dual diagnosis.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether his Department intends to carry out a full needs analysis for those seeking help for poor mental health, mental health crisis, and drug and alcohol addiction.

(AQW 8624/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is aware of the significant mental health needs here in Northern Ireland.

On Monday 19 October results of The Mental Health of Children & Parents in Northern Ireland Youth Wellbeing Prevalence Study will be launched. This is the first ever prevalence study for children and young people in Northern Ireland. The findings will help support the work to develop the new mental health strategy and inform new service provisions.

For adults, the Mental Health Action Plan, action 15.2, calls for a prevalence study for adults. This will help future developments of new services.

Overall, the work to develop a new mental health strategy is evidence based, and include stakeholders from a large set of groups, including people with lived experience, professionals, community and voluntary sector, academics and others. This will ensure that the future of mental health services are based on analysed need and on recognised best practice.

As reflected in New Decade, New Approach, my Department is also leading on the development of a new substance use strategy to tackle the harm from alcohol and other drugs. Work to co-produce this new strategy has been undertaken and, subject to the demands placed on my Department by COVID-19, I plan to publish this document for formal public consultation in the near future.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health what assessment has been made of the impact on non-COVID-19 illnesses due to the first lock down earlier this year, including cancelled appointments and surgeries as a result of decisions to prioritise COVID-19 health care.

(AQW 8636/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department began the routine publication of monthly Management Information reports to highlight the impact of COVID-19 on various aspects of service, including waiting times and cancer treatments. These reports can be found at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/interim-waiting-times-reports>

Further to this, my Department has been monitoring the levels of elective inpatient, day case and regular attender appointments cancelled due to COVID-19 and related pressures. As at 16th October 2020, there had been 12,883 elective appointments cancelled up to 15th October. These data include appointments for surgeries and other procedures such as diagnostic tests.

The Strategic Rebuilding Framework which I published in June recognised the severe impact of appointment cancellations and challenged Trusts to reset these services as quickly and as safely as possible.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health what telephone answering resources are available to the Public Health Agency. (AQW 8670/17-22)

Mr Swann: PHA Reception can be contacted at 0300 555 0114 for Public Health Agency Headquarters and for all PHA sites apart from the Lisburn office, which can be contacted on 028 9266 5181. Call volumes to PHA Reception for the period 5 October to 11 October were 4,088 received calls.

The PHA Duty Room, whose role is to take calls from health professionals to deal with all public health outbreaks, including COVID-19 in care homes, schools and in the wider community operates from 9:00-17:00, followed by an out-of-hours on-call rota. The PHA Duty Room has 7 telephones, and 7 telephone lines - all with voicemail capability - for use during working hours. The out-of-hours on-call rota is managed by a single telephone. Approximately 1,000 calls per week are received by the PHA Duty Room.

If a call is made to the PHA Duty Room out-of-hours, a voicemail message informs the caller to contact Ambulance Control and to ask for the out-of-hours Public Health Doctor to be paged. The average number of calls to the out-of-hours Public Health Doctor at the weekend is 20 per day.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what additional funding his Department has received, and what subsequent plans are in place, to increase the number of available inpatient beds for the treatment for COVID-19. (AQW 8671/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Surge Planning Strategic Framework and the individual Trust surge plans, which I published on 6 October 2020, ensure that there are comprehensive plans in place to address both further COVID-19 surges and winter pressures.

As part of this surge planning, the Critical Care Network's regional surge plan provides the ability to flex ICU capacity to a maximum of 158 ICU beds. In addition, to lift pressures from across the system, I have commissioned an additional Nightingale facility on the Whiteabbey Hospital site. This will be an intermediate care facility, providing 100 additional 'step down beds', which will be operational on a phased basis from mid-November 2020.

The resource costs associated with the Nightingale hospital at Whiteabbey have been included in the bid to the Department of Finance (DoF), which the Department made in respect of the £600m being held centrally for Health. The capital costs have been included in a bid to DoF as part of the October monitoring round. The Department is waiting for the outcome of these bids.

It is important to note that the key limiting factor on additional beds is the availability of staff. While we are taking steps to address this, including relaunching the workforce appeal, we know that operating at peak surge levels, particularly in ICU, is not sustainable for long and will have a major impact on HSC services, including complex elective surgery.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health for an update on the development of a surgical podiatry service. (AQW 8675/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have established a Regional Orthopaedic Network which is working to rebuild and transform elective orthopaedic services across Health and Social Care Trusts and to ensure all available theatre capacity is used as effectively as possible. As part of that work, the Network will consider new models of care for Orthopaedic Surgery, and has agreed to establish a work stream which will consider the potential to establish a podiatric surgery service in Northern Ireland. The most appropriate model for the service will be subject to clinical advice.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health how many hospital patients who have tested positive for COVID-19 had been admitted for other reasons. (AQW 8683/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of hospital patients who have tested positive for COVID-19, but were admitted for other reasons, is not available.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health to detail the average number of available inpatient and day case beds across health and social care, for each of the last seven months. (AQW 8686/17-22)

Mr Swann: The average number of inpatient and day case beds available is provided in Table 1 overleaf.

Table 1: Average number of inpatient and day case beds available, March – October 2020¹

Month	Beds Available
March ²	3942
April	3752
May	3454
June	3638
July	3737
August	3701
September	3699
October ³	3655
Average across period	3690

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for an update on the personal protective equipment (PPE) acquired by the Business Services Organisation between August and October 2020; and what type of PPE has been acquired during the same period.

(AQW 8703/17-22)

Mr Swann: Table 1 below reports on volumes of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) product by type, for orders placed between 1 August 2020 and 18 October 2020. Table 2 reports on volumes of PPE product by type, which have been delivered to BSO stores during the same time period.

It should be noted that orders and delivery schedules are such that they will not neatly align to specified time periods. In addition, there can be lead times for deliveries and delivery schedules associated with each order, for example while an order may be placed, product may be delivered on a monthly basis for 12 months.

Table 1 – Order volumes placed between 01/08/2020 and 18/10/2020

PPE Item	Volume (000's)
Apron	6,000
FFP3 Respirator Mask	5,713
Type 11R Facemask	216,042
Gloves (nitrile)	50,980
Gowns – fluid repellent	0
Face shields - visors	0
Total PPE Items Ordered in the period	278,734

Table 2 – Delivery volumes received between 01/08/2020 and 18/10/2020

PPE Item	Volume (000's)
Apron	27,572
FFP3 Respirator Mask	405
Type 11R Facemask	40,876
Gloves (nitrile)	131,284
Gowns – fluid repellent	2,724
Face shields - visors	4,804
Total PPE Items delivered in the period	207,666

- 1 This includes the majority of beds available at the majority of hospital sites. It does not include Ambulatory, Virtual, Dialysis or Maternity Wards. In addition it excludes Mental Health Units, including Waterside Hospital in Western HSCT.
- 2 March 2020 refers to the average beds available from 10th March, when recording of this data began.
- 3 October 2020 refers to the average beds available to 14th October, the latest date of information currently held.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Health how he will ensure that the suspension of short break provision in the Western Health and Social Care Trust is restored; and when these services will be reopened.

(AQW 8710/17-22)

Mr Swann: Short break provision at The Cottages in the Western Health and Social Care Trust has been temporarily suspended due to COVID-19 related staff absence and isolation. The Western Trust have taken this decision in line their Winter Surge Plan.

I understand this decision will be kept under regular review and the Trust are seeking to recommence the service as soon as they possibly can. I understand how critical these services are to families and my officials are working with the Western Trust to ensure that every possibility which would allow the centre to re-open has been explored.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health (i) what current information about adoption support services are issued by his Department; and (ii) when the Adoption and Children (Northern Ireland) Bill will be introduced to the Assembly.

(AQW 8714/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) My Department does not issue information about adoption support services. The HSC NI Adoption and Foster Care service provides current information about adoption support services. <https://adoptionandfostercare.hscni.net/>
- (ii) I intend to seek the Executive's agreement to introduce the Adoption and Children (Northern Ireland) Bill in the Assembly in the current mandate. Strategy for Reducing Suicides amongst Students and Young People

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health for an assessment of his Department's strategy for reducing suicides amongst students and young people.

(AQW 8724/17-22)

Mr Swann: Support services for students are primarily a matter for the Department for the Economy. However the health system is collaborating with higher education bodies to improve mental health outcomes for students.

The Public Health Agency provides support through its role in the Student Wellbeing Network Forum and by funding the production, print and distribution of Minding Your Head: Student Guide to Mental Health booklets. These have been updated and circulated electronically this year due to COVID. In addition £13,800 was allocated by the PHA in 2019/20 towards mental health resources and services for students.

The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust is also part resourcing a pilot with Queens University Belfast and the University Of Ulster for students with a term time Belfast post code to provide a dedicated and responsive student mental health service, with the aim of better engagement and better clinical outcomes through early intervention.

Finally, it is important to note that mental health services are available to anyone that requires support and this has continued throughout the pandemic.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health how many scheduled operations have been cancelled in each Health and Social Care Trust since March 2020.

(AQW 8743/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of operations cancelled due to COVID-19 is not available.

Information is available however on hospital appointments cancelled between 18th March and 15th October 2020. During this period some 12,883 elective appointments were cancelled due to COVID-19 and related pressures. These data include appointments for surgeries and other procedures such as diagnostic tests and are broken down by HSC Trust in Table 1 overleaf.

Table 1: Elective Hospital Appointments Cancelled, 18th March – 15th October 2020

HSC Trust	Elective Appointments Cancelled
Belfast	4,558
Northern	1,803
South Eastern	2,818
Southern	1,780
Western	1,924

The Strategic Rebuilding Framework which I published in June recognised the severe impact of appointment cancellations and challenged Trusts to reset these services as quickly and as safely as possible.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether he has returned any funds under any budgetary monitoring rounds this year.

(AQW 8745/17-22)

Mr Swann: £2.5m of Capital funding was returned from the Mother and Children's Flagship project in June monitoring.

£6.3m of Resource funding was returned in October monitoring relating to a reduction in Agenda for Change pay pressures.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health whether patients, who are admitted to hospital for non-COVID-19-related symptoms but test positive on arrival, are classified as COVID-19 hospital admissions for statistical reporting purposes.

(AQW 8755/17-22)

Mr Swann: Patients admitted to hospital for non-COVID-19 reasons but who subsequently test positive are classified as COVID-19 admissions for statistical reporting purposes.

Information on COVID-19 hospital admissions is published daily on the Department's COVID-19 dashboard and is available at the link below:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates>

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail his contingency plan for the Western Health and Social Care Trust when Altnagelvin hospital reaches capacity in terms of COVID-19 admissions.

(AQW 8822/17-22)

Mr Swann: On 6th October 2020, the Surge Planning Strategic Framework and individual Trust surge plans were published on the Department's website.

As during the first wave of COVID-19, these plans include measures to increase ICU surge capacity in incremental stages, using the Belfast City Hospital Tower as the regional ICU Nightingale facility. Should it be required, the Critical Care Network's regional surge plan provides the ability to flex capacity to a maximum of 158 ICU beds.

I have also commissioned an additional Nightingale facility on the Whiteabbey Hospital site. This will be a regional intermediate care facility, providing 100 additional 'step down beds', which will be operational on a phased basis from mid-November 2020. Nightingale two will aim to improve patient flow from hospitals into the community and to free up acute bed space, easing wider pressures on the system.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many (i) inpatient; and (ii) day case beds were available at Causeway Hospital on (a) 1 March 2020; (b) 1 July 2020; and (c) 1 October 2020.

(AQW 8841/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of beds available at Causeway Hospital on 1st March is not centrally available. A data collection was developed from 10th March 2020 to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on bed occupancy levels, however this does not distinguish between inpatient and day case beds. Table 1 presents the number of beds available at Causeway Hospital on 10th March, 1st July and 1st October 2020.

Table 1: Number of beds available at Causeway Hospital

Date	Number of beds available
10th March	172
1st July	164
1st October	172

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the rebuilding process for the health and social care services within the prevailing COVID-19 situation.

(AQW 8879/17-22)

Mr Swann: When I launched the Rebuilding HSC Services Strategic Framework on 9 June 2020, I was very clear that restarting services would be very much tempered with any future surges of Covid-19, but that we had to maximise service delivery in the prevailing Covid-19 context.

Under the rebuilding agenda we have, to date, published the way forward for Daycase Elective Care Centres, Orthopaedics and proposals for changes to our Urgent and Emergency Care system which were long overdue.

We have also restarted many services that were paused during the first wave of the pandemic building up service provision incrementally each month since June. Indeed, at a regional level, Trusts exceeded their planned activity for the months of July and August. For example, Trusts had planned for 52,584 outpatient procedures but delivered 63,971.

Given the precarious current situation, I have decided not to publish Rebuild Plans for October to December. I recently published a Strategic Surge Framework and individual Trust Surge Plans. These set out how the HSC system will manage further Covid-19 surges, whilst still trying to maintain as many essential services as possible.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what data his Department holds regarding children with malnutrition.
(AQW 8885/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department holds data on children that have been admitted to hospital with a diagnosis of malnutrition. There have been 17 cases of children aged under 18 years that have been admitted to hospital for this condition over the last five years, from 2015/16 to 2019/20.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health whether businesses designated as close contact services, who also function as a retail business, can continue to operate under the new Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, provided they open solely for retail purposes and do not offer any close contact services.

(AQW 9043/17-22)

Mr Swann: Under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, close contact services such as the provision of beauty and aesthetics treatments, hairdressers, massage therapies, tattooing, body piercing and services in spas were required to close on Friday 16 October 2020.

Businesses providing close contact services that also function as a retail business will be permitted to continue operating for retail purposes. However, the business must not offer or provide any close contact services or any other business or service required to close under the Regulations.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Health what discussions he has had with Parkinson's UK about their Get It On Time campaign, to ensure people with Parkinson's disease in hospital and care settings receive their medication when required.

(AQO 939/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have not yet had any discussions with Parkinson's UK regarding their "Get it On Time" campaign. I had agreed to a meeting with representatives of the organisation on 19 March but unfortunately that meeting had to be postponed due to the onset of COVID-19 to allow me and the health service to concentrate on our response to the pandemic. My officials continue to work closely with the Northern Ireland Neurological Charities Alliance who represent a number of charities, including Parkinson's UK.

Health and Social Care Trust clinical pharmacy teams work to promote awareness of the list of critical medicines among medical and nursing staff and that every effort should be made to avoid omitted and delayed doses of critical medicines for people with Parkinson's. Patients may also undertake routine self-administration of their medicines where a specific local procedure approved by the Trust's Drugs and Therapeutics Committee.

As part of the Regional Review of Neurology Services, a specific work stream has been established to determine how care pathways for those with long-term neurological conditions, including Parkinson's, can be improved. My Department will ensure that the voice of service users and carers is central to the Review of Neurology Services and importantly, the Northern Ireland Neurological Charities Alliance are members of the Neurology Review Team.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Health when attention deficit disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder assessments for children of primary school age will recommence.

(AQO 942/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information regarding how many cancer patients awaiting treatment in each Health and Social Care Trust have had appointments cancelled since March 2020 is not centrally available.

I can say that, in relation to appointments, between 18th March 2020 and 13th October 2020, there were 14 confirmed cancer and a further 2,970 red flag suspect cancer cancellations in relation to elective inpatient, day case and regular attender appointments.

While most cancer diagnostics continued throughout the surge period, measures put in place to ensure patient safety in the context of COVID inevitably impacted capacity and, when compounded with patient reluctance to attend hospital for diagnostic appointments, has led to an increased back log.

One of my primary aims in the difficult weeks ahead will be to ensure the continued delivery high quality diagnosis and cancer services, in COVID-19 safe spaces and using the independent sector hospitals where appropriate, providing of course it is safe to do so.

However, we should be under no illusions that these are challenging times. Services are already coming under pressure and as the number of COVID positive in-patients increases, this will have a negative impact on our ability to maintain other services.

Mr McCann asked the Minister of Health whether existing supply lines for personal protective equipment are adequate to meet the needs of the Health Service during a second COVID-19 surge.

(AQO 943/17-22)

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 Allister asked the Minister of Health how many abortions have been performed since the change in the law on 31 March 2020.

(AQO 944/17-22)

Mr Swann: At 14 October 2020, my Department had received 719 notifications of termination.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister of Health for an update on the Workforce Appeal.

(AQO 945/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Workforce Appeal was launched in March 2020 and generated a total of almost 19,000 expressions of interest. Almost 12,000 of these converted into formal applications based on their occupation, experience and the demand from Trusts.

This was a phenomenal response, at such a challenging time, and I thank each and every one of those applicants for stepping up to offer support and help to our Health and Social Care Trusts.

We are now experiencing a second wave of infections, and, as a result, we have re-opened the Workforce Appeal in an effort to try and build capacity again with particular focus on certain roles and positions. I am encouraging anyone with the relevant skills and experience who is interested in joining or returning to the health service to consider applying.

So far through the Workforce Appeal 1,702 people have been successful in their application to work for the health service, spread across a number of disciplines including clinical and support staff.

Of those 1,702 people, 899 are appointed and deployed in the service, 658 are on stand-by in the Health and Social Care Trusts' corporate staff banks. A further 145 have been offered a job and are pending their acceptance.

This time, the appeal is more targeted in nature and we would particularly welcome applications to meet demand in the following areas;

- Medical, all disciplines and grades;
- Nursing;
- Social Care;
- Allied Health;
- Pharmacy;
- Administrative; and
- Support Services.

Yet again the response has been exceptional with a total of 2,635 applications already made since the Workforce Appeal was relaunched at the end of September. This is a true example of our community pulling together to face the demands being placed on our health service as result of the virus.

We are in an evolving situation that may require further recruitment drives going forward and we will continue to monitor the situation closely.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the adequacy of the current travel regulations in protecting public health.

(AQO 946/17-22)

Mr Swann: The international travel regulations impose requirements on individuals arriving in Northern Ireland who have been in a country outside the common travel area within the previous 14 days. Specifically they require them to provide contact details and details of their intended onward travel, and to self-isolate for a period of 14 days following their arrival in Northern Ireland.

The regulations provide a list of exemptions or “travel corridors” where self-isolation is not required due to a lower risk of imported cases from those countries. This provision allows those who want to travel to an exempt country to do so without the need to self-isolate on their return, and also provides a vital lifeline for travel operators and those whose jobs rely on the travel industry. This list is continually reviewed and is informed by a risk assessment developed by the Joint Biosecurity Centre, in close consultation with Public Health England. Devolved administrations also take into account local factors in their decision making.

For practical reasons certain categories of person are also exempt from the need to self-isolate. Examples include those working on essential border security, non-UK diplomats, flight crew and some other transport staff.

Covid-19 is of course a global pandemic and local situations can change quickly. Therefore travellers need to be alert to this risk and plan for it. They should make sure they are checking travel advice regularly and be prepared to self-isolate if it is necessary. Any symptomatic travellers are required to self-isolate regardless of the country they have travelled from.

Public Health remains my top priority and I reiterate that the position with international travel and the risks posed by travel to specific countries is kept continually under review. I consider that the current travel regulations provide appropriate protection of public health at this time.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Health for an update on the work of the interim Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland.

(AQO 947/17-22)

Mr Swann: Professor Siobhan O'Neill took up the post of interim Mental Health Champion, on 10 August 2020. During this relatively short period of time she has focused on raising awareness of the need to care for our mental health and highlighted the support available. To raise awareness she has spoken to a wide range of media across TV, radio, print, podcasts and online, participating in public discussion about topical issues.

Professor O'Neill has met with a broad range of stakeholders across charity, education, research, commissioning and health and wellbeing, as well as undertaking work across public advocacy within Departments, meeting Ministers and officials, groups and panels to gain an insight into the current situation.

Professor O'Neill sits on the Department's Mental Health Strategic Reform Board and Strategic Advisory Panel, relaying views of stakeholders with whom she has met, to inform the development of the Mental Health Strategy.

To address Covid-19 mental health concerns, Professor O'Neill has also been involved in the delivery of a regional social media campaign to promote positive mental health and wellbeing of people across the Public Health Agency, NI Health and Social Care Trusts and Northern Ireland Ambulance Service.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health, given COVID-19 restrictions, how women in North Antrim are able to access abortion care safely.

(AQO 948/17-22)

Mr Swann: Until such time as my Department directs the Health and Social Care Board to commission abortion services, women who choose to use abortion services can contact the British Pregnancy Advisory Service for access to services available in England. They may also contact their General Practitioner.

I would strongly advise women who wish to have an abortion against contacting unregulated online services.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Health how many cancer patients awaiting treatment in each Health and Social Care Trust have had appointments cancelled in since March 2020.

(AQO 949/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information regarding how many cancer patients awaiting treatment in each Health and Social Care Trust have had appointments cancelled since March 2020 is not centrally available.

I can say that, in relation to appointments, between 18th March 2020 and 13th October 2020, there were 14 confirmed cancer and a further 2,970 red flag suspect cancer cancellations in relation to elective inpatient, day case and regular attender appointments.

While most cancer diagnostics continued throughout the surge period, measures put in place to ensure patient safety in the context of COVID inevitably impacted capacity and, when compounded with patient reluctance to attend hospital for diagnostic appointments, has led to an increased back log.

One of my primary aims in the difficult weeks ahead will be to ensure the continued delivery high quality diagnosis and cancer services, in COVID-19 safe spaces and using the independent sector hospitals where appropriate, providing of course it is safe to do so.

However, we should be under no illusions that these are challenging times. Services are already coming under pressure and as the number of COVID positive in-patients increases, this will have a negative impact on our ability to maintain other services.

Department for Infrastructure

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an updated timeframe for the completion of additional works on the North-West Transport Hub, Derry.

(AQW 7949/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): The North-West Transport Hub is designed to act as a gateway to the North-West region, as well as promoting active and sustainable travel, bringing together a wide range of transport modes and providing enhanced customer and staff facilities. It will also allow for improved co-ordination between rail and local and cross-border bus services, as well as a Greenway link to the city centre and Foyle Street Bus Centre via the iconic Peace Bridge

The first phase of the new hub with enhanced passenger facilities opened on 21st October 2019.

The completion of the second phase of the works, including the park and ride site, enhanced public realm and bus turning circle, has been delayed by Covid 19 and is now scheduled to be completed before the end of the year.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure how often public transport vehicles are deep cleaned, including when a suspected COVID-19 case has been detected.

(AQW 8062/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am advised by the Chief Executive that Translink takes very specific steps to ensure that vehicle cleanliness not only reflects public health and health and safety advice but also meets the high standards expected by customers.

Translink informs me it has been undertaking regular deep cleaning of its fleet in light of the COVID-19 pandemic with vehicles cleaned daily, weekly and monthly in each depot.

Daily cleans involve a general internal clean followed by sanitisation of all multi-touch hand points. A further weekly clean includes the use of a long lasting industrial grade antiviral and anti-bacterial cleaning agent, which is sprayed throughout the vehicle with an electro static sprayer. In addition to this, on a monthly basis, each vehicle undergoes an extensive interior deep clean. The deep cleaning of all vehicles in each depot is recorded.

In the event of a suspected or positive case of COVID, the vehicle is immediately taken out of service and a deep clean of the vehicle is performed in line with public health and health and safety advice. The vehicle is then checked prior to re-entering service.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to reduce the waiting list for driving tests by ensuring that the Driver and Vehicle Agency has the capacity to provide a greater number of driving tests each month than would have previously been provided before the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 8065/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure what additional overtime hours are planned for Driver and Vehicle Agency driving Instructors to reduce the driving test backlog.
(Aqw 8066/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) is taking a range of measures to increase its driving test capacity, including recruiting additional examiners.

Once driver testing services resume again the DVA will offer driving tests on a Saturday and following consultation with key stakeholders is planning to offer driving tests for Heavy Goods Vehicles on Sundays, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test.

Where necessary, the DVA will also use overtime to rota off-shift dual role driving examiners to provide additional capacity and to provide cover for scheduled driving tests, where due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, driving examiners are unable to attend work.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to grants for home owners within flood risk zones who are wishing to increase the flood resilience of their property, to outline how grants support in Northern Ireland compare to those available in the rest of the UK.
(Aqw 8068/17-22)

Ms Mallon: You will be aware of my Department's Homeowner Flood Protection Grant Scheme. However, the approach to similar work varies across England, Scotland and Wales where local councils have discretionary powers to fund grants including for Property flood resilience.

In England and Scotland, central government funding provided to local authorities can be used for property resilience schemes. This can be either on a partnership basis where the grant does not cover the full cost and a local contribution can be made, or exceptionally, after severe flood events through property flood resilience recovery support schemes. The recovery support schemes provide grants up to £5,000 available towards additional costs of householders and businesses impacted by these events making their property flood resilient. It is my understanding that there isn't currently an individual property level resilience grant offered in Wales.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of views expressed as a result of consultation previously undertaken, what design elements of the proposed park and ride site at Tillysburn, Belfast, will be amended.*[R]*
(Aqw 8104/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In March 2018, a public consultation on this Park & Ride proposal was undertaken. The Planning Application, that was intended to follow the consultation, was delayed to allow for design changes identified from that process to be incorporated. The design has subsequently been amended to address the access and traffic concerns raised in the consultation, specifically in relation to inclusion of a second entrance from the Sydenham By-pass to supplement the main Hollywood Road entrance. This will allow vehicles travelling on the A2 Belfast Road to directly access the Park & Ride facility.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will explore designation of the area in the vicinity of Foyle Port as an Enterprise Zone.
(Aqw 8105/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Whilst my Department has the power to designate Enterprise Zones under The Enterprise Zones (NI) Order 1981, the post project evaluation of such designations, here and in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s, found only limited success and that it was an ineffective policy that merely displaced business activity, and also resulted in poor quality development.

You will be aware of the British Government's recent consultation on free-ports. Officials from my Department, the Departments for the Economy and Finance have been engaged with HM Treasury to inform the development of a 'Freeports' policy. The Department of Finance (DoF) is the lead Department in NI and, once the policy has been fully developed and agreed, there will be a competitive process to award Freeport status.

I am committed to continuing to work with my Executive colleagues to explore the possible establishment of a Freeport in the North and will continue to provide support to our ports at this unprecedented time.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on work to increase driving test capacity.

(AQW 8116/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether any road or other construction projects funded by her Department has used sand sourced from Lough Neagh; and (ii) to detail the volumes used; in each of the last three years.

(AQW 8124/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Lough Neagh is a significant source of sand in Northern Ireland, my Department will have used sand from Lough Neagh in construction projects. However, only small quantities of 'raw' sand are used in the Department's construction projects. Sand is normally a constituent part of other products, such as concrete, road surfacing, bricks and blocks.

For construction projects, my Department, uses industry standard contracts incorporating specifications which meet the relevant legislation and mandatory requirements. As such, it does not directly purchase sand or products made using sand and does not hold information on the sources or related volumes of sand used.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has any plans to develop a taxi rank area for Ballyclare town.

(AQW 8145/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has not received any requests to provide a Taxi Rank in Ballyclare and has no current plans to introduce one as provision of such a facility would adversely impact on the already limited availability of on-street parking within the town.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in order to provide additional safety to vulnerable road users such as cyclists, whether she intends to bring forward legislation around minimum safe overtaking distances.

(AQW 8160/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister responsible for promoting and improving road safety, I want to pay particular attention to the safety of the most vulnerable road users, that is, people who choose to walk and cycle.

I am very keen to continue to make clear the need for drivers to be aware of cyclists and other vulnerable road users on the road and particularly the need to take care when overtaking them. The Highway Code advises drivers to give cyclists at least as much room as you would when overtaking a car.

I am very alert to the fact that the Highway Code in GB is currently out to consultation and a number of changes are proposed including rules on giving enough space when overtaking (1.5m space if driving under 30mph and at least 2m if driving over 30mph). While I have no current plans to bring forward legislation, I have asked my officials to monitor this closely and keep me updated as I consider this and other road safety issues.

My Department has a full programme of road safety public information campaigns including those promoting the safety of people cycling. These campaigns are communicated using multimedia channels including TV, radio, bus rears and social media. The cycling safety campaigns provide advice to both drivers and cyclists to increase cyclist safety awareness, including advice to drivers on leaving space of a minimum of 1.5 meters when passing people cycling.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the status of the European Commission's Pilot Case 7640/15/ENVI: Environmental Enforcement in Northern Ireland (i) currently; and (ii) after the transition period for leaving the European Union ends on 31 December 2020.

(AQW 8172/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Pilot Case 7640/15/ENVI is ongoing and will continue regardless of the Transition Period ending on 31 December 2020. The future status of the case will be a matter for the Commission.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will issue guidance to provide clarity to local councils around the use of parking bays as locations considered for a pavement cafe licence.

(AQW 8173/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Licensing of Pavement Cafés Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 empowers District Councils to manage Pavement Café requests. The Department for Communities (DfC) has published guidelines to assist district councils with the implementation of this statutory licensing scheme, however, my Department plays an active role and is a key partner in that process.

I think it is safe to say that at the time the Act was enacted it was not envisaged that Pavement Cafés would ever be set up on the road, however I do appreciate that circumstances have changed due to the pandemic and I am content that parking bays are considered for Pavement Café purposes. My department is currently drafting more detailed guidelines intended to be used to assess individual pavement café applications.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in respect of the Planning Forum, to detail (i) membership; (ii) purpose; (iii) the number of meetings held; and (iv) outputs thus far.

(AQW 8175/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Planning Forum membership is made up of the main statutory consultees. It is chaired by a Deputy Secretary with responsibility for DfI Planning, and its other members include senior staff from DfI Regional and Strategic Planning Directorates; DfI Roads & Rivers; NI Water; DfC Historic Environment Division; DAERA Environment, Marine & Fisheries; DfE Geological Survey of NI and the NI Housing Executive.

The purpose of the Forum is to help improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning system by agreeing, prioritising and monitoring the implementation of recommendations and actions which emerged from the report into the role of statutory consultees in the planning process, which was completed in 2019. The Forum also monitors the performance of central government statutory consultees in relation to live major planning applications and takes forward any other related tasks identified.

The Forum meets broadly on a quarterly basis and it has now had three meetings since its inception in December 2019. In addition to the establishment of the Forum itself, actions completed include a review of resourcing for statutory consultations within DfI Rivers; and ensuring that the requirements for effective monitoring and reporting of statutory consultations have been included within the specification for the new regional IT system. The Forum will continue to work through a number of areas which involve looking critically at existing practice, procedures and resources with a view to finding ways to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning process.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what measures she can put in place, including overtime, to create extra driving test slots to help reduce waiting times.

(AQW 8188/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

When testing resumes the DVA also intends to offer driving tests on a Saturday and following consultation with key stakeholders is planning to offer driving tests for Heavy Goods Vehicles on Sundays, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. The DVA will also use overtime to rota off-shift dual role driving examiners to provide

additional capacity and to provide cover for scheduled driving tests, where due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, driving examiners are unable to attend work.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure why a planned speed reduction on the Derrymacash Road, Craigavon, which received no objections and which was put before the Committee for Infrastructure on 24 June 2020, has still not been implemented.

(AQW 8206/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that the Order for the new speed limit at Derrymacash came into effect on 7th September. The 30mph signs have been ordered and are expected to be erected within the next 2 weeks.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she expects to be in a position to make a planning decision on the ARC21 Hightown Incinerator proposal.

(AQW 8228/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am keen to bring a resolution to this long standing application for all involved, but if a sound decision is to be reached it is important the planning process is completed correctly. My officials are continuing to progress the application at pace in line with planning policy to a point where a decision is ready to be made.

A number of consultation responses are awaited and, when received and all statutory processes satisfactorily completed, a recommendation will be brought forward by my officials; however at this time I cannot confirm when a recommendation will be made.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the targets; (ii) timescale; and (iii) investment set for the conversion of the public transport network fleet from fossil fuels to renewable or regenerated energy.

(AQW 8248/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) My Departmental officials have been working with Translink on a fleet replacement strategy that potentially would see the full transition to net zero carbon bus and rail public transport in Northern Ireland.
- (ii) The current timescale for the transition of all public transport services from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources is currently planned to be achieved by 2040.
- (iii) It is currently estimated investment of circa £1.6bn will be required. However, given the severe budget pressures facing my Department during COVID-19 and the funding required to ensure the viability of Translink, there will be significant challenges in providing new public transport infrastructure without additional funding being allocated from the Executive. Nevertheless, this is an area that I remain committed to, and I will continue to seek support from my Executive colleagues to deliver on my ambitions.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many primary schools in the South Antrim constituency accessed (i) the Active School Travel Programme; and (ii) the Cycling Proficiency Scheme, in the last year.

(AQW 8269/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not hold participation figures for Active School Travel Programme and Cycling Proficiency Scheme on a constituency level but rather as a whole across Northern Ireland.

The most recent set of participation figures of schools before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic are for the financial year 2019/20 and are detailed below;

Figures for 2019-2020

Cycling Proficiency Scheme	348
Active School Travel Programme	180

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) to detail the length of time unauthorised Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) development had been permitted to take place from the date of service of enforcement notices on the sand extraction operations in Lough Neagh Special Area of Conservation; (ii) whether any unauthorised EIA development

was permitted to become immune from enforcement action during that time; and (iii) whether she intends to retrospectively regularise unauthorised EIA development.

(AQW 8277/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department issued an enforcement notice on 27 May 2015 in respect of unauthorised sand dredging and I have recently announced my intention to grant planning permission for future dredging operations. This will likely issue in the coming weeks. You will also be aware that operations since November 2017 have been undertaken subject to a series of interim control measures and monitoring.

Given the statutory restrictions on time limits associated with enforcement action, there is a period of several months in 2015 where enforcement action is not possible.

The Lough Neagh Sand Traders made an application for the retrospective extraction of sand through the Planning Appeals Commission appeals process and this was refused in May 2019. I am not aware of any further retrospective application having been made.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 6711/17-22, to detail (i) the number of statutory consultees' responses to consultation requests for planning applications and; (ii) the percentage of those which were within the statutory time limits, broken down by statutory consultee, for each of the last three years.[R]

(AQW 8280/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The following responses were returned to planning application consultations in line with the statutory requirement of 21 days for the reporting periods in question.

	2017-18		2018-19		2019-20	
	Total statutory consultations returned	Percentage on time	Total statutory consultations returned	Percentage on time	Total statutory consultations returned	Percentage on time
DfI Roads	11537	71%	12241	78%	10908	73%
DAERA Environment Marine and Fisheries	4315	87%	4689	72%	4116	72%
DfC Historic Environment Division	2881	78%	3266	76%	2903	72%
NI Water	3445	87%	3159	84%	3101	85%
DfI Rivers	2350	66%	2571	29%	2239	31%
Health Safety Executive NI	95	71%	72	86%	87	63%
DfE/GSNI	88	80%	86	86%	104	84%
Belfast International Airport	82	87%	91	67%	107	77%
Belfast City Airport	24	96%	31	100%	69	100%
City of Derry Airport	6	100%	9	100%	14	100%
Belfast City Council	5	0%	2	50%	4	25%
NI Housing Executive	14	93%	28	71%	25	64%
Antrim & Newtownabbey council	2	0%	7	14%	6	17%
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon council	1	0%	n/a		2	0%
Causeway Coast & Glens council	n/a		n/a		3	33%
Fermanagh & Omagh council	2	100%	n/a		1	100%
Mid & East Antrim council	n/a		n/a		n/a	
Mid Ulster council	2	0%	n/a		2	0%

	2017-18		2018-19		2019-20	
	Total statutory consultations returned	Percentage on time	Total statutory consultations returned	Percentage on time	Total statutory consultations returned	Percentage on time
Newry, Mourne & Down council	1	0%	n/a		n/a	
Ards & North Down council	2	100%	n/a		n/a	
Lisburn & Castlereagh council	1	0%	n/a		n/a	
Derry City & Strabane council	1	0%	n/a		1	0%

n/a signifies no statutory consultations for the period in question.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the losses that Translink has suffered that can be attributed to the onset of COVID-19 from March.*[R]*
(AQW 8281/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Analysis of Translink's results to date for the current financial year indicates an estimated loss of revenue due to the impact of COVID-19 of £110m for the whole year. This figure is subject to change, reflecting the impact of COVID-19 in the remaining months of the financial year.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many street light columns have been replaced, broken down by local council area, in the last year.
(AQW 8299/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The following table provides details of the number of new street lighting columns installed by my Department, during the period 1 October 2019 until 1 October 2020, broken down by local council area:

Council Area	Number of columns replaced
Antrim & Newtownabbey	295
Ards & North Down	220
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	380
Belfast	832
Causeway Coast & Glens	280
Fermanagh & Omagh	256
Lisburn & Castlereagh	276
Derry & Strabane	485
Mid & East Antrim	304
Mid Ulster	396
Newry, Mourne & Down	240

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much has been spent on street light column replacements, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 8300/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Details of my Department's expenditure on street lighting column replacements in each of the last five years are provided in the following table:

Financial Year	Expenditure
2015/2016	£7.5m
2016/2017	£6.3m

Financial Year	Expenditure
2017/2018	£4.1m
2018/2019	£5.5m
2019/2020	£4.7m

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the maximum number of people there were waiting to book a driving test appointment on line at any one time after the official opening of the online booking system on 5 October.

(AQW 8302/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver and Vehicle Agency's (DVA) online booking service is used to book both driving and vehicle tests. The online booking system was reinstated on a phased basis with bookings for HGV and trailer tests resuming from 1 October.

Following the official reopening of the online booking service for driving tests on 5 October, the peak number recorded in the queue was 3,805. While the majority of those in the queue will have been waiting to book a driving test, a small number will have been waiting to book vehicle tests for HGVs and trailers. This figure may not accurately represent the number of individual people waiting, as some customers may have used multiple devices to try and book a test. The DVA has also now introduced separate queueing systems for driver and vehicle test bookings.

Since the driving test booking system reopened thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of driving tests that can currently be completed weekly.

(AQW 8303/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. Motorcycle lessons and tests are not affected by these new restrictions. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

The number of driving test slots that are available on any given day is not collated by the Driving and Vehicle Agency (DVA) as these figures can vary significantly depending on a range of factors including the demand for tests and the availability of staff. However, the number of driving test applications and driving tests conducted are National Statistics and as such are released in accordance with the UK Official Statistics Code of Practice.

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 has recently introduced a new publication providing provisional monthly statistics on vehicle, driving and theory tests conducted. DVA statisticians published the first edition on 15 October,

relating to September 2020, which is available on the Department's website. Application statistics will be added to the November publication and will include figures for the October period.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many driving tests were booked on the online system prior to the system officially opening on 5 October at 8:00am after being open on the evening of Sunday 4 October.

(AQW 8304/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The number of driving test applications 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 has recently introduced a new publication providing provisional monthly statistics on vehicle, driving and theory tests conducted. DVA statisticians published the first edition on 15 October, relating to September 2020, which is available on the Department's website. Application statistics will be added to the November publication and will include figures for the October period.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) how many test centres are currently available for theory tests to be undertaken; and (ii) how many individuals can be accommodated in each centre.

(AQW 8305/17-22)

Ms Mallon: From 6 July, driver theory tests resumed at all six theory test centres at locations in Ballymena, Belfast, Derry, Newry, Omagh and Portadown, at reduced capacity in order to comply with PHA advice and guidance on social distancing.

Since then, a number of steps have been taken to increase capacity for customers, including extending opening hours, and decreasing social distancing requirements from 2m to 1m+, in line with revised PHA guidance.

The table below outlines the current position across the 6 theory test centres.

Test centre	Total work stations Open
Ballymena	10
Belfast	15
Derry	5
Newry	7
Omagh	4
Portadown	5
Total	46

The DVA is continuing to work with the theory test provider to monitor availability, in order to identify further measures as required.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many vehicle damage claims have been made against her Department in the Lagan Valley constituency, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 8307/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not maintain records of claims by Assembly constituency area but instead records claims by Roads Section Office area, which broadly align with Council areas.

The table below provides details of the number of vehicle damage claims received by my Department for the Lisburn and Castlereagh Section Office area in each of the last three financial years:

	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
Number of vehicle damage claims received	455	383	264

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much of the recently announced £15 million being given to NI Water to upgrade sewers, waste water treatment work and pumping stations will be going to the Limavady area.

(AQW 8335/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The recently announced additional £15 million funding was allocated to NI Water to accelerate specifically named and planned projects which had been deferred or delayed this year due to the mandatory cessation and change of many business activities during the ongoing Covid pandemic.

While this funding was not specifically intended to be used for wastewater treatment works in Limavady, I am advised that NI Water has planned a wastewater system upgrade for the Limavady area, to be taken forward during the next Regulatory Price Control period, PC21 (2021-27). As part of this undertaking, £63k will fund project preparation work during 2020/21. I should note however that certainty for this opportunity to improve the Limavady wastewater network, will depend on NI Water being fully funded for PC21.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department is considering resurfacing a section of the Moyra Road in Burnside village once utilities work for Douglas Hill is completed.
(AQW 8346/17-22)

Ms Mallon: An inspection of this road was recently carried out and while it is acknowledged that there have been some utility works carried out in recent years, the road is considered to be structurally sound and not requiring resurfacing at this time. I can assure you that this road will continue to be routinely inspected and any defects which are actionable under the current maintenance policy will be programmed for repair.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to the requirement of section 1 of the Planning Act (NI) 2011 for a consistent planning policy, whether she can confirm that permitted development rights will not be reduced on a geographical basis.
(AQW 8349/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Permitted Development rights conferred by the Planning (General Permitted Development) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 (GPDO) may be removed for any particular development or class of development within a specified geographical area by direction under Article 4 of the GPDO. The result is that an application must be submitted to, and planning permission obtained from, the relevant district council for such development to proceed.

An Article 4 Direction may be made by a council, or the Department, if it is satisfied that it is expedient to restrict permitted development rights in this way.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure why are applications for Certificates of Lawfulness (i) not advertised; (ii) placed on the Planning Portal; or (iii) subject to consultation.
(AQW 8350/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The legislation in Northern Ireland, in line with other UK jurisdictions, does not require councils to advertise on the planning portal (or elsewhere) or to consult on applications for certificates of lawfulness.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure what development orders have been made pursuant to Section 171 of the Planning Act (NI) 2011.
(AQW 8351/17-22)

Ms Mallon: One development order has been made pursuant to section 171 of the Planning Act. This order is Article 11 of the Planning (General Development Procedure) Order (Northern Ireland) 2015 [<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2015/72/made>].

Article 11 sets out the procedure for making an application, for a certificate that an existing, or proposed, building/use is lawful and the procedure for determining the application. In particular, Article 11 specifies the information (and supporting evidence) which the applicant must provide and how the council must process the application.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure what spare sewerage capacity there is in (i) Armoy; (ii) Bushmills; (iii) Dervock; (iv) Mosside; and (v) Stranocum.
(AQW 8353/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised me that capacity at the five named waste water treatment works is as follows;

- (i) Armoy - there is no spare capacity
- (ii) Bushmills - there is approximately 33% spare capacity
- (iii) Dervock - there is no spare capacity
- (iv) Mosside - there is no spare capacity
- (v) Stranocum - there is no spare capacity

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure when the extensive and long-term shrubbery growing and protruding from within the structure of Dee Street bridge will be killed at the root and the shrubbery removed.
(AQW 8359/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Work to remove the vegetation on Dee Street bridge is currently being arranged. As part of the structure spans the railway line it requires specialist equipment, specially trained staff and must be programmed in order to minimise disruption to both railway and road users. I have asked my officials to keep you updated on progress with this work.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) what measures are being implemented to remove the backlog in driving test appointments; and (ii) what measures are being implemented to ensure there is an adequate number of driving test assessors available to carry out driving tests from the Omagh test centre.

(AQW 8371/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

When testing resumes the DVA also intends to offer driving tests on a Saturday and following consultation with key stakeholders is planning to offer driving tests for Heavy Goods Vehicles on Sundays, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. The DVA will also use overtime to rota off-shift dual role driving examiners to provide additional capacity and to provide cover for scheduled driving tests, where due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, driving examiners are unable to attend work.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that many housing estates were constructed decades ago when vehicle ownership was not as widespread as it is currently, whether her Department has given consideration to addressing lack of parking areas in such estates.

(AQW 8372/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware of the impact that increased levels of car ownership have on many older housing developments and specifically the additional demand for parking facilities generated.

My Department is available and willing to work to develop solutions in partnership with housing representative groups, where available, where road safety or traffic progression issues are evident. The delivery of practical solutions will be dependent upon the availability of land and funding.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the rationale for her Department's Planning Environmental Governance Work Programme; (ii) the purpose of the Programme; and (iii) the implications of not achieving compliance.

(AQW 8375/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The rationale and purpose of my Department's Environmental Governance Work Programme is to improve environmental governance and practice across the planning system.

Non-compliance with environmental obligations could have reputational and financial implications for planning authorities but more importantly could result in environmental harm or badly planned development.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given her decision to approve sand extraction from Lough Neagh Special Protection Area, for her assessment of whether her Department's decision to allow unauthorised Environmental Impact Assessment development compromises its position to oversee and deliver assurances to the European Commission in respect of Pilot Case 7640/15/ENVI: Environmental Enforcement in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 8376/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My decision to grant planning permission for the extraction of sand and gravel from Lough Neagh relates to proposed future dredging. My Department has fully co-operated with the European Commission in respect of Pilot Case 7640/15/ENVI: Environmental Enforcement in Northern Ireland and I am satisfied that my recent announcement does not alter

the position that the decision to implement the comprehensive interim measures was taken in line with the correct approach to the precautionary principle and as directed by the Northern Ireland Court of Appeal.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether consideration has been given to introduction of part time 20mph speed limit zone in the vicinity of Eglinton Primary School.

(AQW 8379/17-22)

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 benefit from a part-time 20 mph speed limit on the roads outside their gates.

Given the restricted budgets for works of this nature, as well as the practicalities of delivery, it was necessary to limit the number of schools to 100 in this year's programme. Unfortunately based on its assessment score Eglinton Primary School was not ranked as highly as other schools included within this year's programme. However, I do intend to take forward a further tranche of part-time speed limits at schools and it will be considered for inclusion in future programmes.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of concerns expressed by local residents in relation to speeding, whether she will consider erecting additional signage on (i) Craigdarragh Road; and (ii) Fort Road, Helen's Bay, to warn motorists of the 30mph speed limit.

(AQW 8380/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Highway Code for Northern Ireland states, at rule 124, that the presence of street lights indicates that a 30mph speed limit exists, unless otherwise specified. As Fort Road is within this street lit urban setting, repeater 30mph signs would not be considered appropriate.

Leaving Helens Bay, the Fort Road becomes the Craigdarragh Road and the speed limit changes along this road. I have asked officials to review signage on the Craigdarragh Road in the coming weeks to ensure that the speed limits are signed appropriately.

Where residents have concerns about speeding, I would encourage them to contact the PSNI who are the enforcement authority and can be contacted on their non-emergency number, 101.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will include a roll out of further 20mph school speed restriction zones, including North Down schools, within budgets for the next financial year 2021/22.

(AQW 8381/17-22)

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.

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 the assessment scores none of the schools in the North Down area were ranked as highly as the 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 the schools in North Down will be considered for inclusion in future programmes the extent and scale of which will be dependent on the funding available to me.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will carry out assessments for traffic calming measures at (i) Acorn Hill, Bessbrook; and (ii) Courtney Hill, Newry.

(AQW 8382/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department recognises the importance of traffic calming and road safety measures and is committed to exploring solutions that deliver better for communities and improve lives across Northern Ireland. I have instructed officials to carry out assessments of Acorn Hill Bessbrook and Courtney Hill Newry for traffic calming measures.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of what additional safety measures her Department could put in place to help pedestrians cross Rathgael Road, Bangor.

(AQW 8392/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A road improvement scheme was completed in 2019 on the Rathgael Road in Bangor. This scheme was carried out by a housing developer and involved road widening and the provision of four pedestrian refuge islands. I am advised that these measures have improved crossing facilities for the local community and improved road safety on this busy part of the road network.

I have however asked officials to carry out an assessment for the provision of a pedestrian crossing at this location and this assessment will be carried out in the coming weeks.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she will roll out a 20mph speed limit restriction for Millisle Primary School.

(AQW 8398/17-22)

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 be able to commit 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.

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 the assessment scores, Millisle Primary School was not ranked as highly as the 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 Millisle Primary School will be considered for inclusion in future programmes the extent and scale of which will be dependent on the funding available to me.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure what discussions she has had with the Minister of Finance to increase the level of roads maintenance funding for North Down in the 2021/22 year.

(AQW 8399/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has submitted capital bids to the Department of Finance for the next 4 years as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review process. This budget process is ongoing a Ministerial bilateral between myself and the Minister of Finance is to be scheduled towards the end of October to discuss priorities and departmental budget requirements in 2021/22 and beyond.

I will use this opportunity to stress the need for additional funding for road maintenance across the North as I continue to strive to fully fund the independently assessed annual investment requirement of £143m for road maintenance. Subject to the outcome of this on-going Budget process, funding will be allocated equitably across the North to reflect need, including in North Down.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to and subsequent to the COVID-19 restrictions imposed on the Derry City and Strabane District Council area, what actions are being taken to protect Driver and Vehicle Agency staff and to ensure that MOT testing can continue to be provided.

(AQW 8408/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver and 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 to enable MOT centres to safely reopen for vehicle testing from 20 July and, from 1 September, to resume practical car and lorry driving tests. The control measures the DVA has implemented at their MOT test centres are in line with PHA advice and guidance and have been endorsed by the Department of Health as both necessary and proportionate to mitigate against the risk of Covid transmission.

I can assure you it remains my top priority to ensure that our staff and customers remain safe and the DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health advice and will regularly review its risk assessments to ensure driver and vehicle testing services can continue to be conducted safely.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 7597/17-22, given that I was informed at a site meeting five years ago that it was being processed through the courts, for an update on the current status of land acquisition.

(AQW 8414/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In February 2015, initial meetings were held with landowners to discuss this footway scheme at Brocagh to establish if land could be purchased by agreement. Although compulsory purchase of land (vesting) is one of the options available for a scheme of this nature, I am advised that no decision about commencement of the vesting process, which leads to a financial commitment, was taken at that time.

In recent years, funding for Local Transport and Safety Measures has reduced significantly and consequently it has become more difficult to deliver larger scale schemes such as this one in Brocagh. However, I can assure you the scheme remains on the Local Transport and Safety Measures Programme for the Mid Ulster District Council Area and the Department remains committed to delivering the footway although you will appreciate that this will be subject to the availability of funding.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on practical driving tests in Omagh town.
(AQW 8422/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether PSV driver tests have restarted yet; and (ii) if not, when they will restart.
(AQW 8444/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

Taxi driver practical driving tests had not been reinstated before this period of increased restrictions took effect. The DVA is working hard to reinstate these tests as soon as possible after the restrictions end, however due to the longer duration of the on road driving element of this test, it must be fully risk assessed to ensure it can be delivered safely in line with PHA advice and guidance. Whenever the DVA is in a position to resume this service I will ensure this is clearly communicated to all affected customers.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the resumption of approved driving instructor tests.
(AQW 8458/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

The qualifying tests for Approved Driving Instructors had not been reinstated before this period of increased restrictions took effect. The DVA is working hard to reinstate these tests as soon as possible after the restrictions end, however due to the longer duration of the on road driving element of this test, it must be fully risk assessed to ensure it can be delivered safely in line with PHA advice and guidance. Whenever the DVA is in a position to resume this service I will ensure this is clearly communicated to all affected customers.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what (i) strategies; and (ii) plans her Department intends to publish during this mandate.

(AQW 8475/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department intends to publish the following strategies and plans during this mandate:

- Road Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland
- Equality Scheme and Audit of Inequalities
- Disability Action Plan
- DfI Roads and Rivers Group Procurement Plan
- Strategic Drainage Infrastructure Plan for the Greater Belfast Area
- Integrated Drainage Investment Planning Guide for Northern Ireland
- Flood Risk Management Plan (2021-2027)
- The Belfast Bicycle Network

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on review of old mineral permissions.

(AQW 8476/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Officials in my Department are preparing a briefing paper on issues on the implementation of the review of old mineral 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 Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail winter service funding, broken down by local council area.

(AQW 8477/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The average normal budget requirement for provision of Winter Service is £7m but has in the past been as much as £10m for a severe winter as was the case in 2017-18.

I welcome the recent £5m allocation for winter service from the Covid bids exercise which will make a much needed contribution and my Department has prudently bid for the remaining £2m as part of October Monitoring.

We do not maintain a record of expenditure in the format requested however, based on gritted road lengths across Divisions, I plan to allocate the £5m funding as follows:

Division	Allocation
Eastern	£670k
Northern	£1,240k
Southern	£1,309k
Western	£1,421k
HQ	£360k
Total	£5,000K

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she is considering extending the special circumstances for driving tests to those people who are included in the vulnerable category.

(AQW 8480/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Prior to driving test bookings reopening to all customers, priority driving tests were provided for high priority critical workers and for those customers whose driving test had been cancelled between March and June. Priority tests were not offered to other customers, such as those in vulnerable categories because, as I am sure you will understand, for prioritisation to be effective it needs to be focused and be able to be managed by the DVA.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity

by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time. 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 and scientific advice.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the annual cost of roadworks not being completed on schedule, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 8512/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Pursuant to AQW 7132/17-22 there were three major road projects which were not completed on schedule in each of the last five years.

In regards to the M1/M2 Busways and A5/B48 Strathroy Link Road projects there were no additional costs to my Department directly associated with the delay.

In the case of the Malcolm Road / Gilford Road (Millennium Way) Lurgan project, the delay and increase in tendered cost was primarily due to re-design arising from buildability issues associated with uncharted underground electric cables. Whereas the final works cost of £1.98m exceeded the tendered cost of £1.37m it is important to note however that the scheme is forecast to outturn less, at £5.6m, than the economic appraisal estimate of £6.1m approved by the Department of Finance in 2015.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the number of minor and major roadworks completed by her Department; (ii) how many of those have not been completed on time; (iii) how long is the average delay; and (iv) the shortest and longest delay, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 8513/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The major road works elements of your question were addressed in my response to your previous query on this matter, reference; AQW 7132/17-22.

In addition to investing in the strategic road network, the Department undertakes minor road improvements through its annual programme of Local Transport and Safety Measures (LTSM) schemes. The LTSM programme is wide ranging and typically includes a number of small schemes that are normally progressed within each financial year and as such information is not held on delays.

Details of completed LTSM schemes are reported in the DfI Roads Divisions Spring and Autumn Council Reports which can be accessed via the following link:-

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/type/corporatereports>

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the long-term impact Translink cuts will have on rural transport provision.

(AQW 8525/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Translink plays a major part in meeting the social and economic needs of our society, in both urban and rural areas. It operates a range of services to meet these needs which we must fund as part of our commitment to the provision of a public transport network and to Translink's future.

I am committed to working with Translink to maintain socially and economically necessary services as we respond to customer demand. Indeed, over the course of the pandemic, I have approved a number of service changes to allow resources to be concentrated on essential services.

I am very much aware of the pressures we face, as is the NI Transport Holding Company Board, and, in light of the impact of COVID-19 on its business, it has brought forward a business efficiency programme that is estimated to deliver £20m of savings in this financial year. This programme builds on ongoing efficiencies that the Company has delivered over the past number of years and focuses on actions across the business.

I have been assured by Translink's Chief Executive that these savings will not impact on front line services delivered through the Public Service Agreement between the Department and Translink. However, these savings alone will not bridge the current funding gap created by lost income as a direct result of Covid-19, and I am continuing to bid for additional resource budget to ensure all services can be maintained. Across the world governments are investing in public transport in order to better connect communities and help tackle climate change. Northern Ireland needs to do the same and I will continue to make this case at the Executive so we can protect our public transport network but also expand it given all of the social, economic and environmental benefits it brings.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) what pavements in North Down are due to be upgraded and repaired in this financial year; and (ii) when unsafe pavements on (a) Henderson Drive; and (b) Sinclair Road, Bangor will be upgraded and repaired.

(AQW 8529/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not maintain such records by constituency area, however, listed below are details of footway upgrade schemes being progressed within the Ards and North Down District Council area during this financial year:

- U8001 Church Drive/ Crescent, Bangor;
- U0103 Tower Crescent, Bangor; and
- U0132 Cultra Avenue, Holywood.

The Department is currently finalising details of its works programmes which includes further schemes, details of which will be included in the DfI Roads Southern Division report to Ards and North Down Borough Council which will be issued shortly.

My Department's budget available for this type of work is very limited and therefore work has to be prioritised and targeted at those footpaths which are in the poorest condition where the greatest benefits can be accrued. Recent inspections indicate that although cracks may be evident in a number of the flagstones, the footways in both Henderson Drive and Sinclair Road remain in a serviceable condition and upgrading is not required at present under current Departmental maintenance guidelines.

While there are currently no immediate plans to carry out any reconstruction work on these footpaths, I can confirm that Henderson Drive and Sinclair Road are on the reserve list of schemes that will compete along with other similar schemes for inclusion in future works programmes.

In the interim these footways will continue to be subject to routine safety inspections on a scheduled basis, and all defects meeting the Department's current intervention levels will be recorded and actioned for repair within the established timescales.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to a recent Nikkon Gas UK & Ireland development, whether Newry, Mourne and Down District Council were obligated, under EU transnational planning directives, to notify or consult with Louth County Council.

(AQW 8531/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Transboundary notification and consultation required under the Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 is undertaken when a council, in its role as local planning authority, becomes aware that an application made to it is for proposed development which is likely to have significant effects on the environment in another EU Member State or any other state which is a party to the European Economic Area agreement.

In such circumstances the council is required to provide my Department with specific information and then my Department would engage directly with that state. In relation to the application by Nippon Gases (which was granted planning permission by the council in 2015) no such notification was given to my Department by Newry, Mourne and Down District Council.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether local councils are permitted to adopt Local Development Plans and Policies contrary to the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for Northern Ireland.*[R]*

(AQW 8532/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The provisions of the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) apply to the whole of Northern Ireland and as stipulated in the Planning (NI) Act 2011 these must be taken into account in the preparation of Local Development Plans. However, councils may tailor their operational policies to suit their own local circumstances.

My Department is one of a number of statutory consultees within the Local Development Plan process that engages with councils throughout plan preparation and has responded to each of the 7 published draft Plan Strategies, highlighting where regional policy has not been followed.

Where a Council deviates from the SPPS they must ensure that they have robust evidence to show reasoned justification for such a departure. This will be considered at Independent Examination where the Development Plan Document (draft Plan Strategy and draft Local Policies Plan) will be tested for soundness.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the extent to which visual impact is a consideration in determining regionally significant planning applications concerning the erection of wind turbines.*[R]*

(AQW 8533/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Planning policy is a material planning consideration which must be taken into account in the determination of all planning applications, including those which are regionally significant. Regional planning policy for renewable energy development in Northern Ireland is contained within the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) and Policy RE 1 of Planning Policy Statement 18 – Renewable Energy. PPS 18 is also accompanied by a Supplementary Planning Guidance document entitled 'Wind Energy Development in Northern Ireland Landscapes'.

Both the SPSS and PPS 18 advise that development that generates energy from renewable resources will be permitted where the proposal and any associated buildings and infrastructure, will not result in an unacceptable adverse impact on a number of planning considerations which includes visual amenity and landscape character.

Accordingly, the assessment of visual impacts is a significant consideration in the determination of all regionally significant applications for wind energy developments.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether he will deliver a capital programme for greenways in 2020-21.
(AQW 8542/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The delivery of greenway capital projects is, in general terms, the responsibility of local Councils. However, since I became Minister, I have indicated my willingness to provide financial support to Councils for greenway schemes.

My Walking and Cycling Champion wrote to Councils in July seeking an update on the status of their greenway projects. Following consideration of the proposals put forward by all Councils, I announced £2.8 million funding investment towards the development of six greenway projects, where construction could begin this financial year. I also indicated that I hope to be in a position to fund further greenway projects in the future. Decisions on the extent of funding for any future greenway projects will depend on the budget provided to my Department for 2021/22.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the extent of the alternative approaches devised by NI Water to maximise the use of capacity in sewer networks.
(AQW 8547/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water is pursuing a range of alternative approaches which focus on both the immediate and longer term wastewater system capacity issues and associated solutions.

In the event of a planning application where sewer network constraints have been identified, NI Water is working with the applicants to determine whether alternative drainage/treatment solutions can be agreed, to mitigate any impact and potentially allow the development to continue.

The alternative drainage/treatment solutions being pursued by NI Water include:

- Wastewater treatment package plants;
- Stormwater separation and/or Sustainable Drainage Solutions (SuDs) on a site, to create hydraulic capacity in combined sewer systems;
- Investigating with other key stakeholders (NIEA and DfI Rivers) the use of stormwater offsetting within pilot drainage catchments, to create hydraulic capacity in the combined sewer system, to accommodate sewage flows from a proposed site(s); and
- The use of innovative modelling approaches in pilot catchments, to optimise flow patterns in sewer networks with pumping stations, and thereby reduce the size of sewer flow peaks and improve their operational capacity.

Various approaches may be combined to maximise the use of capacity in sewer networks. Furthermore, applicants for new and on-going developments are encouraged to consult directly with NI Water and to discuss the scope of their proposals and the potential for alternative approaches, to enhance the available sewer capacity.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail what engagements she has had with her ministerial counterpart Eamon Ryan over the Bus Éireann service reductions.
(AQW 8549/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to securing island wide services between Belfast and Dublin and as I previously advised in AQW 7777/17-22, I did raise the matter with Minister Ryan at the NSMC Transport meeting on 7 October 2020.

My Department will continue to work to provide services for our communities North-South and will work with Translink to minimise the overall impact to passengers.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the maintenance budgets for the Roads (i) Eastern Division; and (ii) Southern Divisional Offices, in each of the last three years.
(AQW 8553/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's Road maintenance outturns in the last three years for DfI Roads Eastern and Southern Division is provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1

	2017-18 £k	2018-19 £k	2019-20 £k
Eastern Division	16,954	23,966	23,741
Southern Division	28,337	40,870	39,896

The outturn in each Division will have been determined by budget availability and capacity in that particular year. In relation to boundaries, Eastern Division is coterminous with the District Councils of Belfast City, and Lisburn and Castlereagh City. Southern Division is coterminous with the District Councils of Ards and North Down; Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon; and Newry, Mourne and Down.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the governance mechanisms used to ensure that NI Water changes to policy and service delivery are assessed to ensure compliance with the duty to have due regard to rural needs under the terms of the Rural Needs Act.

(AQW 8563/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is responsible for the oversight of NI Water as a Non Departmental Public Body, and my officials engage closely with the company at a policy and operational level to ensure it complies with governance requirements expected of it as an Arm's Length Body.

In terms of the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, I am advised by NI Water that the company does not appear in the Schedule to legislation and, as such, has no specific obligations under the Act. However, the company is mindful of the principles contained within the Act and gives due consideration to them when designing and delivering its services.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the governance mechanisms used to ensure that Translink/NI Transport Holding Company changes to policy and service delivery are assessed to ensure compliance with the duty to have due regard to rural needs under the terms of the Rural Needs Act.

(AQW 8564/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Whilst Translink is not included in the schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016, the Department wrote to Translink on 28 February 2018 highlighting good practice to pay 'due regard' to rural needs and further recommended that it commits to rural proofing practices in future. More recently, DAERA has launched a review to look at the list of bodies set out in the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 (the Act) and consulting on the review to seek views from stakeholders.

All Translink's rural services are provided under contract to the Department for Infrastructure. As a Government Department, DfI is subject to the Rural Needs Act and has regard for rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans, and when designing and delivering public services, including the public transport services defined in the Public Service Contract between DfI and Translink. Given the Public Service Agreement signed by the Department and Translink, any changes to the level of the public transport network coverage would have to be approved by the Department and therefore be given consideration under the Act.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW7237/17-22, what oversight of the current planning system her Department has undertaken since Local Government Reform in 2015 that indicated (i) greater inclusivity; (ii) stronger third-party engagement; and (iii) greater local democratic accountability would be delivered.

(AQW 8605/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Local democratic accountability and community engagement were central to the reform of the planning system in April 2015. The majority of planning applications are now decided at local level and early community engagement has been introduced, such as pre-application community consultation on major planning applications and publication of a Preferred Options Paper to assist early community engagement in the local development plan process.

My Department regularly engages with councils and other stakeholders to understand how the planning system is working and to assist with its operation. This includes engaging with councils on planning matters through the Strategic Planning Group (with Heads of Planning), the Development Plan Working Group and regular meetings with council Chief Executives. Through the Planning Forum the Department engages with statutory consultees to the planning process and regular meetings also take place with the community, environmental and business sectors, all of which provide ongoing insight into how the transferred and reformed planning system is working.

In addition, I have recently announced the establishment of a Planning Engagement Partnership, including representatives from local councils and other planning stakeholders, which will look at how to enhance the quality and depth of community engagement in the planning process at both the regional and local planning levels. The forthcoming Review of the implementation of the Planning Act 2011 will also provide valuable insight on how the planning system is working.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the location; and (ii) dates when bridges on NI Railways network have been subject to a bridge strike on more than one occasion, in each of the last three financial years. *[R]*

(AQW 8607/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The requested information is contained on the attached page

NIR Bridge No	01.188	01.236	02.270A	02.282	02.296	04.318	05.073	06.424	07.112	08.129	08.180	10.189A	11.003
Local Name	Red Bridge	Tandragee Rd	Ballinderry Rd	Antrim St	Upper Dunmurry Ln	Bridge End St	Old Stone Rd	North Rd	Clark's Bridge /Toome Road	Dunminning County Rd	Windyhall	Millburn Rd	Brookhill / Lissue Rd
Nearest NIR Station	Newry	Portadown	Portadown	Lisburn	Derriaghly	Central	Antrim	Carrick	Antrim	Ballymena	Ballymoney	Coleraine	Knockmore
2017/18		22/04/17 26/03/18		20/07/17 05/09/17 07/11/17 16/01/18 14/02/18			08/05/17 28/09/17 08/11/17 24/02/18	18/04/17 20/05/17 22/08/17	27/04/17 08/12/17	01/11/17 05/02/18	02/03/18	18/12/17 15/01/18 26/01/18	
2018/19	16/09/18 28/01/19	09/03/19	28/09/18 24/12/18	15/11/18	08/04/18 06/07/18 18/02/19		16/09/18 20/09/18 06/03/19	08/05/18 14/05/18 01/02/19	16/04/18	25/03/19		02/06/18 20/03/19	16/08/18 09/11/18
2019/20		23/09/19		04/06/19	11/03/20	14/08/19 27/08/19	07/06/19 04/12/19	17/09/19	11/03/20		14/06/19 03/07/19	16/03/20	

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the rationale for only seeking £1 million in the October 2020 Monitoring Round to cover (i) minor works; and (ii) local transport and safety measures.
(AQW 8608/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has recently submitted a capital bid in October monitoring for £5.5m of which £4.5m is in relation to structural maintenance for resurfacing and £1m for minor works / Local Transport and Safety Measures (LTSM).

The Department's bid for minor works and LTSM reflects the uncertainty around delivery given the current COVID 19 conditions, the longer lead-in times required for this type of work and our capacity to successfully deliver those schemes by the end of this financial year.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to a recent road traffic accident involving a child, whether she will agree to road calming for Beechfield Drive, Donaghadee.
(AQW 8625/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am very sorry to hear of a collision involving a child and I hope the young person is recovering from this unfortunate incident. I have asked my officials to contact the PSNI to obtain further information on this collision to help inform a decision on next steps.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will consider a reduction of the speed limit to 40mph in Cotton, North Down.
(AQW 8626/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The need for a change in the speed limit on a road is assessed in accordance with the Department's guidelines, 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 using the criteria set out in this policy document and I have asked officials to advise you of the outcome of the review.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure how to access the detailed stadium crowd safety plan related to the Casement Park planning application reference: LA04/2017/0474/F.
(AQW 8646/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The detailed stadium crowd safety plan should be requested from the Safety Technical Group which was established by the Department for Communities to review, challenge and advise on all aspects of spectator safety, and to ensure that best practice was embedded appropriately within the final designs of the stadium.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Infrastructure why it has taken so long for her Department to resolve the ownership of the land at the junction of Rann Road and Annacloy Road, Downpatrick.
(AQW 8658/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has declared surplus to requirements 355 sq. metres of land at the junction of Rann Road and Annacloy Road, Downpatrick. There is no issue with the Department's title to this land. However, the adjoining landowners have incorporated this land into their driveway and garden and are claiming possessory title.

The Member will appreciate that, in line with Government Disposal Procedures, when offering any land for sale, the Department must provide vacant possession for any successful bidder. This is a long running case that is proving to be difficult to resolve quickly to the satisfaction of all interested parties. My Department has recently withdrawn the land from sale until such times as vacant possession can be secured.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 7697/17-22, which specific piece of legislation gives her Department legislative power and competence to take forward or approve a scheme to bridge the Bannfoot.
(AQW 8660/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Under Article 3 of the Roads (NI) Order 1993, my Department may construct a new road, including any bridge over which a road passes, where it appears to the Department expedient to do so for the purpose of facilitating road traffic.

As I advised the Member in my answer to his recent Assembly Question (AQW 7697/17-22), any 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. Should the Council decide to take forward a bridge scheme in the future and the proposed bridge is to be located at a location on the river considered navigable, the Council would have to apply to my Department for the necessary Bridge Orders to be made, as required under Articles 4, 5 and 6 of the Roads (NI) Order 1993.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has the (i) in-house capacity; and (ii) necessary budget to employ external contractors to carry out street light repairs over the upcoming winter period.
(AQW 8664/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to be able to confirm that I have allocated a budget of £5m for street lighting maintenance for the current financial year. This funding will allow for the provision of a full street lighting repair service that will be delivered by my Department's internal contractor and external contractors.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline whether she intends to bring forward a grants scheme for greenway schemes.
(AQW 8720/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In September, I announced £2.8 million of capital grants towards the development of six greenway projects, where construction could begin this financial year. I also indicated that I hope to be in a position to fund further greenway projects in the future out of the blue /green infrastructure fund. Officials have already written to Councils encouraging them to submit their business cases for projects where construction could start next year.

Decisions on the extent of funding for any future greenway projects will depend on the budget provided to my Department for 2021/22 and beyond.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to the Minister for Transport's response to Oireachtas parliamentary questions 29301/20 & 29305/20 where he only specified a study of rail speeds around the Belfast-Dublin-Limerick Junction-Cork line, with no mention to Derry, to outline (i) why, on 7 October, she announced plans to progress a feasibility study into high speed rail for Derry-Belfast-Dublin-Cork-Limerick; (ii) whether improved connectivity of rail for Derry on the agenda; and (iii) whether it was agreed.
(AQW 8722/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Minister for Transport, Eamon Ryan T.D and I agreed at the NSMC meeting on 7 October 2020 to progress the feasibility study for high speed rail, a commitment in New Decade, New Approach (NDNA).

In addition to the commitment in NDNA to conduct a feasibility study into high speed rail between Belfast – Dublin – Cork, we also agreed that the feasibility study will be extended and will now include Derry and Limerick in the terms of reference.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will engage with Mooreland and Owenvaragh Residents Association in relation to the Casement Park development.
(AQW 8736/17-22)

Ms Mallon: You will be aware that I announced my decision to recommend planning approval for the new stadium at Casement Park on 13 October 2020. However, before a final decision issues a Notice of Opinion to approve will first issue to Belfast City Council and the applicant. There is a right to a hearing before the Planning Appeals Commission should either the Council or the applicant disagree with the Department's opinion. As such I do not consider it appropriate to engage with any party at this time.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on MOT services in light of the new COVID-19 restrictions.
(AQW 8795/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Vehicle testing services at all 15 Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) test centres are unaffected by the new COVID-19 restrictions that came into effect on Friday 16 October.

The DVA has carried out an extensive review of its vehicle testing risk assessments to ensure that all relevant control measures relating to COVID-19 have been incorporated into the testing process to allow vehicle testing to continue. These control measures are in line with public health advice and guidance and are both necessary and proportionate to mitigate against the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

I can assure you it remains my top priority to ensure that staff and customers remain safe and the DVA will continue to be guided by the latest public health advice and will regularly review its risk assessments to ensure vehicle testing services can be safely conducted.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the ramifications of not implementing the Interbus agreement by the end of the year.

(AQW 8877/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Department for Transport in Great Britain are making the necessary arrangements for the UK to accede to the International Interbus Agreement. This Agreement will permit occasional services only.

A Protocol to expand the Agreement to include regular and special regular services has been agreed by its contracting parties, however three contracting parties must sign the Protocol before it is ratified. Once ratified my Department will bring forward Regulations to give effect to this new legislation.

In the event of a non-negotiated outcome the UK will accede to the Interbus Agreement for occasional services. If the Protocol to the Agreement is not ratified and legislated for by 31 December 2020 passenger transport operators will not have the necessary legislative cover to provide international regular and special regular services from 1 January 2021. My Officials have raised this issue with DfT to ensure a solution can be put in place. I have also written to Executive colleagues and the SOS for Transport to ensure that services right across our island are protected.

I am also aware that in the event that no agreement is reached between the EU and the UK, and the UK does not accede to the Interbus Protocol before 31 December 2020, that the Irish Government will engage with the European Commission on the possibility of an EU Contingency Regulation to facilitate appropriate levels of cross border bus services post-transition.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to actively explore enhanced Home to School Provision to provide greater social distancing in order to limit the transmission of COVID-19 via (i) increased Translink services; (ii) utilisation of private coach operators; and (iii) engagement of private taxis, where relevant regulatory arrangements permit.^[R]

(AQW 8951/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have engaged with the Education Minister on various school transportation issues throughout the pandemic, including how best to provide additional capacity on school services in a way that protects other passengers on our public transport network. As a result of this engagement, Translink agreed to provide an additional 500 school buses, and has also designated some of the public timetabled services as “schools only”.

I have also raised with Minister Weir the potential to utilise private buses and coaches and taxis to provide additional school transport capacity. However, the responsibility for making any such arrangements lies with his Department.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will relax the operation of traffic attendants to support our town centre retailers during the current restrictions.

(AQW 8967/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Traffic attendants perform an important role in local towns and cities helping to ensure that drivers park safely and legally. Parking enforcement ensures that parking spaces are available for shoppers and commuters, which will help support the local economy during these difficult times. I am therefore satisfied that traffic attendants should continue to deliver parking enforcement services across the north at this time.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the (i) condition of; and (ii) plans for MV Portaferry II currently berthed in Strangford.

(AQW 8977/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The MV Portaferry II is in generally good condition but has been temporarily taken out of service due to a mechanical fault. Unfortunately there has been a delay in the delivery of the specialist parts required to complete the necessary repairs. I can confirm the MV Portaferry II will return to normal service when these repairs have been completed. In the interim normal service continues with the MV Strangford II.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she will proceed following receipt of the Ministerial Infrastructure Advisory Panel report and recommendations.

(AQO 960/17-22)

Ms Mallon: You will be aware that the Ministerial Advisory Panel presented their final report and recommendations to me on 2 October 2020.

The report reflects the extensive stakeholder engagement undertaken by the Panel and sets out a number of detailed findings and recommendations in respect of infrastructure planning and delivery here.

I am engaging with Executive colleagues on the final report and also look forward to discussing the report with the Infrastructure Committee to consider how we might best move forward to support the long term planning and delivery of infrastructure, a critical component in the Executive's Brexit planning and Covid recovery.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the number of drivers waiting for a taxi driver practical test.

(AQO 959/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Before undertaking a taxi driver practical test a driver must first pass the taxi theory test. The Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) has confirmed that as of 7 October 2020, 114 candidates hold a valid taxi theory test certificate and have not yet taken a taxi driver practical test.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to increase funding for roads maintenance in North Down.
(AQO 956/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Budget process in relation to 2021/22 and beyond is ongoing and I understand that bilaterals between departmental Ministers and Minister of Finance are to be scheduled towards the end of October to discuss priorities and budget requirements in future years.

Having well maintained roads, cycle paths and footpaths is critical if we are to support public transport, encourage active travel and facilitate the transport of critical goods.

I will of course therefore be making the case for additional funding for maintenance and to ensure that additional funding is allocated fairly across all parts of the north, including of course the member's own constituency.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the challenges created by the COVID-19 crisis, for an update on Translink's School Transport Services.

(AQO 961/17-22)

Ms Mallon: While home-to-school transport is the responsibility of the Education Minister, I recognise that many pupils also rely on our public transport network to travel to and from school. The safety of passengers on our buses and trains remains a key priority for me as we tackle the worrying increase in COVID-19 cases, and, most likely, a challenging winter ahead.

The scientific evidence currently suggests that coronavirus poses a low risk to children, but the risk that infected children pose to adults is not yet clear. Until this is known, we must do everything we can to minimise opportunities for transmission between children and adults.

A key way to do this is to reduce the number of school children travelling on public transport alongside other passengers. This is why I encourage those who can to travel to and from school by active travel, such as walking or cycling, or to use 'park-and-stride' facilities. Translink is also providing over 500 additional bus services to supplement the public transport network to facilitate social distancing for all passengers, including school children.

At present, dedicated school transport services are exempt from the Face Coverings Regulations. However I have been engaging with the Education Minister as I feel the most effective approach would be a simple, uniform mandatory face coverings policy across the board, on school services as well as on public transport.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on cycling infrastructure in West Belfast.

(AQO 963/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department carried out a feasibility study to identify possible walking and cycling routes through and to the Colin area of west Belfast in 2018. Since that time officials have been working with Belfast City Council, Department for Communities and NI Housing Executive to consider a number of routes that could be built and this work is ongoing. Progress on these projects is reported through the Colin Town Centre Stakeholders Group.

Building on the Colin report, a further report was commissioned by my Department on the feasibility of active travel routes throughout north and west Belfast with a view to feeding into a final Belfast Bicycle Network document, which I plan to publish later this year.

Last year my Department completed a linkage at the Broadway Roundabout which ultimately connects the Falls Road through Bog Meadows to Belfast city centre. My Department is also assisting in delivering crossing points for the Belfast City Council's Peace IV project, which aims to connect shared civic space in the west of the city and, in September, I announced part funding for an element of this greenway scheme.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps are being taken, in liaison with the Department for the Economy, to advance hydrogen bus development.

(AQO 957/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I fully recognise the urgent action needed to address the climate emergency we face and the role that my Department has to play in reducing Northern Ireland's carbon footprint in the transport sector. On wider climate change mitigation, I will continue and advance work to facilitate a modal shift to walking and cycling; increase the use of clean public transport including the introduction of 3 Hydrogen Fuelled Buses announced earlier this year and encourage people to switch to greener transport options.

I also recently announced a £30m investment in both Zero Emission Hydrogen and Battery Electric buses that will enter service in 2021/22 and further opportunities to invest in zero emission bus technologies are being assessed.

My focus will be on using available resources to green our infrastructure and deliver sustainable transport that connects our communities, availing of the opportunities that arise when we collaborate within and beyond government. 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 also recently met with Ministers Dodds, Poots and Murphy to discuss opportunities for developing the Hydrogen economy in Northern Ireland.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure to outline the work her Department has carried out to improve road safety in East Belfast since 2017 as a result of road traffic collisions involving loss of life or serious injury.

(AQO 958/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can assure you that my Department takes the issue of road safety very seriously and has commenced work on the successor to the current Road Safety Strategy which expires on 31 December 2020.

The road network is monitored on a yearly basis and for this purpose my Department receives information on road traffic collisions involving personal injury from the PSNI to be used for engineering reasons in the consideration and bringing forward of improvement schemes.

Specific funding for collision remedial schemes is only considered at locations where there are four or more personal injury collisions within a three year period and there is an identifiable collision pattern which can be addressed by engineering measures.

I can confirm that since 2017 no Collision Remedial Schemes have been identified for the East Belfast area however officials have taken forward many other schemes that have benefits in terms of road safety.

In the period identified my Department has implemented a traffic calming scheme at Rochester Road and a further traffic calming scheme is being progressed at Connsbrook Avenue and is currently at the detailed design stage. Two other notable schemes that have been carried out and provide safety benefits are the widening of the Comber Greenway and the upgrading of the signalised crossing at the A55 Knock Road / Glen Road junction.

You will also be aware that I am taking forward a programme of part time 20mph speed limits at schools to improve safety in the vicinity of schools and I am pleased to advise that Knocknagoney Primary School and Leadhill Primary School, both within your constituency area, are included within this year's programme.

A full list of schemes carried out across the East Belfast Constituency area are included within our annual reports to Belfast and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Councils.

These reports can be viewed on the Department's website under "Publications – Corporate Reports":

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/type/corporatereports>

Department of Justice

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to detail the scale of the current underrepresentation of Protestants within the Planning Appeals Commission; and what steps are being taken to address the issue.

(AQW 8235/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The current breakdown by community background within the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) is 64% Roman Catholic, 36% Protestant/Other.

Appointments to the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) are made on the basis of merit in publicly-advertised recruitment competitions. As the sponsor body for PAC, my Department is alert to its current community background composition and, where appropriate, positive action advertising has been used to encourage applications from under-represented groups. Accordingly, the past three external competitions have included an equality opportunity statement that welcomes applications

from men, people with a disability, those from ethnic minorities and those from a Protestant community background as these groupings are currently under-represented within the Commission.

Outreach exercises have included standard newspapers, the Section 75 groups, an e-mail to all those registered with the Royal Town Planning Institute in NI, and publication on The Planner and PAC website.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Justice what treatment and support is available to prisoners with dual diagnosis.
(AQW 8292/17-22)

Mrs Long: Healthcare services, including mental health services, are provided to prisoners in Northern Ireland through the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (the Trust).

Mental Health teams are in place at each establishment, staffed by the Trust, and are comprised of mental health nurses, psychiatrists, mental health occupational therapists and clinical psychologists.

The diagnosis, treatment and support of prisoners with a dual diagnosis is provided by the Trust, and this information is held confidentially by the Trust.

The Northern Ireland Prison Service does not hold, nor have access to, the information to answer this question. We respectfully suggest that the question is redirected to the Department of Health.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Justice (i) what action she has taken to ensure victims are made aware of the Victims Charter; and (ii) to detail what reporting mechanisms she has put in place to ensure this Charter is being communicated to victims.
(AQW 8322/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Victim Charter is currently accessed through NI Direct, my Department's website and those of our key criminal justice and voluntary sector partners. It is also referenced in leaflets and guidance which should be provided to victims when they come into contact with the criminal justice system.

However I welcome the recommendations in the CJINI Report on the Care and Treatment of Victims and Witnesses by the Criminal Justice System which indicate that although some work has been done to provide victims with access to the Charter, there is a need to improve victims' awareness of their rights and entitlements under the Charter, so they are assured about how they will be supported and informed. I also agree with the recommendation by CJINI that, across the criminal justice system, we need to ensure that service providers who have a duty to provide services to meet victims' entitlements are fully aware of their obligations under the Charter.

My Department is working with partners on the Victim and Witness Steering Group (VWSG) to develop a multi-agency Action Plan that will deliver on the recommendations in the CJINI Report. This will include the development of a cohesive and joined up information and communication plan to improve what information is provided to victims and witnesses, how it is provided and to make it more accessible. It will also include raising both public and organisational awareness of the Victim Charter and the key entitlements under it. The VWSG will report to the Criminal Justice Board on delivery against the Action Plan.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Justice what discussions or other steps she or her officials have undertaken with the Northern Ireland Office with regard to ending the segregated regime in our prisons.
(AQW 8331/17-22)

Mrs Long: I remain in contact with the Secretary of State regarding separation and have discussed the issue with him on a number of occasions.

Separation within prisons is both a sensitive and challenging issue. Fundamentally, it exists because of conditions in wider society. Bringing about an end to the separated regime is highly dependent on our collective success at tackling paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime.

Mr Nesbitt asked the Minister of Justice whether she has made any assessment of the preconditions that need to be met before the segregated prison regime can be ended.
(AQW 8332/17-22)

Mrs Long: Separation exists because of the prevailing conditions in wider society; bringing about an end to the separated regime, therefore, also depends on our collective success at tackling paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime.

It is my duty to ensure that the safest possible conditions exist for both staff and prisoners, both in the general and separated regimes.

Ending separation would have significant implications for the good order, discipline and security of prisons as a whole. It could also contribute to a greater level of threat to prison officers.

On that basis it is not something which should be embarked upon without careful consideration of all of those issues.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Justice what measures her Department has put in place for staff working within the Northern Ireland Prison Service to be tested for COVID-19 on a regular basis.

(AQW 8397/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service has well developed and embedded procedures for staff to be tested for COVID-19.

Department of Health testing guidance was updated on 9 April 2020 to designate prison staff as key workers. NIPS staff and their household members, who are displaying COVID-19 symptoms, can be tested through an agreement with Health Trusts.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice (i) for her assessment of; and (ii) to detail any relevant data regarding reduced offending behaviour among children and young people whilst in foster care.

(AQW 8453/17-22)

Mrs Long: Whilst my Department has responsibility for producing reoffending statistics, looked after children are not identified as a separate cohort of all children who offend, so no data is available for those in foster care. It is therefore not possible for any assessment to be made.

I am aware, however, that the Department of Health collects and reports information on children in care, including data on children cautioned or convicted. It may be, therefore, that the information you require is held by that Department.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) how many prison officers have been subject to physical assaults each year for the last five years; and (ii) which house these assaults originated.

(AQW 8497/17-22)

Mrs Long: The number of prison officers who have been subject to physical assaults each year for the last five years, and the location where these assaults are recorded as occurring, is shown in the table below.

Location	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 (1.1.2020 – 30.9.2020)
Bann	2	6	6	3	0
Belfast	2	0	1	5	0
Braid	1	0	0	0	0
Bush	0	1	1	2	0
Craigavon Area	0	0	0	2	0
CSU (MBY)	3	7	6	1	3
Davis	0	0	0	0	1
Erne	6	9	6	2	2
Foyle	8	0	0	0	1
Healthcare (MBY)	1	1	1	2	0
Lagan	7	10	13	9	3
Lagan Valley	0	0	0	1	0
Other Areas (MBY)	2	1	2	1	1
Quoile	2	3	3	3	2
Reception (MBY)	0	0	1	0	0
Roe	9	6	8	1	2
Not recorded	0	1	0	1	0
Halward	0	0	2	1	2
H Block 1	0	0	1	1	0
H Block 2	2	0	0	0	0
H Block 3	1	1	0	1	0
Ash	7	4	4	2	2
Beech	4	7	5	1	2

Location	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020 (1.1.2020 – 30.9.2020)
Cedar	2	0	0	4	1
CSU (HBW)	0	3	1	3	0
Healthcare (HBW)	2	1	0	0	0
Other Areas (HBW)	1	2	1	1	0
Reception (HBW)	0	1	0	0	0
Willow	0	0	0	0	1
Total	62	64	62	47	23

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice for a breakdown of the annual costs of segregation in our prisons.
(AQW 8508/17-22)

Mrs Long: The annual estimated cost of administering separation in the Northern Ireland Prison Service is £2.404m. The cost is broken down as follows:

Hydebank Wood staffing Costs:	£0.355m per annum
Maghaberry Staffing Costs:	£1.864m per annum
Maghaberry Accommodation Costs:	£0.185m per annum

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice what safety measures are in place to protect G4S security staff working at police stations from potentially contracting COVID-19.
(AQW 8546/17-22)

Mrs Long: Decisions relating to health and safety measures, and in compliance with COVID-19 guidance, within police stations are an operational matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board (NIPB). I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the NIPB. You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI.

As an employer, G4S also has a responsibility to comply with Government COVID-19 guidance to ensure the well-being and health and safety of their employees.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice for an update on addressing paramilitarism in North Down.
(AQW 8606/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Executive Action Plan, which is co-ordinated within my Department, takes a holistic approach to tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime. It includes 38 commitments aimed at preventing people from becoming vulnerable to paramilitary influence, providing support to enable transition away from paramilitary structures, building confidence in the justice system, and implementing new powers and strategies to deal with paramilitary activity.

Ending the harm caused by paramilitarism cannot be the sole responsibility of the criminal justice system. We are working in partnership across the Executive to address the systemic issues that build strong, resilient communities where there is no place for paramilitary organisations and activity.

There are a number of projects currently operating in North Down to address the harm caused to communities and individuals by paramilitary organisations. These include: the Education Authority is delivering the START project, a youth outreach scheme which aims to build relationships with young people who could be considered as being at higher risk of involvement in paramilitary activity; the Probation Board is delivering the ASPIRE project, which works with marginalised young men (aged 16 to 30) who are most at risk from being involved in paramilitarism and criminality; the Department for Communities is delivering a women's programme which seeks to increase the participation and influence of women in community development; and The Executive Office is delivering the Communities in Transition project which has developed projects in specific areas where there has been a history of paramilitary activity and coercive control. In addition, the PSNI / NCA / HMRC Paramilitary Crime Task Force is targeting criminality associated with paramilitary organisations and has had a number of successful operations in the North Down area.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Justice whether the Northern Ireland Prison Service intends to grant prisoners Christmas home leave, in light of the latest COVID-19 surge.
(AQW 8627/17-22)

Mrs Long: A decision about Christmas Home Leave will be taken in due course. This decision will take account of a number of factors including the public health situation over the coming weeks.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice, in light of the Policing Board's Human Rights Annual Report 2019/20 which states that of 5,654 uses of the Justice and Security Act (JSA) power, no further action was taken in 96 per cent of cases, to detail how much public money was spent in policing the usage and implementation of the JSA power on these occasions.
(AQW 8645/17-22)

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 Beattie asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 7798/17-12 (i) who accompanied the Minister on her visit to Dublin to meet the Irish Foreign Minister; and (ii) in what capacity.
(AQW 8662/17-22)

Mrs Long: I was not accompanied on the visit.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 7890/17-22, (i) who covers the cost of her security when she visits the Irish Republic in her capacity as (a) the Minister of Justice; (b) the Alliance Party leader; and (ii) who covered the cost of her recent visit to meet the Irish Foreign Minister in Dublin on the 24 September 2020.
(AQW 8663/17-22)

Mrs Long: As previously indicated in response to AQW 7890/17-22, I do not comment on matters relating to my personal security.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill 2019-21.
(AQW 8894/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill is a UK wide Bill which relates to reserved or excepted matters in Northern Ireland and is therefore outside the scope of the Department of Justice.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice, pursuant to AQW 8645/17-22, to detail how much was spent on stop and search activities in relation to the Justice and Security Act.
(AQW 9059/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department of Justice does not hold this information. This is an operational matter for the Chief Constable.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Justice whether she has ever received a bid for funding for body scanners to use in prisons.
(AQW 9111/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service are currently examining how X-Ray Body Scanners can be implemented within establishments.

The Northern Ireland Prison Service has funding available for the implementation of this technology.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Justice to detail the number of (i) hotels; (ii) restaurants; (iii) bed and breakfasts; (iii) barbers and hairdressers; and (iv) beauticians, which were prosecuted for breaches of the COVID-19 regulations, broken down by council area.
(AQW 9185/17-22)

Mrs Long: There have been 12 cases completed at courts up to 16 October 2020, for offences under Coronavirus regulations. Of these cases, 10 resulted in a conviction, though none of the defendants, from case result data held by the Department, are recorded as being hotels, restaurants, bed and breakfasts, barbers, hairdressers or beauticians.

Additionally, there are currently 13 cases currently being prosecuted in courts in relation to offences under Coronavirus regulations.

Aside from those cases dealt with at, and proceeding through, court, individuals who breach Coronavirus regulations may be issued with Prohibition Notices, Penalty Notices and Community Resolution Notices. It is important to note that the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) is not the only organisation with the power to issue these notices in respect of breaches of COVID regulations. Local councils, Border Force and any other body designated by DoH can also issue such notices.

The issue of the above notices by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the associated statistics is a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI, Border Force, Councils or to other designated organisations, in relation to those particular figures.

Department for the Economy

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy how she will ensure that people furthest from the labour market continue to receive support to access employment after the ending of the current European Social Fund Programme funding period in 2022.

(AQW 8410/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): The European Social Fund Programme currently provides important support to a large number of individuals who face a range of barriers to employment. The current projects are due to conclude in March 2022 and a joint project with the Department for Communities has been established to consider the range of policy and delivery options.

A key consideration for any replacement programme will be access to the necessary funding. This is being progressed by the Department of Finance on behalf of the NI Executive.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of current health protection regulations and restrictions on the local music industry; and (ii) whether she will bid for financial resources for those who are adversely affected.

(AQW 8527/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As this question is specific to the local music industry I have been asked by the Minister for Economy to respond.

I value the role of the arts and culture in our society and to our well-being and I recognise the importance of live music within that. I, and my officials, have met with representatives from across the local music industry. Through that engagement, and from the correspondence I have received, I am aware of the impact of the current regulations on those who make their living through music. The current restrictions and limitations will be revised and ultimately removed when circumstances allow.

I have welcomed the £29m allocation from the Executive which will provide support across the broad arts, language, culture and heritage sectors.

My officials are engaging with partners across central and local government, as well as arm's length bodies and sectoral representatives to ensure the funding is distributed quickly, fairly and to maximise its impact. Work on the programmes of support is well advanced and details of the new funding schemes, including guidance, eligibility and application information will be available shortly. Relevant programmes will be open for application from those working within the music industry.

This funding is in addition to the £5.5m Creative Support Fund previously established by my Department. To date, £1.9m has been paid to small to medium organisations in addition to just over £0.5m to individuals, including musicians. A further round of awards from that fund is anticipated in the coming days.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy what action she will take to address the imbalance between the financial support available to students from Northern Ireland studying medicine at university in England compared to that available to students from England on the same courses.

(AQW 8540/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Health and student finance are devolved matters. The financial support available to healthcare students varies across the regions of the UK, depending upon where the student is ordinarily resident. Policy reflects the resources available to each administration, and their assessment of workforce supply priorities.

My Department pays tuition fees for fifth year medical and dental students from Northern Ireland studying a primary degree at any of the medical schools throughout the UK. These students may also be entitled to a means-tested bursary and specific maintenance allowances. I have no plans to change these arrangements.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy (i) why her Department raised the level of financial support available to smaller, standalone wind turbine based generating stations in 2014; (ii) to detail the number of these type of generating stations that joined the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) scheme each year, for the duration of the scheme; (iii) to detail the extent of the increase in number of these stations in the last few years of the NIRO scheme; and (iv) what actions her Department took to pre-empt and manage a surge in applications.

(AQW 8694/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department did not raise the level of financial support to small-scale onshore wind in 2014. The level of support available for onshore wind generating stations up to 250kW was set in April 2010 and was subsequently reviewed in 2014. Despite evidence that technology costs for small-scale onshore wind had increased from 2010, the Department did not increase the level of support in 2014 and maintained the level at 4 ROCs.

The number of accreditations each year has been received from Ofgem, as administrator of the scheme, and is detailed below. The NIRO closed to small scale onshore wind on 30 June 2016, with grace periods for generators that met certain criteria, and the numbers reflect an urgency for accreditation pre-closure.

Year	Number of accreditations
2005/06	8
2006/07	27
2007/08	57
2008/09	161
2009/10	46
2010/11	70
2011/12	30
2012/13	59
2013/14	95
2014/15	128
2015/16	128
2016/17	248
2017/18	152
2018/19	2

Closure of the NIRO was announced in May 2012 and the Department initially consulted on closure in August 2015. The Department established a steering group to manage the process which included membership from all of the main stakeholders. The group identified and progressed key issues including NIRO accreditation.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy for a financial and institutional breakdown of the £5.8 million allocated to university research and development.

(AQW 8765/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The £5.8 million was allocated to university research and development as follows ;

Queen's University Belfast	£3,944,000 (68%)
Ulster University	£1,856,000 (32%)

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy, in respect of the internal review into petroleum licensing policy which the Department completed in 2019, (i) to detail commencement dates and reporting dates of that internal review; (ii) to lay a copy of the internal review in the Assembly Library, including its scope and findings; and (iii) why the findings of this internal review have not published prior to tender being initiated, given those findings are being used to justify the rationale and business case for the funding of the tendered research currently being considered.

(AQW 8774/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The response to AQW 7567/17-22 sets out the timeframes of the internal review of petroleum licensing;
- (ii) This was a high level internal review, the findings of which were set out in a submission to the Permanent Secretary attaching a draft strategic scoping and discussion paper. The submission recommended the need for an independent study of existing research on the impacts of petroleum licensing and its application to Northern Ireland to provide a solid regional evidence base. The Department will use the information gathered to consider options and develop, through stakeholder engagement and consultation, evidence based petroleum policy proposals.

The specification for the research study sets out the strategic context and rationale for commissioning this piece of work and is available on the Department's website at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/specification-research-economic-societal-and-environmental-impacts-onshore-petroleum-exploration-and>

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what is the estimated per capita cost to Northern Ireland electricity consumers of the support given to renewable electricity production.

(AQW 8840/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Support for renewable electricity production comes from the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation. The estimated annual cost of this to the typical NI domestic consumer in 2019 was £31.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department will carry out a review on all types of renewable generators, to ensure that current levels of financial support and the actual rates of return, that are being achieved, are compatible with the original projections, as recommended in the Northern Ireland Audit Office report into generating electricity from renewable energy.

(AQW 8860/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: All of the recommendations included in the Northern Ireland Audit Office report that are specific to my Department have been accepted. The Department will ensure they are addressed going forward.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy why smaller wind turbines were incentivised when such provided poorer value for consumers.

(AQW 8923/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) is technology neutral and provides support for a range of renewable technologies and size bands.

This is consistent with the rest of the United Kingdom, which also provides support for small-scale onshore wind through both the Renewables Obligations and the Feed-in Tariff.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether the decision not to reduce subsidies to small scale wind turbines and anaerobic digesters in or about 2015 was subject to EU State Aid approval.

(AQW 8924/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The decision was that Northern Ireland Renewable Obligation Certificate (NIROC) banding levels should be retained at their existing level. EU State Aid approval was not required.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy whether the decision to increase subsidies to small scale wind turbines and anaerobic digesters in or about 2011 was subject to EU State Aid approval.

(AQW 8925/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The decisions to increase Northern Ireland Renewable Obligation Certificate support for small scale onshore wind and generating stations fuelled by biogas produced through the anaerobic digestion process, were both subject to EU State Aid approval.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Carroll asked the Assembly Commission whether it has considered the merits of making available non-contact thermometers at the entrances of Parliament Buildings.

(AQW 8478/17-22)

Mr K Buchanan (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Member will be aware that the Assembly Commission established a COVID-19 Response Group at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, chaired by the Director of Corporate Services, with responsibility for overseeing our response and determining measures required to deal with the effects of the pandemic in Parliament Buildings.

These measures have included changes to the entrance arrangements and the provision of screens and hand sanitisers at those locations. Consideration has also been given to the merits of providing non-contact thermometers at the entrances but this has not been identified (either through advice from the Public Health Agency or through guidance issued by the Executive) as a requirement at this time.

The Response Group continues to meet on a weekly basis and will continue to implement such measures as are necessary to mitigate the risk of infection in Parliament Buildings.

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission why there is water ingress in corridor ceilings on the third floor of Parliament Buildings.

(AQW 8506/17-22)

Mr O'Dowd (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Member will be aware that the Assembly Commission undertook a major construction project, aimed at refurbishing the roof of Parliament Buildings, in 2014. This work, which included the installation of a new waterproof roof covering, was successfully completed in 2015.

As is normal for projects of this nature, a number of minor defects were identified, investigated and, where appropriate, addressed by the contractor.

The Commission is aware of issues that appear to relate directly to the works undertaken during the roof project and these are currently being investigated by the design team and contractors.

One such issue is the recurrence of a water leak in the 3rd floor corridor at the south east side of the building.

Several additional issues which resulted in water ingress on parts of the 3rd and 4th floors emerged following Storm Francis on 25 August 2020. These new issues may be outside the scope of the work of the roof project. If this is found to be the case, they will be addressed separately by Building Services Branch.

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission for its assessment of whether the manner in which the railings on the roof of Parliament Buildings were installed is the cause of water ingress.

(AQW 8507/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Member will be aware that the Assembly Commission completed a major construction project, aimed at refurbishing the roof of Parliament Buildings, in 2015. Included in this project was the installation of a new safety barrier/handrail system at roof level.

The Commission is aware of issues that appear to relate directly to the works undertaken during the roof project including problems with the handrail system that was installed and with water ingress.

As is the normal procedure where such situations arise in complex construction projects, these issues are now the subject of an investigation by the design team and contractors, seeking to determine the cause of the problems, to identify responsibility for the issues and to propose a methodology for addressing them effectively. The Commission will be represented throughout this investigation process.

It is too early in the process for the Commission to come to a view on whether the manner in which the railings were installed on the roof is the cause of the water ingress.

Mr Carroll asked the Assembly Commission whether it plans to introduce technology in the Chamber to allow Members who are self-isolating to partake in Assembly business

(AQW 8557/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Assembly's Standing Orders do not currently provide for Members to participate remotely in plenary business. If the Assembly was to amend Standing Orders to allow for this, the Assembly Commission would provide the Assembly with the necessary infrastructure and technology.

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission whether the installation specification for the railings on the roof of Parliament Buildings was approved by and on behalf of the Commission.

(AQW 8589/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Member will be aware that the Assembly Commission completed a major construction project, aimed at refurbishing the roof of Parliament Buildings, in 2015. Included in this project was the installation of a new safety barrier/handrail system at roof level.

The Commission appointed an integrated design team to undertake the scheme design and to oversee the works on site, following the appointment of the successful contractor.

The Commission is aware of some issues that appear to relate directly to the works undertaken during the roof project, including problems with the new safety barrier/handrail system that was installed and also with water ingress.

As is the normal procedure where such situations arise in complex construction projects, these issues are now the subject of an investigation by the design team and contractors, seeking to determine the cause of the problems, to identify responsibility for the issues and to propose a methodology for addressing them effectively. The Commission will be represented throughout this investigation process.

The Commission approved the scheme design brought to it by the design team and subsequently approved the appointment of a main contractor to undertake the works on site.

The Commission's contract, as is common with complex construction contracts, contains contractor and/or supplier-designed work elements. The aforementioned investigation is working to establish where responsibility for the relevant work elements in our contract lies. Until the investigation is concluded, it would not be possible or appropriate for the Commission to comment on the specific detail of the specification for the handrail installation.

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission (i) whether there are outstanding claims against the contractor who did the work on the roof of Parliament Buildings; and (ii) if so, how are these being progressed.

(AQW 8590/17-22)

Mr K Buchanan (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): The Member will be aware that the Assembly Commission completed a major construction project, aimed at refurbishing the roof of Parliament Buildings, in 2015.

The Commission is aware of some issues relating to the roof project and these have been brought to the attention of the design team and contractors who are currently investigating the issues. The Commission will be represented throughout this investigation process.

There are no outstanding claims against the contractor.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 30 October 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 4183/17-22, by what means can Ms Brenda King lawfully perform functions arising under Section 14(2) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 which are expressly bestowed on a named office holder, namely the duly appointed Attorney General.
(AQW 5011/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Section 22 of the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 (as amended) provides the First Minister and deputy First Minister (acting jointly) with the power to appoint an Attorney General for Northern Ireland and with the power to make arrangements for the discharge of the functions of the Attorney General for Northern Ireland during any vacancy in that office.

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the establishment of a dedicated fund for restorative justice initiatives to provide enhanced levels of resource over longer periods of time to deliver positive outcomes for individuals and communities, as outlined in A9 of the Tackling Paramilitarism Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme.
(AQW 5149/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: An options paper for the establishment of a dedicated fund for restorative justice initiatives is being developed by officials for consideration by Ministers.

In parallel with this, through Action B4 (the Communities in Transition Project), a contract to the value of £1.4m has been awarded to deliver a regional programme to expand the use of restorative practices in non-justice settings across the eight Communities in Transition areas of focus.

Mr O'Toole asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail what progress has been made on implementing Article 11 of the Protocol to ensure the protection of the all-island economy, clarifying how they intend to address gaps on (i) mobility rights on the island; (ii) mutual recognition of professional qualifications; (iii) data flows; and (iv) barriers to all-island trade in services.
(AQW 5826/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Withdrawal Agreement, of which the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol is part, is an agreement between the United Kingdom and the European Union. As International Relations is an excepted matter under the terms of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the implementation of the Protocol is a responsibility of the UK Government.

At the recent meeting of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Ministers discussed the implications of the UK's withdrawal from the EU. Both jurisdictions share a common interest of minimising disruption to trade and economic activity and there will be further engagement on this topic at future NSMC Sectoral meetings and bi-laterally between Ministers, where appropriate.

In relation to mobility rights on the island, Immigration and the Common Travel Area are the responsibility of the UK Government. Under the Common Travel Area (CTA) Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) agreed by the UK Government (UKG) and the Government of Ireland on 8 May 2019, British and Irish citizens remain able to move freely and to work, including on a self-employed basis, within the CTA.

EEA citizens who do not qualify for settled / pre-settled status or as frontier workers wishing to enter Northern Ireland or any part of the UK for activity under Article 11 of the Protocol will be required to obtain the necessary immigration status under the points-based immigration system from 1 January 2021.

In relation to services, including the mutual recognition of professional qualifications and the continued free flow of data, the most effective way of ensuring strong trade links is through a robust UK/EU agreement.

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will make representations to the Northern Ireland Office to request that the voting age in Northern Ireland be lowered to 16 years old.

(AQW 5912/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: In the absence of a consensus on this matter it would not be appropriate for us to make such representations on behalf of the Executive.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the impact of the Executive Committee (Functions) Bill on the bringing of all proposed departmental legislation before the Executive.

(AQW 5965/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive has agreed procedures for consideration of, and agreement to, legislative proposals. These will not be affected by the enactment of the Executive Committee (Functions) Bill.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to publish the list of persons designated by the parties with whom papers can be shared relating to the Brexit sub-committee.

(AQW 6190/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Designated party colleagues with whom papers relating to the Executive Committee dealing with EU Exit matters can be shared, as notified to the Secretariat, are detailed in the table below.

Party	Name
Alliance	Stephen Farry
	Sorcha Eastwood
DUP	Nigel Dodds
	Timothy Johnston
SDLP	Matthew O'Toole
	Sinead McLaughlin
Sinn Fein	Chris Hazzard
	Caoimhe Archibald
UUP	Steve Aiken
	John Stewart

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the revised Ministerial Code will be brought before the Assembly.

(AQW 8496/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We are currently considering proposed amendments to the Ministerial Code to reflect the changes in the law introduced by the Executive Committee (Functions) Act 2020. Following Executive agreement we will table a motion for their approval by the Assembly at the earliest opportunity.

Ms McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will recuse themselves from the process of appointing the Head of the Civil Service.

(AQW 8872/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The particular nature of the HOCS position in terms of its duties and responsibilities and its relationship to the Executive has implications for the recruitment process.

The HOCS appointment process provides for our involvement in the recruitment and selection decision-making process, both at the planning stage of the competition and at second stage interviews.

The HOCS recruitment policy was revised in 2016 to incorporate this Ministerial element and mirrors that applied across GB and devolved administrations.

We will continue to be involved in the appointment process, within a framework that ensures that merit remains the basis for selection.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the proposals which manifested themselves in the COVID-19 Regulations of 16 October 2020 come to the Executive with their joint consent.

(AQW 9091/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: All matters included on the agenda of a meeting of the Executive Committee are subject to our prior joint agreement.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he and his officials have met officers at Derry City and Strabane District Council to discuss measures to improve air quality in its urban area.

(AQW 8539/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Air Quality is continually monitored across Northern Ireland. This includes monitoring pollutants such as particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide.

In Northern Ireland, District Councils are responsible for reviewing the state of air quality in their district. Derry City and Strabane City Council do this through monitoring air quality at a number of sites throughout Northern Ireland. DAERA provides financial assistance to Derry City and Strabane City Council through the Local Air Quality Management Grant to support this monitoring network. As part of the grant process, policy and technical air quality officers are in regular contact with the council as regards its approach to the management of air quality.

There are currently four Air Quality Management Areas and four automatic monitoring stations within Derry and Strabane District Council. When an AQMA is declared a council must produce an Action Plan to outline how they will reduce exceedances or the likelihood of exceedances of air quality objectives within their council area. Derry City and Strabane District Council have such an action plan in place which is currently under review by the Council.

At present my Department is developing the first Clean Air Strategy for Northern Ireland. In December 2016, the previous DAERA Minister, Michele McIlveen, gave a commitment to develop an air quality strategy. Since then, my officials have been working on developing a draft Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document. This work has involved close collaboration with other Departments, in particular the Department for Infrastructure.

The Discussion Document has now been finalised and will be launched shortly for a 12 week public consultation in the coming weeks. The consultation will invite views on a wide range of matters relating to air quality and I would welcome further engagement with Derry City and Strabane District Council at this stage to discuss issues relating to air quality within that District Council area.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given that 98 per cent of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) have exceeded their critical loads of nitrogen deposition, 86 per cent by over 200 per cent and some by over 300 per cent of their critical load thresholds, to detail what shortcomings by his Department have been identified that resulted in the situation.

(AQW 8596/17-22)

Mr Poots: The scale of critical load exceedance with respect to nitrogen deposition at Northern Ireland's SACs is largely due to emissions from Northern Ireland livestock, and to a lesser extent, other sources such as transport, industry and transboundary pollution. This reflects the importance of livestock production to the Northern Ireland economy. There have been sustained increases in livestock numbers between 2010 and 2017, with limited provision for mitigation or abatement.

There has been greater awareness in recent years of the impact of nitrogen deposition on the environment so rather than looking back on any potential shortcomings we are learning from past experience and the emerging evidence to remedy this situation in a way that delivers for a healthy environment, including protection and improvement of these habitats, and for sustainable agriculture. An important element of this will be developing a comprehensive approach to ammonia and I intend to publish these proposals for consultation soon.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how many crimes on farms in North Down have been reported to his Department, over each of the last five years.

(AQW 8629/17-22)

Mr Poots: While the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs works closely with the PSNI, DAERA is not responsible for collating statistics on crimes on farms.

However the PSNI has provided the following data on crimes associated with "agricultural-based activity" in the Ards & North Down policing district: -

2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
20	17	21	10	6

You should note however that the PSNI's data includes not only crimes where the location was a farm, but may also include stolen property or vehicles with an agricultural link which occurred in another location.

Further more detailed information, including the PSNI's Statistics Branch's quarterly bulletin on Agricultural and Rural Crime in Northern Ireland, may be found on the web-site - <https://www.psni.police.uk/inside-psni/Statistics/police-recorded-crime-statistics/>

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department's records of existing anaerobic digester plants includes records of plants without planning permission.
(AQW 8855/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department continues to work closely with colleagues from the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and Department for the Economy (DfE) to identify all anaerobic digestion (AD) plants and to ensure they are regulated effectively. There is a statutory duty on my Department to ensure that all AD plants treating waste have planning permission in place prior to them being issued with a waste management licence or permit.

Responsibility for planning rests with the DfI and the 11 Local Authority Planning Departments. My Department is consulted by the planning authorities in relation to planning applications involving AD plants but the planning decision does rest with the Planning Departments within local Councils. Therefore my Department does not maintain comprehensive records of AD plants that have no planning permission in place.

My Department holds information on existing anaerobic digester (AD) plants for a number of purposes. These include applications made to the Department for authorisations to accept waste or treat animal by-products which require information on the planning status of the AD plant.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for his assessment of rural fly tipping and littering across West Tyrone; and (ii) to detail whether additional funding will be provided to address this.
(AQW 8910/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- i) My Department's (NIEA) waste enforcement activity focuses on large-scale waste disposal activity rather than ad hoc dumping often referred to as fly-tipping, which is addressed by the District Councils. However, the NIEA will assist the councils by the removal of hazardous wastes, such as asbestos and fuel laundering waste, and larger waste deposits over 20 cubic metres.

My Department records its waste management activities on a District Council (DC), rather than Parliamentary Constituency (PC) level. Data relating to the two DCs that encompass the West Tyrone PC area, Fermanagh and Omagh, and Derry and Strabane, show that, in the 6 months between April and September 2020, there were 9 waste-related incidents cleared by NIEA's contractor at a cost of £10,090.43 across both DC areas. This compares to 16 incidents and an expenditure of £24,673.80 by the NIEA across both DC areas for the same period in 2019, representing a decrease in waste clearance costs of 59.1%.

As previously stated, fly-tipping is primarily addressed by the DCs and my Department does not hold information in relation to costs incurred by the DCs in clearing such wastes. However, during the initial stages of the Covid-19 restrictions, the Local and Central Government Waste Working Group commissioned the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) to compile a weekly Municipal Waste Issues Tracker, including fly-tipping incidents, from data supplied by each of the 11 DCs. Throughout the reporting period (April - September 2020) Derry & Strabane and Fermanagh & Omagh each reported either 'green' or 'amber' status, indicating that they had either low numbers of fly-tipping incidents, or increased numbers of incidents manageable within their current resources respectively.

It is apparent from the decrease in the number of incidents reported to NIEA for waste clearance, and the fly-tipping data supplied by both DCs encompassing the West Tyrone PC area between April and September, that the incidence of hazardous waste dumping had decreased, and that both DCs were managing any increase in fly-tipping and littering within their own resources.

- ii) To date, DAERA has allocated £3.8m emergency Covid-19 funding for the period March to June 2020 to the eleven DCs for their additional waste management costs as a result of the pandemic.

Regarding this period, Fermanagh and Omagh did not request any additional funding for fly-tipping due to Covid-19; Derry and Strabane have been allocated £11,975.28 towards their additional fly-tipping costs due to Covid-19.

A further £11.4m emergency Covid-19 funding for council waste management services has been secured from the Executive to cover additional costs for the period July through to March 2021. My officials are working with DCs to allocate this funding on the basis of the additional expenditure necessarily incurred by DCs, which may include fly-tipping.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what process or mechanism exists within his Department whereby a written record is kept of any lobbying of the Minister or special adviser in relation to departmental functions, policies or proposals.
(AQW 9002/17-22)

Mr Poots: All correspondence received by my Department is logged and recorded appropriately in line with NICS policies and guidance.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 5986/17-22 and AQW 7472/17-22, to detail (i) the parties involved in an ammonia consultation process; (ii) the work that has been completed on an ammonia strategy; and (iii) a timeline for action against ammonia pollution.
(AQW 9029/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) This will be a public consultation. We look forward to engaging with stakeholders from the environment and agri-food sectors as well as the general public.
- (ii) The draft ammonia strategy I am considering outlines a comprehensive approach to ammonia reduction, habitat protection and restoration, along with an economic analysis of the ammonia reduction measures.
- (iii) Timelines will depend on the outcome of the consultation however I also recognise that there is an urgent need for ammonia reduction. The Nutrients Action Programme measures already introduced by my department will contribute to ammonia reduction in the short term.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for details on the recruitment process for establishing the Office for Environmental Protection in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 9035/17-22)

Mr Poots: The commencement of the provisions relating to the extension of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) to Northern Ireland is subject to the future approval of the Assembly. Details of the recruitment process for the OEP in NI are still at an early stage of development. However, DAERA officials are engaged in preparatory work with Defra to consider detailed operational arrangements, including recruitment.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given that, under current European Union environmental governance arrangements, the European Commission monitors the implementation of European Union environmental law, what is being done to fill the governance gap which will be created following the transition period.
(AQW 9037/17-22)

Mr Poots: Following the ending of the EU withdrawal Transition Period on 31 December 2020 the European Commission will no longer an oversight role on the implementation of environmental law – except as provided for under the NI Protocol. The Environment Bill, which is currently progressing through Parliament, provides for the formation of a new, independent, statutory environmental body - the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) - to hold government to account on environmental matters.

Subject to the Bill receiving Royal Assent, and commencement of provisions being approved by the Northern Ireland Assembly, the OEP will have a role within Northern Ireland. The OEP will: provide independent scrutiny and advice on the development and implementation of environmental law and policy; investigate environmental complaints from members of the public; and oversee the delivery of environmental law by public authorities and take steps to bring about compliance where needed.

My officials, along with Defra colleagues, are currently considering interim arrangements to address any gap between the end of the Transition Period and the OEP taking up its role as a result of delays arising from the Covid emergency.

A discussion document has been prepared on Environmental Plans, Principles and Governance in Northern Ireland and this will give stakeholders an opportunity to voice their opinions on how the OEP should function within Northern Ireland.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, what steps his Department is taking to encourage widespread public engagement on the Environmental Plans, Principles and Governance for Northern Ireland Public Discussion Document.
(AQW 9038/17-22)

Mr Poots: The public discussion document on Environmental Plans, Principles and Governance for Northern Ireland is due for release in the near future. The document will be published on the DAERA website and the Citizen Space Hub consultation platform and will be accessible for a period of 8 weeks. The launch will be accompanied by a press release and will be shared on social media channels such as Twitter and Facebook. In addition a list of stakeholders comprising of environmental Non-Government Organizations, local government, and other interested parties will be utilized to email details of the document launch.

A dedicated email address and telephone number are available should stakeholders require further information.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for his assessment of the NI Audit Office finding in their report Generating Electricity From Renewable Energy that accredited Anaerobic Digestion based generating stations in receipt of Renewables Obligations Certificates were operating without environmental waste permits or had not

complied with certain conditions set out within their planning approval; (ii) what shortcomings have been identified by his Department that led to this happening; and (iii) what actions his Department is taking to address these issues.

(AQW 9041/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The Department for the Economy (DfE) has overall responsibility for renewable electricity policy and legislation, including the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) Scheme. Its administration is fulfilled through an Agency Services Agreement with the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets (OFGEM).

Anaerobic digester (AD) plants produce biogas which, when combusted in a combined heat and power (CHP) unit can generate renewable electricity. This CHP unit and generator are collectively referred to as a 'generating station'. It is this generating station that is accredited by OFGEM for the purposes of the NIRO scheme and not the AD plants creating the biogas. Importantly anaerobic digestion plants are not eligible for support under the NIRO Scheme. The NIRO scheme supports the generation of renewable electricity, including electricity generated by stations fuelled by biogas that has been produced by AD plants. This is an important distinction as the NIRO legislation and scheme administration is focused solely on the electricity generating station and Renewables Obligation Certificates (ROCs) are issued only in recognition of the eligible electricity produced.

My Department is aware that a number of Anaerobic Digestion plants have been operating without waste management licences although not all anaerobic digestion plants will require a waste management licence as this is dependent on the nature of the feedstock.

Compliance with conditions set out in planning approvals is a matter for the planning authorities, namely the Department for Infrastructure and the 11 local authority planning departments.

- (ii) As detailed above, the accredited AD based generating stations in receipt of Renewables Obligations Certificates refers specifically to the energy generating stations fuelled by biogas that generated renewable electricity and energy. Anaerobic digestion plants nor the biogas they produce were not eligible for support under the NIRO Scheme.

As the NIAO report states, there was no requirement in the NIRO legislation for planning and environmental regulations to be complied with for a generating station to be accredited and receive ROCs. When it was announced that the NIRO scheme was closing on 31 March 2017, there was a large increase in applications to the scheme and some developers proceeded to construct AD plants without securing the necessary planning permission or waste authorisation where this was required.

- (iii) My officials have worked with colleagues in DfE, DfI and OFGEM to identify the locations of AD plants operating without a waste management licence. They have contacted all known operators and applications have now been received from all plants currently operating that require a waste authorisation.

My Department welcomes the key findings and recommendations of the NIAO Report to put in place new measures to strengthen partnership arrangements with DfE and other relevant public bodies, to ensure that any future renewable energy schemes are supported at an early stage, with a proactive and joined up approach to accreditation, monitoring and enforcement.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, following the Assembly calling for climate change legislation that includes binding carbon reduction targets within a three month timeframe, for an update on a climate change act.
(AQW 9105/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am currently finalising a discussion document consultation on a future Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill which I will publish in the next number of weeks. A Climate Change Bill for Northern Ireland must be given proper thought and consultation, to ensure that:

- the measures which we take are appropriate and will deliver benefits, and;
- we allow business time to adjust to a new way of working and where necessary provide financial support.

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. I want to consider this information to ensure our emissions reduction targets are credible and evidence based. Unfortunately the CCC are not in a position to respond to my request until after they have provided advice on the UK's sixth carbon budget, which will be published in December 2020.

I will consider the responses from the discussion document consultation on a future Northern Ireland Climate Change Bill, along with the advice provided from the CCC. I will then present my findings to the Northern Ireland Executive to agree a way forward.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, following the Executive's announcement that those who work from home should work from home, whether all officials and staff members in his Department, who can work from home, are working from home.
(AQW 9338/17-22)

Mr Poots: The well-being and safety of our staff remains a priority for DAERA and, in line with the NI Executive's guidance and advice, I can confirm that all DAERA officials and staff members who can work from home are doing so.

A small number of staff, equating to around 24% of departmental staff can only deliver their services from the workplace and cannot therefore work from home. For the protection of these staff we continue to follow all Coronavirus Health & Safety Regulations to ensure our premises remain Covid secure.

Department for Communities

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Communities how much money is to be contributed to the redevelopment of Casement Park by (i) the taxpayer; and (ii) the GAA.

(AQW 8634/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): The 'New Decade, New Approach' deal (2020) states that 'The Executive will advance with plans to complete both the Regional and Sub Regional Stadia Programmes which includes Casement Park'. I am fully committed to delivering on this commitment.

In March 2011, my Department was allocated a budget of £110 million of capital grant funding by the Executive to deliver the three projects in the Regional Stadia Programme. The current allocation of public funding to the Casement Park Project, approved by the previous Executive, is £62.5 million. Committed UCGAA partnership funding of £15 million brings the total current project budget to £77.5 million.

The draft UCGAA Full Business Case dated November 2019 includes a project cost estimate of circa £110 million current up to a date of June 2019.

A due diligence exercise is currently underway reviewing the estimated construction cost, which has risen due to the passage of time since the original estimate. There is also potential for any conditions associated with the planning approval process to impact on the projected costs for the project.

UCGAA has continued to engage with the Department throughout this process.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for Communities what assessment has been made of the reasons behind the estimated £33 million cost overruns on the planned redevelopment of Casement Park.

(AQW 8655/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: To support the development of the revised business case, the Casement Park project Design Team carried out an assessment of the key reasons for cost increases to the project, which are summarised as follows:

- Time delay of circa six years resulting in construction cost inflation increases

Necessary redesign of the facility to respond to: CAL Committee 2015, PAR Report 2015, Planning Community Consultation 2016. Design changes are attributable a range of issues including, reduced height, changes to reduce the visual and sound impact on neighbouring homes, safety considerations and transport management plans. My departmental officials, in conjunction with officials in the Department of Finance, are currently completing a review of the latest version of the draft Full Business Case for the Casement Park Project.

Alongside this, a further due diligence exercise reviewing the estimated construction cost, which has risen due to the passage of time since the original estimate, is underway. There is also potential for any conditions associated with the planning approval process to impact on the projected costs for the project. This is also under review.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities whether future sport investment will be based on a means tested application.

(AQW 8814/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My officials have been working with the sports Governing Bodies to establish the extent of the financial impact of the pandemic and the potential future implications given the latest restrictions.

I have submitted a bid to the Executive seeking a financial support package for the sector. If this bid is successful, my officials will work with SportNI to design a needs based scheme, in line with Managing Public Money.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Communities whether she will provide additional funding for the DNA Museum project in Ebrington in addition to the funding secured by Derry City and Strabane District Council, the Heritage Lottery fund and the Executive Office.

(AQW 8874/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I recognise the strategic importance of developing the Derry North Atlantic Maritime Museum as part of the wider Central Riverfront Tourism Project, the ultimate aim of which is to attract greater numbers of tourists to the North West. With this in mind the business case for the Derry North Atlantic Maritime Museum is currently being reviewed. It will, of course, be subject to the associated economic appraisal process and budget availability.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Communities whether her officials will engage with Derry City and Strabane District Council in order to identify potential funding opportunities to continue to advance the business case for the Strathfoyle Greenway in Derry.

(AQW 8875/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Departmental officials have been engaging with Derry City and Strabane District Council officials, as well as representatives from DFI and DAERA, on an ongoing basis in order to progress the Strathfoyle Greenway project.

My Department agreed to accept an application for funding from Council which has just been received. This will now be appraised, subject to the necessary business case approvals, and within the context of the Department's wider budget considerations.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Communities whether she will assess provision of funding for Save the Children's Emergency Response Programme, in partnership with the Greater Shantallow Area Partnership.

(AQW 8876/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department through the Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund currently provide financial assistance in partnership with Save the Children to the Greater Shantallow Area Partnership. I have asked my officials to continue to work with this organisation to assess the provision of future funding, in line with governance requirements and availability.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities for an update on plans for the return of spectators to live sporting events.

(AQO 878/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: DfC officials will continue to work with the Governing Bodies, SportNI, Councils and the Sports Grounds Safety Authority on the measures that are needed to deliver the safe return of larger numbers of spectators at sports events.

The Governing Bodies have shown that they are acutely aware of the need to act responsibly, have measures in place to manage crowds and when necessary to suspend activities, cancel matches and close their facilities for the good of the wider community.

I have met with the Governing Bodies and stated my position on spectators while also advising them that I am seeking to secure a financial package for the sector.

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Communities what steps have been taken to ensure that men's and women's amateur football can continue to be played throughout the 2020-21 season.

(AQO 881/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: First of all, I would like to acknowledge the crucial role local amateur football clubs and their members have played in helping the relief effort in their local communities during this difficult time.

In terms of getting back to playing football, it was very unfortunate that after all the careful preparations and the development of the protocols for a safe return of football that the situation has had to change again.

The Executive has had to take some difficult decisions to address the recent surge in positive Covid cases and the rising transmission rate.

The latest regulations mean that amateur football matches and team training cannot take place at this time. Elite football and training is still permitted to continue.

I hope that after the four week circuit breaker that the transmission rates will be at a level that allows for a safe return of not just football but of all sporting activities.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the proposed cost to rebuild Casement Park; and (ii) where the money is coming from to build it.

(AQW 8956/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As Department with responsibility for Casement Park this question has been transferred to the Department for Communities to respond.

The 'New Decade, New Approach' deal (2020) states that 'The Executive will advance with plans to complete both the Regional and Sub Regional Stadia Programmes which includes Casement Park'. I am fully committed to delivering on this commitment.

The current allocation of public funding to the Casement Park Project, approved by the previous Executive, is £62.5 million. Committed UCGAA partnership funding of £15 million brings the total current project budget to £77.5 million.

The draft UCGAA Full Business Case dated November 2019 includes a project cost estimate of circa £110 million current up to a date of June 2019.

A due diligence exercise is currently underway reviewing the estimated construction cost, which has risen due to the passage of time since the original estimate. There is also potential for any conditions associated with the planning approval process to impact on the projected costs for the project.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the extension of the ban on landlords evicting tenants during the pandemic.

(AQW 8959/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: At the start of the pandemic the Department secured a commitment from Social Landlords that there would be no evictions due to Covid-19 related rent arrears. This continues to be the case. The Department is continuing to work with Housing Associations and the Housing Executive to help them keep tenants in their homes, and to ensure that the welfare system can provide help to their tenants as quickly as possible.

Tenants are encouraged to have an early conversation with their social landlord if they are struggling to pay their rent, and landlords have agreed to support tenants and treat rent issues with sensitivity.

The Department has produced guidance to support tenants and landlords in the social rented sector during the Covid-19 outbreak. The guidance includes what to do if tenants are struggling with paying rent, health and safety advice for both tenants and workers when carrying out emergency repairs, and information on house moves and possession proceedings.

In terms of tenants in the Private Rented Sector "The Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020" was introduced in May of this year. It requires landlords of private rented properties to give a 12 week notice to quit period to tenants. While the initial period for the extended notice to quit was up to the 30 September 2020, the Act contained provision for an extension to this emergency period and I have exercised this power so that private landlords are required to give a 12 week notice to quit to tenants until the 31 March 2021.

In addition the Department produced guidance for the private rented sector which gives them advice on matters relating to possession proceedings as amended by the Coronavirus Act 2020, Court Action on possession cases during the Covid 19 outbreak, property access and health and safety obligations in the context of Coronavirus restrictions.

The Department have liaised closely with the court service and as a result they have advised judges in possession hearings to ensure that the Department's guidance has been followed.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities on what basis she issued a letter on 16 October 2020 to sporting bodies claiming that the new COVID-19 regulations, which had not been made at that point, banned spectators at elite matches.

(AQW 9006/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In my capacity as Minister with responsibility for sport, I wrote to the Governing Bodies to advise them that in my view they should no longer continue to permit a limited number of spectators to attend games.

This was based on the most recent advice from the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Advisor that in light of the increased numbers of Covid cases it is currently unwise for large gatherings to take place.

I have met with the senior officers from the Governing Bodies, explained my position on spectators and listened to their concerns. I have given a commitment that I will make a bid to the Executive for an appropriate package of financial support for the sector.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of funding awarded to groups in the North Belfast constituency in each of the last three years.

(AQW 9010/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The following tables provide a breakdown of funding awarded to groups in the North Belfast Constituency in each of the last three years. This includes:

- 1 a summary position of revenue and capital investment through the Department's Neighbourhood Renewal and Areas at Risk programmes, as well as a breakdown of funding awarded to groups;

Summary - Revenue and Capital investment through the Department's Neighbourhood Renewal and Areas at Risk programmes

	2017/18 £	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	Total £
Revenue*	2,254,410.40	2,160,744.63	2,136,015.09	6,551,170.12
Capital	-	25,455.60	14,176.48	39,632.08
Total	2,254,410.40	2,186,200.23	2,150,191.57	6,590,802.20

* Revenue: Includes Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund and Areas at Risk

Breakdown by Area and Organisation

Neighbourhood Renewal Area*	Organisation	2017/2018 £	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	Total £
Inner North	174 Trust	11,016.78	10,862.08	10,893.08	32,771.94

Neighbourhood Renewal Area*	Organisation	2017/2018 £	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	Total £
Rathcoole	Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council	80,651.62	78,518.08	78,463.22	237,632.92
Crumlin/Ardoyne	Ardoyne Youth Providers Forum	171,116.01	146,711.89	141,328.86	459,156.76
Inner North	Arts For All	8,612.28	8,612.32	8,437.26	25,661.86
Inner North	Ashton Community Trust – NR Coordinator	23,947.33	27,539.59	10,259.56	61,746.48
Inner North	Ashton Community Trust – ICT	35,517.43	34,069.60	34,041.52	103,628.55
Inner North	Ashton Community Trust	116,604.02	106,984.55	103,709.21	327,297.78
Upper Ardoyne / Ballysillan	Ballysillan Community Forum	30,607.28	27,362.99	27,559.19	85,529.46
Upper Ardoyne / Ballysillan	Ballysillan Community Forum	88,884.60	86,422.72	84,271.62	259,578.94
Greater Shankill	Belfast Community Sports Development	41,468.08	40,245.12	40,402.60	122,115.80
Crumlin/Ardoyne	Cancer Lifeline	78,145.00	73,253.21	73,828.90	225,227.11
Inner North	Carrick Hill Residents Association	39,742.76	40,971.00	39,613.80	120,327.56
Crumlin/Ardoyne	Cliftonville Community Regeneration Forum	24,524.43	27,190.01	27,166.67	78,881.11
Crumlin/Ardoyne	Cliftonville Community Regeneration Forum	221,128.86	215,917.44	213,120.47	650,166.77
All North Belfast NRAs	Community Restorative Justice Ireland – North Belfast only	45,868.44	44,407.16	43,674.95	133,950.55
Upper Ardoyne / Ballysillan	Glenbank Community Association	17,493.27	18,480.23	19,068.40	55,041.90
Upper Ardoyne / Ballysillan	Good Morning North Belfast	57,905.58	59,805.66	62,550.70	180,261.94
Crumlin/Ardoyne	Grace Women's Development Limited	64,478.11	61,851.19	62,316.20	188,645.50
Upper Ardoyne / Ballysillan	Jigsaw Community Counselling	65,039.68	61,758.08	63,205.92	190,003.68
Ligoniel	Ligoniel Improvement Association	132,022.20	126,739.74	128,045.47	386,807.41
Inner North	Mount Vernon Community Development Forum	92,360.04	88,625.24	85,835.96	266,821.24
Crumlin/Ardoyne	New Life Counselling	126,384.24	115,496.55	116,754.42	358,635.21
All North Belfast NRAs	North Belfast Advice Partnership	116,400.80	112,201.27	113,037.86	341,639.93
Upper Ardoyne / Ballysillan	North Belfast Women's Initiative	32,105.70	64,728.88	65,217.68	162,052.26
Upper Ardoyne / Ballysillan	North City Business Centre	32,000.00	33,044.62	32,361.48	97,406.10
All North Belfast NRAs	Northern Ireland Alternatives - North Belfast only	84,299.71	82,672.75	83,285.47	250,257.93
Inner North	Star Neighbourhood Centre	123,853.19	118,569.36	118,100.40	360,522.95

Neighbourhood Renewal Area*	Organisation	2017/2018 £	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	Total £
Crumlin/Ardoyne	Upper Ardoyne Community Partnership	35,309.44	0.00	0.00	35,309.44
Crumlin/Ardoyne	Vine Community and Advice Centre	147,431.11	142,169.64	143,522.19	433,122.94
Crumlin/Ardoyne	Wishing Well Family Centre	49,492.41	47,533.66	47,942.03	144,968.10
Area at Risk – Whitewell and Glenbank	Northern Ireland Housing Executive	60,000	58,000.00	58,000.00	176,000.00
	Total	2,254,410.40	2,160,744.63	2,136,015.09	6,551,170.12

*Organisations may provide services across more than one NRA – The area denoted is the Area in which they are located.

Neighbourhood Renewal Investment Fund – Capital Funding

Organisation	2017/2018 £	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	Total £
Ballysillan Community Forum	-	-	2,915.00	2,915.00
Cancer Lifeline	-	-	3,017.76	3,017.76
Carrick Hill Community Centre	-	25,455.60	-	25,455.60
Community Sports Network	-	-	5,376.00	5,376.00
Glenbank Community Association	-	-	1,437.80	1,437.80
North Belfast Women's Initiative Support Project	-	-	1,429.92	1,429.92
Total	-	25,455.60	14,176.48	39,632.08

Caution is advised in making comparisons of expenditure across Neighbourhood Renewal Areas. The expenditure is influenced by factors such as; the population of the area, the historic expenditure and/ or proposed capital investment in an area from other initiatives or mainstream sources, geographical location and proximity to existing services and the needs identified in Action Plans.

- 2 Revenue funding provided to the Cathedral Quarter Trust which has its office in the North Belfast Constituency;

Cathedral Quarter Trust

Year	£
2017/2018	59,534.00
2018/2019	55,367.00
2019/2020	81,749.23

- 3 Funding provided to Ulster Supported Employment Limited and North Belfast Advice Partnership.

Organisation	Type of Funding	2017/18 £	2018/19 £	2019/20 £	Total £
Ulster Supported Employment Limited	European Social Fund Match Funding	186,369.97	165,160.96	198,041.93	549,572.86
Ulster Supported Employment Limited	Delivery of the Workable (NI) programme	1,472,825	1,260,000	1,168,650	3,901,475
Ulster Supported Employment Limited	Delivery of the Employment Support programme	409,620.83	385,879.17	372,775.03	1,168,275.03
North Belfast Advice Partnership	Advice Plus Test & Learn initiative.			20,790.54	20,790.54
Total		2,068,815.80	1,811,040.13	1,760,257.50	5,640,113.43

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities to detail the next steps for the Areas At Risk programme, given that funding is due to end in March 2021.

(AQW 9013/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Areas at Risk (AaR) is delivered through People and Place – A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal, which is currently undergoing a Review. To secure the views of those delivering on the ground, representatives of each AaR and Neighbourhood Renewal Partnership are included in a Partnership Forum, which was established to help inform the Review.

The Forum provides a platform for these organisations to convey their thinking and give their experiences on what has worked and what may be of benefit going forward. The Forum has met twice to date, with a third meeting scheduled via Zoom for early November.

To address concerns raised by funded organisations in relation to the negative impact of one year funding cycles and budget reductions, Minister Harghey wrote in February to representatives of each Neighbourhood Renewal and AaR project confirming that the budget for the programmes would be protected at current levels until the end of the 2021/22 financial year.

As Covid continues to impact on delivery and in preparation for the new financial year, officials continue to engage with our partners across all funding streams to ensure they are best equipped to deliver key services going forward.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities which areas are currently subject to bans on (i) street drinking; (ii) drinking in parks; and (iii) drinking in other public places; and whether she has plans to extend the areas that are covered.
(AQW 9046/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Under the current local government structure all 11 councils have bye-laws that make it an offence to consume alcoholic drinks in council designated public places.

Each individual council is responsible for its own set of bye-laws and will therefore hold the detailed information on which areas are currently subject to bans on (i) street drinking (ii) drinking in parks; and (iii) drinking in other public places.

I currently do not have any plans to extend the areas that are covered as this would be a matter for the individual council.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities whether she will review the restrictions announced on 14 October around sports to broaden the definition of elite sports to include the (i) NIFL Championship; and (ii) NIFL Premier Intermediate League.

(AQW 9066/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As this question is specific to sports I have been asked to respond.

It is important to emphasise that the purpose of the 'elite' designation within the regulations was to differentiate a small group of individuals and teams who would be able to continue to train and play competitively.

There are no plans to expand the definition of elite sport to permit more clubs and sports to resume activities. That would not be in line with what the Executive is seeking to achieve in this period of enhanced restrictions, which is reduce the transmission rate, limit non household contact and limit non-essential travel.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities (i) what measures are in place to protect civil servants working in her Department; and (ii) whether they will be permitted to work from home in line with guidance issued under new COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 9082/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: During the Covid 19 pandemic period my Department has kept offices open for staff to provide essential benefit and child maintenance services and ensure the continuity of payments to customers. Jobs and Benefits Offices were re-reopened to the public from July 2020 on a restricted basis to ensure that services for vulnerable customers could be provided on a face-to-face basis.

Consequently the Department also put in place a number of measures to protect staff including the designation of key worker status for benefit and child maintenance staff, the provision of IT equipment to work from home where this was possible, the introduction of rota based systems to ensure minimum staffing levels in offices, the reinforcement of social distancing measures in the workplace and additional cleaning/ sanitising regimes.

The Department has also worked with TU Health & Safety representatives to put in place Covid19 risk assessments for all of its office estate to ensure that staff coming in to the workplace could do so safely and in compliance with all relevant Public Health Agency and Health & Safety Executive guidance.

In line with the new Covid 19 restrictions staff have recently been reminded that those who can work from home must do so. The Department continues to take steps to increase the number of staff who can work from home.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities for an update on engagement with district councils concerning restructuring of loans to aid financial circumstances being experienced as a result of the pandemic.*[R]*

(AQW 9114/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is liaising with councils through Association of Local Government Finance Officers and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives to ascertain the number of loans and the interest rates that apply on those loans, in order to ascertain if there are options to restructure loans that could be utilised.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities whether permission will be given to district councils to capitalise redundancy payments. *[R]*
(AQW 9115/17-22)

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.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities to detail the scoring matrix used to assess applications to the artists emergency programme.
(AQW 9254/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Individuals Emergency Resilience Programme administered by the Arts Council on behalf of my Department has, to date, offered support to 1089 individuals in addition to 224 individuals previously supported through the Artists Emergency Programme. The application process, scored against a high, medium, low matrix included an assessment of the following factors:

- 1 Your CV and your contribution to the creative sector before Covid-19; and
- 2 The benefit the award will have on the sustainability of your professional skills, and/or creative development

Department of Education

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education why mandatory face coverings for dedicated school transport has still not happened.
(AQW 8469/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Public Health Agency has recently revised its advice on the mandatory wearing of face coverings on dedicated home to school transport. As a result, ahead of the return of schools, the Minister for Infrastructure and I have agreed to introduce the mandatory wearing of face coverings on all dedicated home to school transport for all those of post-primary age.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Education to detail the procedures currently in place to monitor the learning standards and progress of those who are home schooled.
(AQW 8514/17-22)

Mr Weir: Elective Home Education (EHE) is the term used to describe the practice by which parents decide to educate their children outside of the school system. This is different to tuition provided by the Education Authority (EA) to a child who is unwell or who attends alternative group arrangements provided by the EA.

Article 45(2) and Schedule 13 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 (as amended) sets out the legal duties of the EA and the parent in relation to EHE. It places a duty on parents to ensure that their child receives an 'efficient full-time education suitable to his age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise'. This enables parents to secure their child's efficient full-time education either at school or outside of the formal school environment process.

Parents who elect to educate their children at home do not need to be a qualified teacher and their child is not obliged to follow the curriculum or take tests.

The EA has a duty to act in the best interests of the child if it appears that the child is not being provided with an efficient full-time education suitable to their age, ability and aptitude and any special educational needs they may have.

The EA can make informal enquiries to check that a suitable education is being provided. If a request is made, parents can demonstrate that a suitable education is being provided by writing a report, providing samples of the child's work, inviting an EA officer to the home, with or without the child being present or meeting an EA officer outside the home, with or without the child being present. If it appears that a child is not receiving a suitable education, the EA has the power to serve a school attendance order.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Education whether he has given consideration to introducing social distancing and mandatory mask wearing on school transport vehicles in order to minimise the risk of spreading the COVID-19 virus. (AQW 8770/17-22)

Mr Weir: The revised New School Day guidance, published on 13 August, provided detailed guidance on the restart of home to school transport including in relation to social distancing and use of face coverings. This guidance took account of the advice of the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Advisor who both input into the drafting process and were content with the policy position on social distancing and the wearing of face coverings.

Any form of social distancing on home to school transport vehicles would dramatically reduce the available capacity to a fraction of that required. As a result it would not be possible to transport over 80,000 pupils each day and it would be likely that many pupils would be unable to attend school in this scenario. The risks to pupils' mental health, social development and educational outcomes for such pupils would be significant.

The Public Health Agency has recently revised its advice on the mandatory wearing of face coverings on dedicated home to school transport. As a result, ahead of the return of schools I plan to take forward a paper to the Executive on this issue.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, in light of the closures of some schools and children having to self-isolate, (i) what plans he has to provide more IT devices to children to enable them to have access to remote learning; (ii) how these plans will be sufficient to meet the need within a reasonable timeframe; and (iii) on average, how long does a child have to wait for a device. (AQW 8826/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Covid-19 pandemic has brought challenges to society generally and specifically on education as a result of school closures and on those children having to self-isolate. I accept that home schooling has been challenging for pupils and parents and has highlighted the need for access to devices, and adequate bandwidth.

In the event of schools having to close or a child having to self-isolate for a designated period due to COVID-19, parents should, in the first instance, talk directly to their school about provision of education material.

My Department has asked schools to have contingency plans in place for the delivery of remote learning in the event of a school closure, or if a class or group of pupils have to self-isolate.

A small number of children will be advised by their doctor not to attend school. Where this happens the majority of children would routinely be advised not to attend school even outside the current pandemic period due to the risk of infection. Where a child has been medically advised by a doctor not to attend school their parents should consult with the school Principal and, as required, the Education Authority (EA) regarding their ongoing education provision.

As you are aware the Department has provided a significant number of additional devices to pupils to assist them with learning at home particularly for those pupils who are considered to be most in need of additional support. This is being done in three stages:

- Schools were asked to draw on their existing stock of laptops and many schools have done this where there is scope to do so. Nearly 5000 'school owned' devices have been allocated to pupils and work on this stage is ongoing.
- Three thousand six hundred and sixty four new laptops have been prepared for use. Schools were asked to identify how many new laptops were required by pupils who are in receipt of free school meals and in other vulnerable groups such as children with SEN, newcomers and looked after children. This stage has been completed and all laptops having been allocated.
- The purchase of up to 8,000 additional Chromebook devices with access to broadband for children in vulnerable groups. To date, across stages 2 and 3, approximately 8000 devices have been allocated. Work on this stage is ongoing.

My preference would of course be for pupils to be taught in school where this is possible. Where this is not possible, the arrangements I have put in place will help a significant number of pupils to work from home where it is necessary.

Data is not kept on wait time at a pupil level as the allocation of devices will depend on an assessment of individual circumstances. If a parent or carer wants to make an enquiry they should contact the school in the first instance and ask them to consider their request. Schools can explain the process to parents, including whether their child is eligible under the agreed criteria and support parents to make a request through the EA C2K Exchange.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Education why the Home to School Transport Scheme has not changed to a singular pass that can be used on both trains and buses. (AQW 8929/17-22)

Mr Weir: The current contractual arrangements between EA and Translink for the provision of home to school transport facilitates the issue of either a bus or train ticket for each pupil. To change to a single pass for both modes of transport is likely to have significant resource implications.

It is for the EA to determine the most suitable method of assisting pupils and in doing so they are required to have due regard to efficiency and economy.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what proposals he will bring forward to provide more detail in Education Authority guidance to improve ventilation in classrooms.

(AQW 8998/17-22)

Mr Weir: I am aware of the ongoing research into the role of ventilation in controlling the transmission of Covid-19. As with many issues around the response to the pandemic, this is a rapidly evolving topic.

My officials are considering the implications of the latest research and how it should apply in school settings. The current guidance includes advice on ventilation and any changes to this will be based on the research and written in an appropriate manner which can be applied to all schools,

The guidance remains under continuous review and I will issue further or updated direction to schools as required.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) why childcare provided on the grounds of a school have been advised to close while the same service, provided outside of this type of setting, have been allowed to remain open; and (ii) what provision his Department is making to ensure that alternative provision is available for parents affected by this.

(AQW 9032/17-22)

Mr Weir: On 14 October, the Executive agreed a range of time-bound interventions to curb the spread of Covid-19 in Northern Ireland. As part of these measures, I had requested that schools close from 19 – 30 October, and re-open on 2nd November.

As the purpose of the school closure was to create a break period during which interaction would be minimised between children, between children and adults, and between adults collecting children, a consistent and equitable approach was deemed appropriate to all children using school premises. Therefore, the requested closure also applies to any pre-school, childcare or youth provider based on school premises.

The decision to allow the use of school premises, where a contract exists with a third party childcare provider, ultimately rests with the governing body of the individual school.

I appreciate the difficulties that this may cause, however, following the Executive's decision, the expectation must be that the parents of all children affected by the closure of schools will identify alternative arrangements for the 2 week period.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to bring forward a mental health and wellbeing programme in schools post-COVID-19 to help our young people cope with the anxieties and emotional side effects of uncertainty and long periods off school with the associated social isolation from friends and classmates.

(AQW 9069/17-22)

Mr Weir: I appreciate that the Covid-19 crisis has brought an added dimension to the mental health and emotional wellbeing of our school children.

Through the Engage programme, which was launched in September, every primary and post primary school in Northern Ireland has been provided with additional funding (£11.2m in 2020/21) to assist with the provision of one to one, small group or team teaching support to those pupils who stand to benefit the most from additional support following the lockdown period.

Schools have the flexibility and autonomy to decide on the content and structure of programme delivery in accordance with their pupils' needs, therefore some support may focus on the pastoral or wellbeing needs of children. Those schools participating in the Extended Schools programme may also choose to utilise the funding allocated (£9.1m in 2020/21) to provide emotional or mental health support where there is an assessed need.

My Department is also 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 is progressing well and we are working to complete the Framework by December 2020.

Through the Education Restart Wellbeing Project a range of measures are being delivered in direct response to the Covid-19 pandemic to support the wellbeing of staff and pupils including:-

- An EA online portal of resources available to schools with information on supporting learners, leaders and staff.
- A range of information and materials are available on the EA website to support educational settings, young people and parents/carers with emotional health and wellbeing.
- In April 2020, Primary Behaviour Support and Provisions launched the HIGH FIVE fortnightly newsletter as support to schools and pupils. This newsletter used the "Take 5 Steps to WellBeing" framework to promote emotional health and wellbeing. The link to the latest High Five newsletter can be found on the EA webpage: <https://www.eani.org.uk/educational-resources-newsletters>.
- The EA Youth Service have developed an online resource called 'youth online' available at www.youthonline.org.uk where children and young people can access information, advice and support directly from Youth Service staff.
- The Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS) for post primary aged pupils in mainstream Post Primary and Special Schools is available for young people to access through school and self-referral.
- The Education Welfare Service and Education Psychology Service are working directly with all schools to support the wellbeing of young people and access services as required in accordance with presenting need.

Finally, I can advise that the £5m Education Restart Wellbeing Project funding has been approved and will be allocated directly to schools very soon. By receiving their own allocation, schools will benefit from having the flexibility to use the money to provide health and wellbeing support for their pupils and/or staff.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether registered childcare can open on school grounds.
(AQW 9080/17-22)

Mr Weir: On 14 October, the Executive agreed a range of time-bound interventions to curb the spread of Covid-19 in Northern Ireland. As part of these measures, I had requested that schools close from 19 – 30 October, and re-open on 2nd November.

As the purpose of the school closure was to create a break period during which interaction would be minimised between children, between children and adults, and between adults collecting children, a consistent and equitable approach was deemed appropriate to all children using school premises. Therefore, the requested closure also applies to any pre-school, childcare or youth provider based on school premises.

The decision to allow the use of school premises, where a contract exists with a third party childcare provider, ultimately rests with the governing body of the individual school.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education what steps he is taking to ensure that classroom assistants, paid for term time hours only, are not adversely impacted financially further to the unscheduled extension of the half term break.
(AQW 9168/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority, as employing authority for classroom assistants has confirmed that all school based non-teaching staff will be paid as normal for week commencing 19th October 2020. This includes staff on term time contracts.

Normal school holiday arrangements will apply for the planned Halloween Break. Annual leave arrangements already in place will be honoured and timesheets are to be submitted in the normal manner to reflect the Halloween break.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Education how many primary school places are filled in Bangor; and how many surplus places are currently available.
(AQW 9245/17-22)

Mr Weir: The information requested is not available at this time. The Department is currently in the process of collecting and verifying School Census information. Finalised figures will be available in February 2021.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education what further financial support is available to schools that have teaching staff who are deemed clinically vulnerable and are advised not to be present in school settings currently.
(AQW 9253/17-22)

Mr Weir: I can confirm that a fund for teacher substitution costs, to support existing staff absences specifically as a result of Covid-19, is being centrally managed by the Education Authority, and will be allocated to schools based on verified costs.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of pupils who (i) sat the transfer test; and (ii) did not sit the transfer test, in the academic years 2017, 2018 and 2019.
(AQW 9285/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department does not hold any information in relation to the number of pupils who sit the transfer tests and has no role in their organisation or operation. I can advise that the total number of pupils (excluding statemented children) who transferred to post primary school in the academic years 2017-2019 is set out below.

Year	2017	2018	2019
Total	21732	22684	23949

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the former Strabane Grammar School site on Liskey Road, Strabane.
(AQW 9290/17-22)

Mr Weir: The former Strabane Academy property at Liskey Road, Strabane has been vacated since January 2020 and, regrettably, during this period has been subject to ongoing anti-social behaviour and vandalism.

The EA has approved the demolition of all existing buildings on the site, except the original Milltown House and Lodge, and this work is expected to progress in the coming months. Until this time, temporary security cover is being provided on the site.

The EA is currently considering the potential for alternative educational uses on the site. If no alternative educational use is identified, the EA will seek to declare the asset (or relevant part thereof) surplus to educational requirements and progress disposal in line with public sector disposal guidance. This could be for the entire site or specific surplus areas.

The has advised that the local council has been informed of the EA's intentions should no alternative educational uses for the site be identified

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether he is working with the Minister for Communities to ensure that children who now qualify for Free School Meals and wi-fi vouchers, given recent redundancies are made eligible within the system as a matter of urgency.

(AQW 9295/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority (EA) continues to process applications and as of 27 October, 55,749 families and 100,714 children are entitled to Free School Meals. The EA continues to receive around 50-80 applications per day and are following up directly with those parents for whom they still await income verification documents.

The EA has engaged in an exercise to identify those that require verification documentation from Jobs & Benefits offices and HMRC so that they can target them specifically to their application. Follow up telephone calls are being made daily to parents to assist with their applications. Positive discussions with Department for Communities are also ongoing to explore if benefit verification can be completed directly.

In terms of connectivity, my Department is conscious that internet access remains an issue for many of our children and young people. I announced plans at the beginning of July to provide a range of solutions to help address connectivity problems for pupils facing this difficulty including those in a rural setting. 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 months internet access.

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.

I continue to work with all Government Ministers including the Minister for Communities on issues that encompass our respective Departments' areas of work. Please be assured that every effort is being made within my Department to ensure that these benefits are made to those that qualify as quickly as possible.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how many pupils have been absent under code P or code 8 since the 24 August 2020.

(AQW 9297/17-22)

Mr Weir: Attendance is reported by schools in half day sessions therefore the number of pupils absent under code P or code 8 is not available. These codes continue to be used for their original purpose and therefore are not solely specific to COVID-19.

For the week commencing 12 October code P and code 8 were 2.4% and 5.6% respectively of total possible attendance. The proportion of half day absences for each of these codes in the previous academic year 2019/20 was less than 0.1% of total possible attendance.

If a pupil is absent due to self-isolation in line with PHA advice or for social distancing reasons by the school and they continue to work remotely, then they will be coded as Code 8/P, which in both cases is an Approved Educational Activity and will not adversely impact their attendance. If a pupil fails to engage in remote learning during the period of self-isolation then they will be marked as an unauthorised absence, as set out in DE Circular 2020/08.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education, in regard to the two week Halloween closure, where a school had borrowed optional days to make up the normal 5 day closure, whether that school can now instead deploy exceptional closure days and thereby retain access to the optional days at a future date.

(AQW 9306/17-22)

Mr Weir: For the 2020/21 academic year, schools have been given nine optional days. This represents a one off increase of four days beyond the normal allocation and has been implemented to assist with the challenges faced during the current pandemic.

In respect of the Halloween closure, schools have been advised on 14 October, with further clarification on 15 October, to continue to take any half term holidays planned during this period. The period of additional closure should be recorded as two of the Optional days already mentioned with the remainder recorded as Exceptional Closure days. Schools are required to revisit their school calendar to reflect this decision and resubmit it to the Education Authority.

Schools have also been advised that there is no requirement to recoup these Exceptional Closure days as teaching days later in the 2020/21 academic year. With this in mind and in order to reduce the impact on teaching days, we cannot permit the deployment of additional Exceptional Closure days as a replacement for the two Optional days referred to above.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education whether he intends to roll over existing school transport contracts until the end of the academic year.

(AQW 9376/17-22)

Mr Weir: In preparation for the restart of schools in September, home to school transport contracts were agreed by the Education Authority during July and August for the full academic year. Where appropriate, other school transport contracts have been extended to the end of the academic year.

Department of Finance

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Finance whether he plans to change building regulations to mandate that new buildings are carbon neutral.

(AQW 8520/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): I am committed to making the fastest possible progress towards carbon neutral buildings. My officials are considering the position of other administrations in these islands and will review the outcome of consultations, such as England's Future Homes consultation and Wales' similar review, to ensure that, in turn, effective proposals are brought forward here to reduce carbon emissions from new buildings.

In the meantime, my officials are in active discussion with our local Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC) and with other departments on these matters.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance what percentage of the total amount of COVID-19 relief payments from his Department were designed for (i) businesses; and (ii) individuals.

(AQW 8559/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My department makes payments under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme. This scheme supports businesses occupying premises that have been required to close or severely curtail their activities by the Health Protection regulations. I have asked my Executive colleagues to bring forward proposals to support individuals who are subject to the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 but who do not occupy business premises.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance what discussions they have had with (i) Executive colleagues; and (ii) others regarding freeport status for Northern Ireland ports.

(AQW 8575/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The policy on Freeports is being developed by the Treasury. Following consideration of the Treasury's position with Executive colleagues in August, I wrote to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to call for substantive engagement so that the Executive can assess the potential of Freeports locally.

My department, in conjunction with relevant Executive departments, has been engaging with the Treasury, however limited detail has been shared at this point. My officials continue to press for that to understand fully the implications for our economy and any potential role the Executive might have in creating Freeports. Officials have also been engaging with local stakeholders on this issue to ensure their views are heard and considered as the policy is developed. This will continue going forward.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance to detail (i) the number of Northern Ireland Civil Service buildings in each constituency; and (ii) the existing available desk space in each one.

(AQW 8667/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) The number of Northern Ireland Civil Service buildings in each constituency provided by my Department; and
- (ii) the existing available desk space in each one is detailed in the table below.

'Desk space' has been taken to be equivalent to a desk, chair and data point. Departments will hold further information relevant to their own specialist estates.

	Constituency	Property Name	No of Workstations ¹ as at 30/06/2020
1	Belfast East	Dundonald House	1011
2	Belfast East	Annexe, D Dundonald House	28
3	Belfast East	Stormont Castle	103
4	Belfast East	Castle Buildings	1169
5	Belfast East	Ladas Drive	109

	Constituency	Property Name	No of Workstations¹ as at 30/06/2020
6	Belfast East	Hollywood Road JBO	204
7	Belfast East	Netherleigh	429
8	Belfast East	Courier HQ - vacant	0
9	Belfast East	Craigantlet Buildings	375
10	Belfast East	Stormont Cottages	7
11	Belfast East	Annexe B, Dundonald House	15
12	Belfast East	Massey House	151
13	Belfast East	Hillview Buildings	55
14	Belfast East	Oakbank Stores	4
15	Belfast East	Clare House	554
16	Belfast East	Stormont House	Not available
17	Belfast East	Knockview Buildings	183
18	Belfast East	The Stables	5
19	Belfast East	Walled garden	15
		Total Belfast East	4417
1	Belfast North	Newtownabbey JBO	105
2	Belfast North	DVA Corp Street	65
3	Belfast North	Design Centre	352
4	Belfast North	SSA Superstore	7
		Total Belfast North	529
1	Belfast South	Knockbreda JBO	111
2	Belfast South	Fermanagh House	131
3	Belfast South	Careers Resource Centre Ann Street	22
4	Belfast South	Centre House	68
5	Belfast South	Clarence Court	763
6	Belfast South	Queens Court	202
7	Belfast South	Bankmore House	48
8	Belfast South	Victoria Hall	95
9	Belfast South	Conor Building	117
10	Belfast South	Park House	35
11	Belfast South	Adelaide House	661
12	Belfast South	Causeway Exchange	676
13	Belfast South	Goodwood House	697
14	Belfast South	James House - under refurbishment	0
15	Belfast South	Colby House	302
16	Belfast South	Klondyke Building	531
17	Belfast South	Killymeal House	75
18	Belfast South	Seatem House	110
19	Belfast South	Lanyon Plaza	889
20	Belfast South	2-4 Bruce Street	293

	Constituency	Property Name	No of Workstations¹ as at 30/06/2020
21	Belfast South	Laganside House	271
22	Belfast South	9 Lanyon Place	1492
		Total Belfast South	7589
1	Belfast West	Shankill JBO	88
2	Belfast West	Falls Road JBO	69
3	Belfast West	College Street	309
4	Belfast West	Castle Court	1171
5	Belfast West	Falls Road SSO	39
6	Belfast West	Andersonstown JBO	235
		Total Belfast West	1911
1	East Antrim	Carrickfergus JBO	60
2	East Antrim	Larne JBO	41
		Total East Antrim	101
1	East Londonderry	Ballykelly House	403
2	East Londonderry	Coleraine County Hall	544
3	East Londonderry	Coleraine JBO	264
4	East Londonderry	Limavady JBO	83
5	East Londonderry	86 Main Street, Limavady	5
		Total East Londonderry	1299
1	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Dungannon JBO	215
2	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Enniskillen JBO	158
3	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Castle Barracks	47
4	Fermanagh & South Tyrone	Inishkeen House	150
		Total Fermanagh & South Tyrone	570
1	Foyle	Foyle JBO	321
2	Foyle	1 Crescent Road	35
3	Foyle	Orchard House	289
4	Foyle	Lisnagelvin JBO	130
5	Foyle	Waterside House	408
6	Foyle	Carlisle House	355
		Total Foyle	1538
1	Lagan Valley	Lisburn JBO	163
		Total Lagan Valley	163
1	Mid Ulster	Cookstown SSO - vacant	0
2	Mid Ulster	Molesworth Plaza	69
3	Mid Ulster	Meadowlane	32
4	Mid Ulster	Rivers HQ Loughry	84
5	Mid Ulster	Magherafelt JBO	107
		Total Mid Ulster	292
1	Newry & Armagh	Armagh JBO	137

	Constituency	Property Name	No of Workstations¹ as at 30/06/2020
2	Newry & Armagh	Newry JBO	232
3	Newry & Armagh	Glenree House	101
4	Newry & Armagh	Atek Building	105
		Total Newry & Armagh	575
1	North Antrim	Ballymena JBO	230
2	North Antrim	Ballymena County Hall	555
3	North Antrim	Ballymoney JBO	94
4	North Antrim	Academy House	195
		Total North Antrim	1074
1	North Down	Rathgael House	455
2	North Down	Bangor SSO	76
		Total North Down	531
1	South Antrim	Castleton House	49
2	South Antrim	Antrim JBO	201
		Total South Antrim	250
1	South Down	Banbridge JBO	81
2	South Down	Downpatrick SSO -vacant	0
3	South Down	Kilkeel JBO	37
4	South Down	Newcastle SSO	31
5	South Down	Rathkeltair House	273
		Total South Down	422
1	Strangford	Ballynahinch SSO	38
2	Strangford	Newtownards SSO	45
3	Strangford	Sketrick House	54
		Total Strangford	137
1	Upper Bann	Marlborough House	694
2	Upper Bann	Portadown JBO	84
3	Upper Bann	Lurgan JBO	115
		Total Upper Bann	893
1	West Tyrone	Omagh JBO	149
2	West Tyrone	Strabane JBO	98
3	West Tyrone	Omagh County Hall	142
4	West Tyrone	Elmview	17
5	West Tyrone	Deverney Road	34
6	West Tyrone	Sperrin House	114
7	West Tyrone	Boaz House	116
		Total West Tyrone	670
		Total: 106 buildings	22961 workstations

1 Workstation has been taken to be equivalent to desk space: i.e. a desk, chair and data point.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance what mechanisms are in place to ensure that businesses that pay their rates via their landlord have access to grant support available as a result of COVID-19 public health restrictions.

(AQW 8778/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As you are aware, Land & Property Services (LPS) administered the Small Business Grant Support Scheme and has just commenced administration of the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

LPS has put in place mechanisms to ensure that grants are paid to the intended recipient, the occupier of the premises.

For the Small Business Grant Support Scheme, a dedicated portal was developed for use by occupiers of premises with a Net Annual Value for which liability for the rates rested under legislation with the landlord. The occupier was able to use this portal to make an application and provide proof of occupation.

For all other non-domestic accounts, where the occupier was liable for rates, but was set up in the name of the landlord, LPS manually checked each application to determine if it was the occupier who made the application for a grant, did investigations to determine the business operating from the property or asked for proof of occupation before paying a grant.

It is recognised that at the beginning of this scheme when grants were automatically issued to those who paid their rates through direct debit, a small number of owners instead of occupiers were paid. However, when the occupier made an application for a grant these were paid once the necessary investigations were done and proof of occupation supplied. LPS is currently working to recoup all grants paid in error to property owners.

I must point out that under the terms of the Small Business Support Grant Scheme, businesses which rented a space within a property, did not occupy a property which is a distinct property (hereditament) on the Valuation List and are not in receipt of Small Business Rate Relief did not qualify for a grant.

Under the terms of the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme, all business which have been required to close, or have had business activities at their premises directly curtailed by the Covid-19 health protection restrictions that have been put in place, are eligible for grant support. This includes those business which rent space in a property.

LPS has designed a portal for applications to this new Scheme which is hosted on the nibusinessinfo website. The information given about the Scheme explains eligibility and clearly states that landlords and managing agents must not complete the application on behalf of a tenant business which occupies their property.

LPS will scrutinise and investigate the information on each application to ensure it is the occupier of the premises who receives the grant. The nature of the business affected by the restrictions means LPS can cross reference with District Council information on Food Hygiene Certificates and operating licenses.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 7863/17-22, to outline the rationale for approving the conversion of the £25 million of Financial Transactions Capital loan requested by Ulster University to a grant; and to explain the process by which part of a request for a loan became a request for a grant.

(AQW 8785/17-22)

Mr Murphy: A £25 million conventional capital grant allocation was allocated to the Department for the Economy as part of the June Monitoring round.

The Department for the Economy made a bid to provide support to the project due to the impact of Covid-19 crisis on the university's income, with likely reductions in international tuition fee income, residential income, conferencing income and research income plus the potential risk on the progression of construction due to impact on workforce availability and supply chain issues that were outside the University's ability to control.

Due to the crisis facing all sectors during this unprecedented time, the Executive made a decision to support the Higher Education institute on this basis. The successful completion of the Belfast Campus should help UU deliver the expansion of the Magee campus.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance how continuing to contract employment agencies in the Civil Service satisfies the spirit of the workers' rights pledge within New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 8890/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Like many organisations, the Civil Service uses agency workers to carry out work which for various reasons cannot be completed by permanent staff. This includes using agency workers to cover periods of absence or to support time limited projects or contractual work.

While there is likely to always be a requirement to have temporary colleagues, the civil service is committed to changing the pattern of current usage by engaging agency workers for short term or temporary assignments only and recruiting to permanent posts instead of using agency staff, where possible.

The vast majority of agency workers are undertaking Administrative Officer (AO) roles and consequently we launched an open recruitment exercise to fill a range of AO posts on a permanent basis. This gave anyone, including those agency workers currently engaged in the Civil Service the chance to apply for a permanent position. We are finalising preparations to appoint successful candidates from the recruitment campaign and anticipate around 500 offers of permanent employment will be made in the coming weeks, with the facility to make further offers depending on the needs of departments.

A replacement agency workers contract is currently being tendered and this new contract will entitle agency workers to parity with permanent Civil Service colleagues in terms of pay, annual leave and paid time off for medical/dental appointments from day one of their assignment. The replacement contract will also use the Buy Social initiative to include a number of social clauses.

The recruitment of permanent staff and enhanced arrangements in the replacement agency workers contract is in line with the commitment to Workers' Rights within New Decade, New Approach.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether public sector reforms outlined in the Fresh Start Agreement and New Decade, New Approach have resulted in permanent public sector staff being replaced with agency workers.
(AQW 8892/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As part of the Stormont House Agreement, the Public Sector Transformation Fund was put in place to support Voluntary Exit Schemes in departments and their ALBs, over the period from 2015/16 to 2018/19. As part of annual evaluations completed of the first three PSTF years, schemes reported exiting 6,062 full time equivalent (FTE) staff. As part of the evaluation process, schemes were also required to report on how many staff that left under VES were replaced to maintain business continuity. In total, the schemes reported replacing 323 FTE staff for business continuity. The reported replacements included direct recruits, temporary as well as agency staff.

The reviews of Civil Service Reform included in New Decade New Approach have not resulted in permanent staff being replaced by agency workers.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance whether he will broaden the criteria of support provided under his new financial support scheme for businesses subject to restrictions to include gyms, who have seen their income impacted as a result of being prohibited from holding classes.

(AQW 8898/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The criteria of the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme are broad to encompass all businesses in premises that are restricted by the Health Regulations. The Scheme across all council areas opened to applications on 19 October. It seeks to provide financial assistance for all businesses that are directly affected by the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. This will work in an identical way to the initial scheme brought forward for the Derry City and Strabane District Council Area, by providing financial support to those businesses using commercial premises which are required by the Health Regulations to severely limit their operations or close.

I would encourage any business that has been required to close or severely limit their operations by the Regulations to apply for this assistance. Further details on this Scheme, including eligibility requirements and details on how to apply are available at: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/LocalisedRestrictionsSupport>

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance to detail the restrictions on gyms; and whether those who rely solely on income from exercise classes can avail of the financial support scheme for businesses forced to close.

(AQW 8915/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Details of restrictions to individual businesses introduced as a result of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 are the responsibility of the Department of Health.

As I advised Justin McNulty MLA in my answer to AQW 8898/17-22, the scheme which I have introduced to support businesses is application based. I encourage any business that has been required to close or severely limit their operations by the Regulations to apply for this assistance.

Further details on this Scheme, including eligibility requirements and details on how to apply are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/LocalisedRestrictionsSupport>

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the status of discussions with HM Treasury concerning granting of borrowing powers to the Executive for revenue expenditure.

(AQW 8948/17-22)

Mr Murphy: At this stage my focus, along with the Scottish and Welsh Finance Ministers, is to press Treasury for further flexibilities to allow the Executive to manage within the overall budget envelope provided to us – these include the ability to transfer Capital to Resource should the need arise as well as increased flexibility to carry forward unspent funding.

I am however in favour a comprehensive examination of the Executive's fiscal powers, as has been conducted in Scotland and Wales.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance what support will be put in place to support new employees who have missed out on going onto furlough after the latest COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 8955/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I wrote to the Chancellor earlier this month to urge him to bring forward the starting date of the expanded Job Support Scheme (JSS), now called JSS Closed, to 16 October. This would have allowed those firms who have been forced to close to use it to protect the jobs and livelihoods of their employees.

I am very disappointed that he did not heed that call, and that wage support for those new employees not eligible under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme will not be available until the JSS Closed begins on 1 November.

More broadly, the Executive will continue to do all that it can to support businesses and the jobs they provide. My Department has put a Localised Restrictions Support Scheme in place for businesses which are subject to the latest restrictions and I have also encouraged my Executive colleagues to urgently bring forward proposals for sectors they have responsibility for.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance, in relation to the latest COVID-19 restrictions, whether he will ensure there is sufficient financial support for our pubs and breweries.

(AQW 8958/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In response to the restrictions announced by the Executive on 14 October, I brought forward the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme to provide financial support to pubs and all other businesses using commercial premises, which are required by the Health Protection Regulations to close or severely limit their operations. I would encourage any such business to apply for this assistance. Further details on this Scheme, including eligibility requirements and details on how to apply are available at: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/LocalisedRestrictionsSupport>.

In response to my request for immediate financial support to be brought forward for those businesses, such as those in the supply chain, which fall outside the scope of my Department's Scheme, the Department for the Economy has brought forward the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme to help businesses restricted or significantly affected by the Executive restrictions, details of which are available at: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme-announced>

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Finance how many people have died from (i) cancer; (ii) stroke; (iii) heart problems; (iv) dementia; (v) suicide; and (vi) COVID-19, in each of the last 6 months.

(AQW 8965/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) publish provisional quarterly cause of death statistics based on death registrations; these are currently available up to 30th June 2020 at <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/registrar-general-quarterly-tables-2020>. The table below provides monthly disaggregation of the published data, using the International Classification of Diseases (ICD10) codes for cancer (C00 to C097), stroke (I60 to I69), suicide (X60 to X84, Y10 to Y34, Y87.0 and Y87.2) and Covid-19 (U07). Your request for deaths due to 'heart problems' has been interpreted as Ischaemic Heart Disease (I20 to I25) and for 'dementia' as Dementia/Alzheimer's Disease (F01, F03 and G30).

Please note that 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.

Monthly Deaths by selected causes of death, 2020 (provisional)

Month	Cancer	Heart Disease	Stroke	Dementia /Alzheimer's	Suicides ¹	Covid-19
January 2020	436	152	101	228	10	0
February 2020	320	148	65	186	17	0
March 2020	369	133	72	168	10	23
April 2020	405	163	81	215	18	431
May 2020	374	117	59	150	23	237
June 2020	394	130	62	137	25	63
Total	2,298	843	440	1,084	103	754

1 Defined as deaths due to self-inflicted injury as well as deaths of undetermined intent.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Finance for a breakdown of the age profile of people who have died from COVID-19.

(AQW 9016/17-22)

Mr Murphy: NISRA publishes weekly data on registrations of death. The information requested is available on the NISRA website <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/weekly-deaths>. The table entitled 'Covid-19 related deaths registered each week in Northern Ireland, age by sex, 2020' will provide this information.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Finance whether businesses who are subject to significant restriction but not full closure under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 will be eligible for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

(AQW 9028/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme across all council areas opened to applications on 19 October. It provides financial assistance for businesses that are directly affected by the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 that came into effect on 16 October, subsequently amended by Amendment No. 10 on 18 October. This scheme will work in an identical way to the initial scheme brought forward for the Derry City and Strabane District Council Area, by seeking to provide financial support to those businesses using commercial premises which are required by the Health Regulations to severely limit their operations or close.

Further details on this Scheme, including eligibility requirements are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/LocalisedRestrictionsSupport>

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the Belfast Region City Deal.

(AQW 9039/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Belfast Region City Deal is finalising a number of Outline Business Cases in preparation for signing Deal Documents. Local partners and departments continue to work closely together in order to achieve this.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance whether he plans to introduce the same scheme as in England and Wales that if you are self-isolating as a result of NHS track and trace and are on a low income you may be entitled to £500 support.

(AQW 9053/17-22)

Mr Murphy: On 25 March Minister Hargey responded swiftly to the pandemic by introducing a non-repayable Discretionary Support COVID-19 living expenses grant where a person or a member of their immediate family is diagnosed with COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate in accordance with guidance published by the Public Health Agency.

There is no limit on the number of Discretionary Support COVID19 awards a person may receive as long as they meet the eligibility criteria. The amount payable is based on each applicant's individual circumstances and will include a specific amount for all dependent children in the household.

As we continue to respond to the impacts of the pandemic I will keep this under review.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he intends to expand the number of agency workers in the NI Civil Service in the lifetime of this Executive.

(AQW 9057/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There is no intention to expand the number of agency workers in the NICS in the lifetime of this Executive.

Like many organisations, the Civil Service uses agency workers to carry out work which for various reasons cannot be completed by substantive colleagues. While there is likely to always be a requirement to have temporary colleagues, the Civil Service is committed to changing the pattern of current usage by engaging agency workers for short term or temporary assignments only and recruiting to permanent posts instead of using agency staff, where possible.

The vast majority of agency workers are undertaking Administrative Officer (AO) roles and consequently we launched an open recruitment exercise in December 2020 to fill a range of AO posts on a permanent basis. This gave anyone, including those agency workers currently engaged in the Civil Service, the chance to apply for a permanent position. We anticipate around 500 offers of permanent employment will be made in the coming weeks, with the facility to make further offers depending on the need of departments.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether agency workers in the Civil Service will be made permanent, direct employees of the Civil Service in the lifetime of this Executive.

(AQW 9058/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Agency workers in the Civil Service can only be made permanent, direct employees of the Civil Service if they are successfully appointed as candidates through open recruitment.

While there is likely to always be a requirement for agency workers, the Civil Service is committed to changing the pattern of current usage by engaging agency workers for short term or temporary assignments only and recruiting to permanent posts instead of using agency staff, where possible.

The vast majority of agency workers are undertaking Administrative Officer (AO) roles. An open recruitment exercise to fill a range of AO posts on a permanent basis launched in December 2019. This gave anyone, including those agency workers currently working in the NICS, the chance to apply for a permanent position. We anticipate around 500 offers of permanent employment will be made in the coming weeks, with the facility to make further offers depending on the needs of departments.

A replacement agency workers contract is currently being tendered and this new contract will entitle agency workers to parity with permanent Civil Service colleagues in terms of pay, annual leave and paid time off for medical/dental appointments from day one of their assignment.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance to detail the preparatory work he and his departmental officials have been doing, in partnership with the Department for Communities, to ensure the necessary funding is made available to fund the Casement Park project; and when this funding will be available for the project.

(AQW 9067/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department for Communities is currently working with UCGAA to update the business case following an informal review by DoF officials and also to reflect last week's positive planning decision.

The funding requirements will then be considered as part of the forthcoming budget process. As a flagship project and a commitment under NDNA this project will be prioritised.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Finance, following the Executive announcement that those who work from home should work from home, whether all officials and staff members in his Department, who can work from home, are working from home.

(AQW 9126/17-22)

Mr Murphy: In line with Executive guidance, the Department of Finance is making every effort to help people work from home where they can. Where work cannot be done at home, the Department is taking clear, practical steps to help protect workers and create safe places to work.

My department has a number of roles that cannot 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.

Colleagues who, because of their personal circumstances (e.g. medical, personal or welfare reasons) feel they are better off being in work can discuss and agree potential arrangements with their line manager, including an appropriate safe office location they can work in.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance what process or mechanism exists within his Department whereby a written record is kept of any lobbying of the Minister or special adviser in relation to departmental functions, policies or proposals.

(AQW 9181/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Department has systems and processes in place to maintain the record keeping requirements of the Ministerial and Special Adviser codes of conduct. All written communication received by the Ministerial Private Office is recorded in the Knowledge Network (KN) System.

Officials are present at all meetings concerning departmental or executive business and records of those meetings are recorded and stored on the NICS record management system, HPRM.

In accordance with the requirements of the Ministerial and Special Adviser Codes of Conduct, where the Minister or Special Adviser meets external organisations or individuals and finds themselves discussing official business without an official present they are required to advise the Private Office.

The Executive is committed to publishing details of Ministers' and Special Advisers' meetings with external organisations/ individuals on a quarterly basis, including the above meetings. Unfortunately, Covid-19 pressures have delayed publication but details for the period January to September will be published shortly.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the Barnett consequentials arising from the Chancellor's announcement on 22 October 2020.

(AQW 9344/17-22)

Mr Murphy: On 9 October, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced an extension of the Treasury Guarantee. This guarantee is designed to provide upfront COVID-19 funding, avoiding the drip-feed of Barnett consequentials following announcements of English programmes, thereby assisting the Executive to plan appropriately.

The Chancellor's announcement included an additional £200 million, bringing the total Guarantee for the Executive to £2.4 billion.

Any Barnett Consequentials arising from the subsequent announcement on 22 October announcement will be included in the additional £200 million announced on 9 October.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Finance whether the revised Job Support scheme, announced by the Chancellor, includes Northern Ireland.

(AQW 9354/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Yes.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Finance, when he refers to the newspaper sector, whether he is also including regularly published magazines.

(AQW 9386/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My references to the newspaper sector refers to local newspapers.

Department of Health

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what plans the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has to enter into an agreement to facilitate the continuation of Billy Caldwell's cannabis medication.

(AQW 6550/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): My Department is not involved in the direct care or treatment of patients and as such I am unable to discuss the treatment being provided to any individual patient or indeed intervene in any way with regard to the clinical decision-making process for that patient. Such matters are for the clinical team responsible for their care.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health what COVID-19 prevention protocols and rules were in place for (i) outpatients attending appointments; and (ii) visitors to Craigavon Hospital, up to the 4 September 2020.

(AQW 6559/17-22)

Mr Swann: Outpatients are advised that they must wear a face mask for their appointment and that they should wait in their car until they receive a call to advise them that their clinician is available to see them. They are told to attend alone, except in circumstances that require the patient to be accompanied, such as child or a person with a disability who requires assistance.

From 27 March 2020 all visiting to Craigavon Area Hospital was suspended, with a number of exceptions in respect of paediatric, maternity, neonatology, critical care and palliative care services. From 6 July patients were allowed to have one visitor per hour per day. Staggered visiting was introduced to different wards from 17 August 2020 to avoid large numbers of visitors to the hospital at one time, with visits to the maternity, intensive care unit and haematology wards by appointment only. The following rules were in place for visitors from 6 July 2020 until 1 September 2020, when visiting was again suspended at Craigavon Area Hospital:

- Do not visit if you have any symptoms of COVID-19 or are feeling unwell.
- Only visit if you are one of two people nominated by patient/next of kin.
- Only one visitor permitted at a time, for a maximum of one hour.
- Visitors are to bring their own face covering to wear at all times, and are reminded to use the hand sanitiser provided when entering and leaving the hospital and the ward/department.
- Children under 16 not permitted, unless there are exceptional circumstances.
- Permitted visitors to end of life patients are required to wear appropriate PPE, which will be provided by the Trust.

Throughout this time, virtual visiting has been promoted as the preferred way of visiting and a virtual visiting service pilot has been running to support patients who do not have their own technology.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Health to detail the average waiting time for a COVID-19 test in each Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 6617/17-22)

Mr Swann: Testing for Covid-19 in Northern Ireland is delivered via two routes. Firstly, the Health and Social Care (HSC) laboratories and the NI Scientific Advisory Consortium, (Pillar 1). Secondly, the National Testing Programme (NTP) managed by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in London (Pillar 2).

HSC Trusts have indicated that routine tests for patients and tests for symptomatic HSC staff, and for symptomatic family members causing staff to isolate, conducted through Pillar 1 are usually undertaken within 24 Hours (excluding if requested on a Sunday when it will ordinarily be undertaken the next day).

Testing under Pillar 2 is managed through DHSC London and booked using the online portal or by calling 119. DHSC has advised that data on how long on average it takes a person to secure a test, from their first attempt until they are successful, is not captured. Once a test subject is successful in obtaining a test slot, tests are available on the same day as booking or the following day depending on what time the person accesses the booking system.

The National Testing Programme is currently experiencing an exceptionally high demand due to a number of factors such as the return of schools. 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, are encouraged to please wait a few hours and then try again.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health (i) whether he has received a response from the Minister for the Economy following his request that she establishes a business support programme specifically for private dental practices; and (ii) for an update on discussions that have taken place.

(AQW 6763/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Minister for the Economy replied to the most recent letter on this matter on 30 September 2020, indicating her view that the Department of Health take the scheme forward. On recent advice from the Departmental Solicitor's Office, it has been confirmed that my Department does not have the legal power to provide financial support to private dental activity, which is set apart in legislation to General Dental Services. No further correspondence has taken place.

The Department of Health continues however to provide financial support to General Dental Services and has very recently made available a further £5m to the additional £8.7m that had already been provided, in light of the ongoing challenges facing the sector. The position is under regular review alongside ongoing engagement with the British Dental Association.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what steps are being taken to prevent delays in COVID-19 test results being returned, particularly for key workers.

(AQW 6946/17-22)

Mr Swann: Testing for Covid-19 in Northern Ireland is delivered via two routes. Firstly, the Health and Social Care laboratories and the NI Scientific Advisory Consortium (Pillar 1). Secondly, the National Testing Programme managed by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in London (Pillar 2).

Testing for Health Care Workers who are symptomatic, or self-isolating as a household member is symptomatic, is ordinarily undertaken through Pillar 1 with results usually available within 24 hours.

Testing for other key workers is ordinarily undertaken through the National Testing Programme managed by DHSC. DHSC has established a specific late results team to investigate outstanding test results. This is accessible via the 119 service.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on plans to map out all defibrillators.

(AQW 7211/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) connected to the National Defibrillator Network (known as "The Circuit") in February 2020. They have been working to contact the guardians/owners of all the publicly accessible defibrillators known to NIAS with instructions on how to finalise registration on the database. This work has been impacted by COVID-19, with a significant drop in the number of replies received, and by the necessity to temporarily redeploy members of the Community Resuscitation Team on COVID-related duties.

The Community Resuscitation Team have recently recommenced this work. Recertification of the defibrillators will then fully integrate them with the database and with NIAS' live control system, providing an accurate reflection of all the AEDs available across Northern Ireland.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether he will consider developing a specialist Teenage and Young Adult palliative care unit.

(AQW 7286/17-22)

Mr Swann: Due to the varied and often complex needs of teenagers and young adults who require palliative care, multidisciplinary teams provide individualised and flexible packages of support to ensure that services are responsive to these needs. This involves providing the appropriate specialist nursing and social work support when teenagers are too old to be cared for in paediatric settings, rather than focusing on the development of a specific unit. Each individual will have a key worker who will plan and co-ordinate services for palliative care and support, and ensure continuity of care for them and their family.

This development of these services is aligned to the recommendations of the Children's Palliative and End of Life Care Strategy 2016-26, and is overseen by the Paediatric Palliative Care Network. A Regional Paediatric Palliative Care Consultant has recently been appointed, supported by Paediatric Palliative Care Clinical Leads within each Trust to provide dedicated and visible local leadership.

My Department is also developing a 10 year Cancer Strategy for Northern Ireland. A dedicated sub-group is considering the specific needs of children and young people and will make recommendations to be incorporated into the final strategy, including in relation to service models for palliative care, transition to adult care settings, and physical infrastructure. However, progressing the strategy has unfortunately been impacted by COVID-19 and publication is likely to be delayed until 2021.

In addition, children and young people with life limiting conditions and palliative care needs are able to access short breaks in the Northern Ireland Children's Hospice, which provides 24/7 care with access to medical support, or through the regional hospice at home service.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he is developing bespoke guidance for those who received COVID-19 shielding letters and how they should access elective care.

(AQW 7314/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is working with primary and secondary care providers to ensure that any patients who fall within COVID-19 shielding categories are in receipt of clear advice about the infection prevention and control measures they should follow if they need to access care in a hospital setting.

Those that were previously advised to shield will continue to receive care as appropriate, either remotely or in hospital and primary care settings. Clinicians will ensure that any risks to patients are minimised by the stringent use of infection and prevention control measures. These will be continually reviewed throughout the course of the current pandemic and modified as required.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health what steps have been taken to involve local community-based mental health and suicide prevention groups in the process of formulating the new mental health strategy.
(AQW 7399/17-22)

Mr Swann: A virtual stake holder event to kick-start the process of formulating the new strategy took place on 5 October and included a large number of people from different settings with different experiences.

The work to develop the Strategy will be supported by a Strategic Advisory Panel which consists of people who can provide expert advice, including professionals, academics, community and voluntary sector and people with lived experience.

My officials are also in the process of creating a reference group where anyone who wants to participate, can. Due to the current restrictions on meetings, it is expected that this group will operate virtually, mostly through emails. Community based mental health groups and suicide prevention groups are actively encouraged to participate in this work.

The mental health strategy will not directly focus on suicide prevention, as this is provided through the Protect Life 2 Strategy. As there are clear links between suicide prevention and mental health, the strategy will reflect such links.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health whether regular COVID-19 testing will be implemented for domiciliary care staff who are providing care to elderly members of the community on a daily basis in their homes.
(AQW 7496/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current policy is that all Health and Social Care Workers who are symptomatic, or isolating as a household member is symptomatic, are eligible for testing in Northern Ireland.

This includes community based domiciliary care providers who, as essential health care workers, are currently able to access testing either through local HSC laboratories or via the National Testing Programme.

Should there be an indication of more than one symptomatic individual among a group of care workers, an appropriate risk assessment will be undertaken by the Public Health Agency with testing of all individuals undertaken as deemed appropriate by that risk assessment.

The priority groups eligible for testing are kept under constant review by my Department's Expert Advisory Group for Testing and are updated regularly in line with emerging scientific and medical evidence. The position with regard to the appropriate frequency for testing of domiciliary care workers is kept under active review by the Expert Group.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether he will consider making injectable vitamin B12 available over the counter from pharmacies, in light of challenges presented to receiving these services as result of COVID-19.
(AQW 7530/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are no plans to provide vitamin B12 injections to patients over the counter from pharmacies.

Any patient who is on regular vitamin B12 injections and who has recently experienced a delay in receiving their injection due to Covid-19, is advised to contact their GP practice directly to discuss when they can receive their injection, or to check if it would be appropriate for them to be offered an alternative treatment in line with the current best practice guidance produced by the British Society for Haematology.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health what action he is taking to address cancer treatment delays and ensure a safe resumption and continuance of services.
(AQW 7593/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Strategic Framework for Rebuilding Health and Social Care (HSC) Services which I published in June identified cancer as a key priority, recognising the adverse impact of COVID-19 on referral and treatment waiting times. Under this Framework each Trust has produced plans to reset cancer services as quickly as possible in an environment which is safe for both staff and patients. However, this remains extremely challenging as we face a further peak in community transmission of COVID-19, due to the need for our health service to respond to the current surge in hospital admissions.

The Framework and associated Trust plans are available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/rebuilding-hsc-services>.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he has plans to bring forward a revised Test, Trace and Protect plan to enhance the testing and tracing capacity and provide enhanced support for people self isolating, including monitoring arrangements.

(AQW 7646/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department continually reviews testing capacity to ensure that all aspects of our testing programme are optimised. This has resulted in an increase in the overall availability of testing to meet a recent marked increase in demand.

There continues to be a substantial increase in the number of positive test results notified to the Contact Tracing Service (CTS) system. The service delivery model and staffing resource requirements are continually kept under review with recruitment actively ongoing to appoint staff to work as contact tracers from a variety of professional backgrounds including Locum GPs and dentists. The service operates 12 hours per day, 7 days per week.

The Public Health Agency's tracing 'digital first' model was launched on Friday 09 October 2020. The new service provides online self-service contact tracing for the majority of people who test positive.

This follows on from the introduction of the StopCOVID NI app in July 2020 and the recent move to text alerts for close contacts of positive cases. It is important to note that the new Digital Self-Trace service works with and complements existing services (text messaging and the StopCOVID NI app) and doesn't in any way replace these.

The Executive has put in place a number of measures to provide support for people who are required to self-isolate. This includes for example the Freephone COVID-19 Community Helpline funded by the Department for Communities which connects people into a wide range of support, information and advice available through a range of statutory, regional and local organisations.

Also, people who cannot work while self-isolating because of COVID-19 may be entitled to Statutory Sick Pay for every day they are in isolation.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Health whether he will consider increasing the upper age limit for eligibility for IVF treatment.
(AQW 7648/17-22)

Mr Swann: I appreciate that the delay in accessing fertility treatment due to the COVID-19 pandemic may have caused distress to those currently awaiting treatment. In order to mitigate this, the eligibility for anyone currently on the waiting list has already been extended by a year.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health how COVID-19 has impacted disabled people.
(AQW 7838/17-22)

Mr Swann: COVID-19 has had an adverse impact on people with disabilities due to the higher prevalence of certain underlying conditions within this population. Restrictions and shielding have proved challenging for this group, with the reduction of daycare facilities, short breaks, face-to-face appointments with clinicians and therapists, and in some cases service users choosing to pause domiciliary care packages.

Blind and partially sighted people have faced challenges around shopping, social distancing and keeping connected with others. Deaf and hearing impaired people have experienced challenges with face masks affecting their ability to lip-read; however there has been a recent allocation of 8,640 clear masks to Northern Ireland as part of the UK Make Strategy Pilot. If this pilot is successful, further orders will follow and NI will benefit in line with the Barnett formula.

During the course of the pandemic, my Department has proactively engaged with people with disabilities, their families, carers, and the sector to put in place measures to mitigate the impacts of restrictions on this group.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health when each Health and Social Care Trust will resume provision of pre-COVID-19 levels of respite and day care provision for adults with learning disabilities.
(AQW 7885/17-22)

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. Timescales within this phased restart are guided by the need to ensure the safety of service users, carers and staff and this means that services are currently not able to operate in the same way or to the same capacity as pre-COVID levels. Local issues such as the limitations of current estate and transport services are also having an impact on the rebuilding of services, as are staff absences.

I am very aware of the effects the response to the first wave of COVID has had on those with caring responsibilities and I am concerned that carers will find it hard to manage with fewer supports and increased caring demands.

Trusts are working hard to build capacity in services and find innovative solutions to meet the needs of individuals. My officials are continuing to monitor the progress Trusts are making closely. In addition, Trust keyworkers remain in contact with service users and carers in order to assess and prioritise requests for support and services and there is also engagement with Community and Voluntary sector partners to explore the potential for extending or expanding existing provision.

Service users, families and carers have been contacted by Trusts to support ongoing dialogue and make them aware that, although some services are restricted, the HSC remains 'open for business' and there are staff available to offer support and advice.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health what impact the delay in the roll out of day care is having on carers of adults with learning disabilities.
(AQW 7886/17-22)

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. Timescales within this phased restart are guided by the need to ensure the safety of service users, carers and staff and this means that services are currently not able to operate in the same way or to the same capacity as pre-COVID levels. Local issues such as the limitations of current estate and transport services are also having an impact on the rebuilding of services, as are staff absences.

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Service users, families and carers have been contacted by Trusts to support ongoing dialogue and make them aware that, although some services are restricted, the HSC remains 'open for business' and there are staff available to offer support and advice.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Health to detail the capacity of the COVID-19 test and trace programme; and whether he has the resources required to deal with an increase in the scale of work of the test and trace programme.
(AQW 7923/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department continually reviews testing capacity to ensure that all aspects of our testing programme are optimised. This has resulted in an increase in the overall availability of testing to meet a recent marked increase in demand.

There continues to be a substantial increase in the number of positive test results notified to the Contact Tracing Service (CTS) system. The service delivery model and staffing resource requirements are continually kept under review with recruitment actively ongoing to appoint additional staff to work as contact tracers. The service currently operates 12 hours per day, 7 days per week.

Digital innovation has been at the heart of this work since the outset. The new Digital Self-Trace service, launched on 9 October, builds on and complements existing services, including the StopCOVID NI app and the text messaging service. All of these digital enabled solutions augment the manual contact tracing system and help to improve the efficiency of the overall service.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Health what work his Department is undertaking to understand any long-term effects of COVID-19 on those who have been infected.
(AQW 7925/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is accumulating evidence to suggest that cases of COVID-19 who have had both mild and severe symptoms can experience long-term health effects. National and international research to evaluate the long-term health and psychosocial effects of COVID-19 in affected persons is continuing.

My Department is progressing a local enquiry to consider the physical, rehabilitation, psychological and mental health requirements of post-COVID-19 patients. The findings of this work will be fully considered alongside the wider body of emerging research to inform future policy and service decisions.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of appearances he has made since the restoration of devolution (i) before the Assembly; and (ii) before the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response
(AQW 7972/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since the restoration of devolution I have appeared (i) before the Assembly on the Covid-19 response five (5) times on:

- 2 March 2020
- 9 June 2020
- 6 October 2020
- 9 March 2020
- 28 July 2020

and (ii) before the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response three (3) times on:

- 15 April 2020
- 30 April 2020
- 14 May 2020

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the interventions his Department will make to ensure people with dementia are properly supported during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 7985/17-22)

Mr Swann: The HSC, including the Department, will continue to provide information and guidance in relation to a range of COVID-19 related issues that impact on those who have a dementia, whether they live in the community or are placed in a care home setting.

Trusts have also been requested to develop support plans that ensure that Trusts and service providers are working closely together to maintain services in a safe and effective way.

Along with the Community and Voluntary sector, Trust staff continue to provide local support to people with a dementia and their carers. This has included telephone calls to provide information and offer reassurance and use of other technologies including Apps and video links.

Trust Memory Services have adapted to current circumstances and through the use of technology and other innovative practices, are able to undertake assessments and care reviews.

Information about Dementia and COVID-19 is available on the following links:

- <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/campaigns/dementia>
- <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/>
- Information booklets are also available at:
- <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/search/node?keys=dementia>

We will continue to review all such interventions and ensure they remain appropriate.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health to detail the scanning equipment currently in place at (i) Daisy Hill Hospital; and (ii) Craigavon Area Hospital.

(AQW 8035/17-22)

Mr Swann: Daisy Hill Hospital currently has one main CT scanner, one modular CT scanner and two ultrasound scanners.

Craigavon Area Hospital currently has one main CT scanner, one modular CT scanner, two MRI scanners, two nuclear medicine scanners and six ultrasound scanners.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of new concerns raised by whistleblowers at Dunmurry Manor.

(AQW 8064/17-22)

Mr Swann: Over the past three months a number of complaints, have been received, some signed and some anonymously, directly and through elected representatives. All of these have been or are currently being fully investigated and where substantiated, action has been taken.

A complaint received from a whistleblower in September is the subject of an on-going PSNI investigation and therefore it would be inappropriate for me to comment on this.

I can confirm that there is currently no enforcement action by RQIA in respect of Oak Tree Manor Care Home (formally Dunmurry Manor). Any areas for improvement relating to the level of care are being managed through a quality improvement plan within the most recent inspection reports and not through escalated enforcement action.

The home is being monitored closely by RQIA and Trusts who continue to work closely with Runwood Homes Ltd to ensure the wellbeing of residents and staff at Oak Tree Manor.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health whether partners are able to attend antenatal scans at the Ulster Hospital.

(AQW 8170/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current guidance on visiting restrictions as they apply to all Healthcare settings including maternity (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>) means that for expectant mothers:

“Birth partners will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to dating scan, early pregnancy clinic, anomaly scan, Fetal Medicine Department, when admitted to individual room for active labour (to be determined by midwife) and birth and, to visit in antenatal and postnatal wards for up to one hour once a week.”

This applies to all HSC settings across Northern Ireland, including the Ulster Hospital.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health (i) whether birth partners are permitted to be present for the full duration of labour; (ii) whether this policy is consistent across all Health and Social Care Trusts; and (iii) to detail the scientific and medical rationale for time limits on the support provided to expectant mothers by their birth partners.

(AQW 8171/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current guidance on visiting restrictions allows that:

“Birth partners will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to dating scan, early pregnancy clinic, anomaly scan, Fetal Medicine Department, when admitted to individual room for active labour (to be determined by midwife) and birth and, to visit in antenatal and postnatal wards for up to one hour once a week.”

- (i) This applies to all HSCT maternity settings across Northern Ireland.
- (ii) These restrictions are not in place simply to protect mothers and their visitors, but are necessary due to the need to maintain safety for all others, including other families, all our HSC staff and therefore the wider population, through social distancing and ensuring appropriate Infection Control Procedures are followed across all healthcare settings.

The evidence suggests that there is a higher level of risk if you are closer than 2 metres for more a prolonged period of time. Given that our staff constantly treat others in close proximity, the number and incidence of visitors must be effectively managed and limited since the resulting decrease in footfall in communal areas would significantly reduce the opportunity for transmission of the virus in such a vulnerable setting.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health why Donaghadee GP Health Centre is not providing ear-syringing services to patients.

(AQW 8192/17-22)

Mr Swann: Under the terms of their contract all GPs are required to provide essential primary medical services to their registered patients. As well as providing essential services GP Practices can also contract with the Board to provide additional services to their patients, for which they would receive additional remuneration; there is no obligation on GP Practices to provide those additional services.

Ear syringing is not regarded as an essential service and therefore GP Practices are not required to provide that service unless they have specifically agreed, as part of their contract, to do so.

In 2018 the National Institute for Clinical Health Excellence (NICE) issued guideline 98 which recommended that the manual syringing method should no longer be used.

It is recommended that GPs should offer ear wax removal using an electronic irrigator, micro-suction or another method of earwax removal (such as manual removal using a probe) for adults in primary or community ear care services, if the practitioner, such as a community nurse or audiologist:

- has training and expertise in using the method to remove earwax;
- is aware of any contraindications to the method, and
- the correct equipment is available.

If the GP is not able to provide this service because they do not meet the NICE recommendations they would make the necessary referrals to ENT/Audiology in a Health and Social Care Trust. However, rather than wait, patients may prefer to seek, and pay for, private treatment.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the StopCOVID NI app; and whether there have been any glitches which have impacted users notifications.

(AQW 8216/17-22)

Mr Swann: The STOPCovid NI proximity app is a useful tool which augments the manual contact tracing process, providing an ability to accelerate notifications to “at risk individuals” and increase the number of contacts identified for each confirmed case, beyond the ability of the infected individual to recall their whereabouts and identify at risk citizens.

There have been some issues reported in the media with the recently launched NHS COVID19 App. However for STOPCovid NI app the HSC, as part of a continuous improvement process, has arrangements in place to respond to user queries and to monitor for any emerging issues and ensure these are addressed promptly in future app updates. Examples of how potential issues have been explained can be found on the NI Direct website at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-stopcovid-ni-proximity-app> .

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail the payments Northern Ireland has received each quarter to date from the voluntary pricing and access scheme since its introduction in January 2019.

(AQW 8234/17-22)

Mr Swann: The payments received by HSCB from the DHSC in relation to the Voluntary Scheme for Branded Medicines Pricing and Access (VSBMPA) since its introduction in 2019 are as follows:

Period	Amount Received (figures have been rounded)
2019 Q1	£8.1m
2019 Q2	£8.2m
2019 Q3	£8.8m

Period	Amount Received (figures have been rounded)
2019 Q4	£8.6m
2020 Q1	£6.1m

Please note the next payment from DHSC for Q2 is due shortly.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health what plans there are to refresh his Department's public health messaging on safe drinking limits.

(AQW 8247/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current advice on alcohol consumption is provided in the UK Chief Medical Officers' Low Risk Drinking Guidelines. Published in 2016, these state that for both men and women, to keep the health risks from alcohol to a low level, it is safest not to drink more than 14 units a week on a regular basis.

Since the guidelines have been published, the Public Health Agency have been promoting this public health message through various routes, and they have particularly highlighted the risks associated with alcohol-related harm during the pandemic. Information on where to access local help and support can be found by visiting www.drugsandalcoholni.info and clicking on "Services Near You".

You may wish to note that, my Department has been working in conjunction with key stakeholders on co-developing a new alcohol and drug strategy and this will be issued for public consultation later this year.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail each occasion (i) he; and (ii) his special adviser has attended the Transformation Management Board.

(AQW 8262/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Rebuilding Management Board met for the first time on Wednesday 10th June and has met every subsequent Wednesday with the exception of 15th July.

I am not a member of the board and therefore I attended the first meeting only. My Special Advisor has attended all meetings with the exception of the meetings held on 1st July, 22nd July, 5th August and 12th August.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail each date on which the Transformation Management Board has met.

(AQW 8263/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Rebuilding Management Board met for the first time on Wednesday 10th June and has met every subsequent Wednesday with the exception of 15th July.

I am not a member of the board and therefore I attended the first meeting only. My Special Advisor has attended all meetings with the exception of the meetings held on 1st July, 22nd July, 5th August and 12th August.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how women in North Antrim, who are faced with an unwanted pregnancy, are to safely access abortion care, given COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 8310/17-22)

Mr Swann: Until such time as my Department directs the Health and Social Care Board to commission abortion services, women who choose abortion can contact the British Pregnancy Advisory Service for access to services available in England. They may also contact their General Practitioner.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Health how many times has the Air Ambulance been dispatched to a road traffic accident (i) this year to date; and (ii) in each of the last three years.

(AQW 8316/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMs) undertook their first live mission on 22nd July 2017. Information provided by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) on the number of times the air ambulance was dispatched to attend traffic/transportation incidents from 22nd July 2017 to 31st August 2020, is detailed in the table overleaf.

Number of times the Air Ambulance and Delta 7 were dispatched to an incident (22nd July 2017 - 31st August 2020)

Year	Air Ambulance	DELTA 7*	Total
22/07/2017 - 31/12/2017	92	28	120
01/01/2018 - 31/12/2018	153	53	206
01/01/2019 - 31/12/2019	207	56	263
01/01/2020 - 31/08/2020	103	39	142

- * Delta 7 is a Rapid Response Vehicle used by the HEMs crew to respond to an incident when the helicopter will not be allocated due to poor weather conditions or an accident occurring close to the HEMs base.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the adequacy of current stocks of Personal Protective Equipment for a potential winter surge of COVID-19 infections.

(AQW 8321/17-22)

Mr Swann: 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 preparation for a surge of Covid-19.

Strong supply lines have been established for core PPE products with currently in excess of 350 million items of PPE in stock across Trusts and in central storage.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on Lisnaskea Health Centre.

(AQW 8338/17-22)

Mr Swann: The outline business case for the proposed new Lisnaskea Health and Care Centre was submitted to the Department of Finance (DoF) for consideration on 17 September 2020 and is currently under review between DoF and DoH officials.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the overall survival rate of COVID-19 patients; and (ii) the survival rate broken down by age group.

(AQW 8356/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on overall survival rates of COVID-19 patients is not available at this time.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health what action his Department has taken to ascertain that all deaths attributed to COVID-19 are actually as a result of COVID-19.

(AQW 8358/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department does not review Medical Certificates of Cause of Death (MCCDs) to confirm what an individual has died from.

A medical practitioner has a statutory duty to complete a MCCD to the best of their knowledge and belief, in accordance with the Births and Deaths Registration (Northern Ireland) Order 1976.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Health (i) to detail the number of (a) residents; and (b) staff infected with COVID-19 in east Belfast care homes; and (ii) what action is being taken to address the level of infection.

(AQW 8360/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Data on the number of residents and staff infected with COVID-19 in East Belfast care homes is not available. However, as a proxy measure using the postcodes BT4, BT5 and BT6, I can confirm that as at 14th October the following has been identified:
- Since the start of the pandemic 19 outbreaks have been reported in care homes in these postcode areas;
 - Care home outbreaks have concluded in 16 homes in these postcode areas;
 - Of those still open, two are confirmed COVID-19 and one is COVID-19 negative but is currently being monitored as a non-COVID respiratory illness.
- (ii) Protecting residents and those working in our care homes has been a key priority and this will continue to be the case as we respond to the pandemic through the winter.

From the start of this pandemic guidance has been provided on infection prevention and control and this has been continually revised during the course of the pandemic.

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-guidance-nursing-and-residential-care-homes-northern-ireland>

This has been underpinned during the course of the year by three announcements of funding for the care home sector, the last being on 21 October worth an additional £27m, in addition to previously announced support packages.

One of the key measures in preventing further increases of COVID-19, is the continuation of the rolling programme of testing for care home residents and staff supported by the PHA and Trusts. This programme will continue to play a significant role in helping to minimise the risk of COVID-19 through early identification of single cases and potential clusters of cases, and will enable immediate steps to be taken to prevent spread of infection, thereby ensuring the continued safety of our residents and staff.

Ongoing provision of PPE from Trusts to care home providers will continue. Over 48 million items of PPE have already been supplied to independent sector care homes up to 3 October 2020, with a value over £16m.

During the first surge Trusts provided more than 26,000 hours of free staff time to work in care homes and fill gaps in rotas. Each Trust has a dedicated care home support team in place, which has been consolidated and expanded to provide further support over the months ahead.

Free training is being provided to care home staff by both NISCC and the CEC on infection prevention and control, use of PPE and a range of clinical skills necessary to help manage patients with respiratory conditions, for instance. Additional funding is available where care homes have further training needs linked to covid-19 above and beyond what I have set out here.

The RQIA will also continue to act as a point of contact for homes with questions or difficulties and have recently increased the resource they deploy on supporting homes in this way.

The PHA Health Protection team has long-established, well-trusted and robust systems in place to monitor infectious diseases and provide direct advice and support to manage outbreaks and limit onward spread. These arrangements are being actively implemented in tackling coronavirus after the pandemic was declared.

The PHA duty-room team also provide specific advice and guidance regarding isolation, containment, and infection prevention and control practice, including cleaning, testing information, how to manage symptoms, when to request additional medical advice, and PPE. The outbreak is then followed and care home supported till the outbreak conclusion.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the topics, excluding those related to COVID-19, on which his Department is considering (i) introducing primary legislation; (ii) introducing secondary legislation; and (iii) making or amending regulations.

(AQW 8366/17-22)

Mr Swann: The information requested is provided in the tables below:

(i) Primary legislation under consideration;

Topic/Title	Purpose
Reform of Health and Social Care Bill	To give effect to previous Ministerial decisions to close the Health & Social Care Board.
Adoption and Children Bill	To overhaul and modernise the legal framework for adoption and also to amend some of the provisions in the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.
Adult Safeguarding Bill	To provide a legal framework for the safeguarding of adults who are at risk of harm from abuse, exploitation or neglect.
Soft Opt-out Organ Donation Bill	To introduce a soft opt-out system of registration on the NHS Organ Donor Register for Northern Ireland.
Health and Social Care (Staffing)	To ensure safe HSC staffing levels, one of the commitments in the framework agreement with Trade Unions to suspend previous industrial action in 2019.
Fire and Rescue Services (NI) (Amendment) Order	To make amendments to The Fire and Rescue Services (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 to address an existing gap in fire safety responsibility for common areas in shared domestic premises (e.g. flats/apartments).
Public Health (Minimum Unit Price For Alcohol) Bill	To set a minimum price at which alcoholic drinks can be sold, by licensed premises, on the basis of how many units of alcohol it contains.
Pharmacy (NI) Order	To implement the statutory registration of pharmacy technicians and the opportunity to update the existing Pharmacy (Northern Ireland) Order 1976.
Fundamental Review of Regulation	To future-proof the regulatory framework for current and future treatments and services available.
Duty of Candour Bill	To give effect to a Statutory Duty of Candour and several other related recommendations in Sir John O'Hara's report of the Inquiry into Hyponatraemia Related Deaths (IHRD), to promote greater openness in the HSC.
Certification of Death Bill	To introduce the role of Independent Medical Examiner (IME) to scrutinise deaths not investigated by the Coroner.

Topic/Title	Purpose
Patient and Client Council (PCC)	Regulations governing the composition of the PCC Board require amendment.
Northern Ireland Practice & Education Council for Nursing and Midwifery (NIPEC)	The Statutory functions of NIPEC may need to be amended to enable NIPEC to expand its activity and/or statutory functions in line with transformation of the HSC and the ever-changing needs of the HSC Workforce.
The Medicines and Medical Devices Bill	The Bill was introduced in the House of Commons on 13 Feb 2020. It contains provisions that deal with human medicines and veterinary medicines, both of which are transferred matters, and will therefore require the consent of the NI Assembly by means of a Legislative Consent Motion (LCM).

- (ii) Secondary legislation; and
- (iii) Making or amending regulations under consideration.

Topic/Title	Purpose
Amendments to The Pharmaceutical Services Regulations (NI) 1997	To recognise registered therapeutic radiographers and paramedics as independent prescribers and registered dietitians as supplementary prescribers.
Amendments to Misuse of Drugs legislation during 2020 in line with recommendations from the Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD)	These changes will place controls, or relax controls, on medicines and drugs liable to misuse. The changes may also allow non-medical prescribers to prescribe an increased range of controlled drugs (CDs) relevant to their practice.
The Human Medicines (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020. Co-signatory UK subordinate legislation (Minister for Health in NI and Secretary of State for Health in England).	Proposed changes to the Human Medicines Regulations 2012 to support the rapid and effective rollout of a COVID-19 vaccine and the influenza (flu) vaccine in the UK.
The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland (SBNI) (Membership, Procedure, Functions and Committee) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019	These regulations, which would amend the 2012 Regulations, propose to remove many of the existing procedures from current Regulations and instead require the SBNI to provide for these in Standing Orders (SOs). In addition, these proposed regulations will strengthen the arrangements for Case Management Reviews (CMRs), as provided for in the 2012 Regulations.
The Regulation and Improvement Authority (Fees and Frequency of Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020	These regulations would amend The Regulation and Improvement Authority (Fees and Frequency of Inspections) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2005.
The Smoke-Free (Private Vehicles) Regulations (NI) 2020	These regulations would extend smoke-free provisions to private vehicles where there is more than one person present and one of those present is under the age of 18.
The Smoke-Free (Premises, Vehicle Operators and Penalty Notices) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2020	This rule completes the enforcement regime in relation to private vehicles (see above) by providing that the driver of such a vehicle is responsible for ensuring that smoking does not take place and providing amended fixed penalty notice forms.
The Nicotine Inhaling Products (Age of Sale and Proxy Purchasing) Regulations (NI) 2020	This rule proposes to introduce a minimum age of sale of 18 years for nicotine inhaling products.
The Tobacco Retailer (Fixed Penalty) (Amount) (Amendment) Regulations NI 2020	In relation to the proposed age of sale restrictions on nicotine inhaling products, this rule is required as part of the enforcement regime and allows for the inclusion of the amount of fixed penalties in The Tobacco Retailer (Fixed Penalty) (Amount) Regulations NI 2016.
The Tobacco Retailer (Fixed Penalty) (General) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2020	This rule is required to amend the form of a fixed penalty notice which may be issued in relation to the proposed offences in relation to age of sale of nicotine inhaling products.

Topic/Title	Purpose
The Healthy Start Scheme and Day Care Food Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020	The legislation is being amended to maintain parity with England and Wales by providing for the digitisation of the Healthy Start Scheme.
Revocation of the Establishment And Agencies (Fitness Of Workers) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020	This regulation will revoke the SR made on 2 April to facilitate a temporary Covid-19 pre-employment vetting policy. The policy has now been stood down. Certain Health & Social Care employers and agencies have a statutory requirement to obtain an enhanced disclosure check and other pre-employment vetting information before starting an employee. This will remove temporary permissions to employ/supply an individual on the basis of an emergency barred list check and supervision pending the receipt of that vetting information.
The Fostering Placement and Fostering Agencies Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021	These Regulations will replace the Foster Placement (Children) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996 (as amended).
The Mental Capacity (2016 Act) (Commencement No. 1) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020	Amendments to the Mental Capacity (2016 Act) Commencement No. 1) Order (NI) 2020 to change the date of commencement of the offence of unlawful detention from 2 December 2020 to 31 May 2021 in response to delays in implementation of the Mental Capacity Act due to Covid-19.
The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Suspension) Order (No. ?) (Northern Ireland) 2020	A SR to suspend the mental capacity provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020 (section 10(4) and Schedule 11).
The Mental Capacity (Deprivation of Liberty) (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020	Amendments to the Mental Capacity (Deprivation of Liberty) (No. 2) Regulations (NI) 2019 to change the forms required for a deprivation of liberty.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the rights afforded to unpaid carers.
(AQW 8368/17-22)

Mr Swann: Carers with a primary or personal responsibility are protected under Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 which requires public authorities, in carrying out their functions relating to Northern Ireland, "to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity...between persons with dependants and persons without".

In addition, The Human Rights Act 1998 imposes duties on the state and those who provide services to ensure that all carers and the people they care for are treated with fairness, respect, equality, dignity and enabled to make the decisions that are right for them.

With regard to working carers, the Employment Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1999 permits carers to take leave to address emergency situations involving dependants such as a breakdown in care arrangements, illness or injury of the dependent person or the death of a dependent person. Furthermore, the Work and Families (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 introduced the right to request flexible working for carers, with the right to appeal such decisions.

The Carers and Direct Payments Act (Northern Ireland) 2002, imposed a statutory duty on Health and Social Care Trusts to inform carers of their right to an assessment and to be considered for services to meet their own needs.

As you are aware, my Department is currently taking forward a process to reform adult social care and support which will consider the needs and rights of carers.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health how many calls for ambulances were made by Northern Ireland Prisons in the last ten years, broken down by (i) prison; and (ii) year.
(AQW 8377/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information provided by the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service (NIAS) on the number of calls for ambulances made by Northern Ireland Prisons between 1st April 2013 and 30th September 2020, is detailed in the table overleaf. This information is not available prior to 1st April 2013.

Number of Calls for Ambulances by NI Prisons (2013/14 – 2020/21)

Year	Hydebank	Maghaberry	Magilligan
2013/14	44	303	36
2014/15	57	318	41

Year	Hydebank	Maghaberry	Magilligan
2015/16	46	353	31
2016/17	37	194	41
2017/18	28	163	42
2018/19	31	204	53
2019/20	25	179	46
2020/21*	7	64	14

*2020-21 reports calls from 1st April 2020 to 30th September 2020.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health whether he will relax restrictions for maternity services to enable partners to attend antenatal appointments and be present from established labour until delivery.

(AQW 8384/17-22)

Mr Swann: No relaxation is planned at this current time, but the existing restrictions do already allow partners to be with expectant mothers in the scenarios outlined.

Following the Executive's decision to invoke limited additional restrictions across Northern Ireland in response to increasing COVID-19 transmissions, updated visiting guidance for all healthcare settings, including maternity services has been published and is available here: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>. This took effect from 23 September 2020.

The guidance is based on the best scientific advice available, with restrictions applying in line with the current Regional Alert Level Position – we are currently at Level 4, defined as “a high or rising level of transmission - enforced social distancing”.

This means that for expectant mothers:

“Birth partners will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to dating scan, early pregnancy clinic, anomaly scan, Fetal Medicine Department, when admitted to individual room for active labour (to be determined by midwife) and birth and, to visit in antenatal and postnatal wards for up to one hour once a week.”

Normal maternity care provision has had to be adapted in order to reduce the spread of infection and to protect expectant mothers, their families and staff providing care and therefore the wider population. This is not the experience we would hope for expectant mothers, but managing this crisis has meant that many difficult requests have been and will continue to be made of the public around all aspects of health service provision.

While the situation is kept under constant review, there are no current plans in place to initiate changes to the structure of the existing visiting restrictions, which remain aligned to the pandemic alert levels/R value - the risk of the virus spreading.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health to outline the process within the Public Health Agency when a patient is tested positive for COVID-19 to activate the app and start the track and trace system.

(AQW 8396/17-22)

Mr Swann: Members of the public who receive a positive test using the national testing initiative, ordered via the national testing portal (<https://www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test>), will get an SMS message from the testing systems to confirm the test result along with an SMS message from the HSC in NI containing a code to enter into the StopCOVID NI app. This code confirms to the app that they have a positive result and triggers the process within the system to share the user's non-identifiable information with other app users.

The Public Health Agency commence the contact tracing process when the positive laboratory test result is received by systems in Northern Ireland, allowing the Public Health contact tracing team to get in touch with the member of the public.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on the investigation into the underspend on adult learning disability services in the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 8420/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the Member to my answer to AQW 6114/17-22 and confirm that I remain committed to considering how best to progress this matter at the earliest possible opportunity, informed by the views of families affected.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact that Brexit will have on the supply of medicines.

(AQW 8439/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department's priority is to maintain the ongoing supply of medicines and medical products to the people of Northern Ireland following the end of the Transition Period in January 2021.

The whole of the United Kingdom (UK) is currently aligned with the European Union (EU) acquis for medicines and medical devices. This will change after transition when NI will remain aligned with the EU and Great Britain (GB) will not. This has implications for both the supply and regulation of medicines in Northern Ireland. Medicines are regulated on a UK-wide basis and NI currently draws over 98% of its medicines supplies from the UK market via GB.

In relation to EU transition planning, the overall responsibility for the continuity of supply of medicines in the UK rests with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). A multi-layered approach to national contingencies has been established to mitigate the risk of reaching the end of transition without an agreement. In addition to national contingencies, the Department is working with DHSC to ensure that additional mitigations are taken, where needed, in the context of the NI protocol to maintain supplies.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact COVID-19 is having on care home insurance premiums, including the future ability to provide care.
(AQW 8442/17-22)

Mr Swann: The increase in insurance premiums is amongst other increasing costs being regularly highlighted by representatives of the care home sector.

While rising insurance premiums are outside of my control, my officials and I will continue to engage with the independent care sector in developing plans to ensure its longer-term resilience and sustainability.

In order to help care homes in their response to Covid-19 and to support the workforce, I announced an additional investment of up to £6.5m at the end of April 2020 and a further £11.7m financial package on 2 June 2020.

The issue of financial support to the Sector will be kept under constant review.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of patients who were awaiting confirmation of a community care package before being discharged from hospital who subsequently died before the care package was in place, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, in each of the last four years.
(AQW 8450/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of patients who were awaiting confirmation of a community care package before being discharged from hospital, and who subsequently died before the care package was in place is not available.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health how his Department is implementing and achieving compliance with NICE CG192, Antenatal and Postnatal Mental Health.
(AQW 8467/17-22)

Mr Swann: In 2017, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority carried out a review of progress and made several recommendations for consideration. A Regional Group was established to work on the implementation of the NICE Guidance and this group meet bi-monthly to bring forward the recommendations

All Trusts continue to work towards implementing CG192.

Progress that has been achieved to date includes:

- The revision and implementation of the Regional Perinatal Pathway.
- The appointment of a Bereavement Support Midwife for each Trust.
- Specialist perinatal mental health training for a wide range of professionals (including Psychiatrists, Psychologists, Mental Health Nurses, Midwives, Health Visitors, Occupational Therapists & Social Workers).
- Training on Perinatal Mental Health for Sure Start and the C&V Sector.
- A Business case for specialist community perinatal mental health has been developed and a Business case for a mother and baby unit is under development.

A Regional Training Day for Midwives and Health visitors on Alcohol Use/ Abuse in Pregnancy had to be cancelled due to Covid Restrictions. This event will be reorganised.

Future plans include producing a Business Case for the development of Specialist Midwives to work with Parents who experience Drugs and Alcohol issues.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health what action is being taken to ensure GP surgeries are properly resourced to provide smear tests in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.
(AQW 8489/17-22)

Mr Swann: As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cervical Screening Programme was paused from mid-March until 29 June 2020.

On 19 June 2020, the Public Health Agency (PHA) wrote to all GP practices in Northern Ireland to advise that there would be a restoration of the Cervical Screening Programme. This was to follow a phased, prioritised approach in order to ensure that the service was not overwhelmed and was restarted in a controlled manner.

Following this staged restart, the invitations to participate in the programme are now being sent out at a pre-pause level. The PHA are monitoring the service including any contingency that would be required if COVID-19 numbers increase significantly.

GP practices have access to up to date guidance on COVID-19 infection prevention and control and can order any required supplies of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for those who are performing smear tests from the Business Services Organisation. Contact details for the relevant team at the PHA have also been provided to GP practices should they have any queries regarding the cervical screening programme.

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.

Ms Hunter asked the Minister of Health how much funding is currently being provided to Addiction NI and INSPIRE to support their work.

(AQW 8541/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am aware of the valuable work that organisations such as Addiction NI and Inspire Mental Health are engaged in to provide support to some of our most vulnerable citizens.

Addiction NI currently receives a total of £382,216 from across the Health & Social Care sector, and Inspire currently receives funding totalling £5,868,987.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health, in light of the Executive's consideration of possible new COVID-19 restrictions and the increasing number of positive cases, to outline what steps have been taken since the first wave to expand hospital inpatient bed capacity in order to maximise overall health and social care capacity.

(AQW 8581/17-22)

Mr Swann: I published the Surge Planning Strategic Framework on 6 October, which sets the overarching context for individual Trust surge and winter planning. Alongside the framework, I also published individual Trust surge plans, ensuring comprehensive plans are in place to address both further COVID-19 surges and winter pressures.

As during the first wave of COVID-19, these plans include measures to increase ICU surge capacity in incremental stages, using the Belfast City Hospital Tower as the regional ICU Nightingale facility. The revised regional ICU surge plan provides the ability to flex capacity across the region to a maximum of 158 ICU beds.

I have also commissioned an additional Nightingale facility on the Whiteabbey Hospital site. This will be a regional intermediate care facility, providing 100 additional 'step down beds', which is expected to be operational on a phased basis by late November 2020. This will aim to improve patient flow to free up acute bed space.

It is important to recognise that a key limiting factor on opening additional beds is the availability of staff. While we have relaunched the workforce appeal, to which we had a phenomenal response during the first surge, operating at peak surge levels, particularly in ICU, is not sustainable for long and will have a major impact on HSC services, including complex elective surgery.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health to detail the number and grade of staff required for the Emergency Department at (i) Ulster Hospital; (ii) Lagan Valley Hospital; and (iii) Downe Hospital, (a) prior to the pandemic; and (ii) on 1 October 2020.

(AQW 8582/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number and grade of staff required in the Emergency Departments at the Ulster, Lagan Valley and Downe Hospitals has been provided by the South Eastern HSC Trust and is detailed in the tables below.

Ulster Hospital Emergency Department

Grade	Staff required at 1st February 2020		Staff required at 1st October 2020	
	Day Shift	Night Shift	Day Shift	Night Shift
Band 8A Advance Nurse Practitioner	2	0	2	0
Band 7 Emergency Nurse Practitioner	3	0	3	0
Band 7 Clinical Educator	1	0	1	0
Band 7 Registered Nurse	2	0	2	0
Band 6 Registered Nurse	2	1	2	1
Band 5 Registered Nurse	22	14	25	18

Grade	Staff required at 1st February 2020		Staff required at 1st October 2020	
	Day Shift	Night Shift	Day Shift	Night Shift
Band 4 Play Specialist	1	0	1	0
Band 3 Housekeeper	1	0	1	0
Band 3 Healthcare Support Worker	3	1	3	1
Band 2 Healthcare Support Worker	3	1	3	1
Consultant	6 (normally 4 on shift)	On-call	6 (normally 3 to 4 on shift)	On-call
Junior doctors	20	4	30	7

Lagan Valley Hospital Emergency Department

Grade	Staff required at 1st February 2020		Staff required at 1st October 2020	
	Day Shift	Night Shift	Day Shift	Night Shift
Band 7 Emergency Nurse Practitioner	1	Closed	1	Closed
Band 7 Registered Nurse	1		1	
Band 5 Registered Nurse	7		8	
Band 3 Healthcare Support Worker	2		2	
Consultant	1 (2 on Monday)		1	
Junior doctors	10		13	

Downe Hospital Emergency Department

Grade	Staff required at 1st February 2020		Staff required at 1st October 2020 *	
	Day Shift	Night Shift	Day Shift	Night Shift
Band 7 Emergency Nurse Practitioner	2	Closed	2	Closed
Band 5 Registered Nurse	5		5	
Band 3 Healthcare Support Worker	1		1	
Consultant	1		0	
Junior doctors	5		0	

* Downe Hospital Type 2 Emergency Department closed due to COVID-19 and was operating a Minor Injuries Unit as at 1st October. From 19th October a consultant led Urgent Care Centre opened.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what is the definition of an urgent care centre; and how it operates. (AQW 8584/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department's COVID-19 Urgent and Emergency Care Action Plan – 'No More Silos' defines urgent care centres and how they operate. This can be found at www.health-ni.gov.uk/NoMoreSilos.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on the sale of 42 care homes by administrators for Four Seasons. (AQW 8586/17-22)

Mr Swann: The administrators for The Four Seasons Health Care Group have commenced a sales process for the Group's care home business in Northern Ireland. This process forms part of the Group's restructuring to place it on a long-term, sustainable financial footing and to provide the care homes in Northern Ireland ongoing stability and investment.

This news does not change anything in terms of the way the Group provides care within Northern Ireland. The key priorities at this time remain the continuity of quality care for the residents and the support to their family members and to the teams. The sale process will not change the way services are run or impact the residents or the care teams looking after them.

I remain committed to ensuring the well-being of residents continues to be a priority. We will continue to monitor this situation closely and I expect the HSCB and Trusts to continue to monitor closely the care and management of all relevant Homes.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Health which facilities in North Antrim have authorisation to conduct abortions.
(AQW 8592/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Abortion (Northern Ireland) (No 2) Regulations do not require facilities to be authorised. Operational decisions are a matter for Health and Social Care Trusts.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether there has been a significant shift in the rate of drug misuse among people with severe and enduring mental illness.
(AQW 8622/17-22)

Mr Swann: Given the nature of substance use, which depending on the substance may be illegal, it can be very difficult to ascertain the rate of substance use within specific populations. However, alcohol and drug services are reporting increased complexity in cases, with higher levels of polydrug use, co-occurring mental health issues, and wider issues such as homelessness.

Improving support for those with co-occurring substance misuse and poor mental health has been raised as part of the co-development of the new Substance Use Strategy, and will also be addressed through the forthcoming Mental Health strategy

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health how many staff in each Health and Social Care Trust have a recognised qualification or specific training in dual diagnosis.
(AQW 8623/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care Trusts have provided the following responses.

Belfast HSC Trust

There is currently no dual diagnosis service within the Belfast HSC Trust. The information requested is therefore not recorded.

Northern HSC Trust

15 staff in the Mental Health Directorate have completed a Post Graduate Certificate in Dual Diagnosis at Queen's University Belfast. Some staff from outside the Mental Health Directorate may have attended this course but this information is not recorded. 29 staff have completed a 2-day Dual Diagnosis Awareness course, provided by the Clinical Education Centre (CEC), since the involvement of a Trust Dual Diagnosis Co-ordinator in the course. Other staff may have been trained but this information is not recorded. 68 staff at Holywell Hospital attended a half-day awareness course in 2017/2018.

South Eastern HSC Trust

13 staff have completed a Post Graduate Diploma in Dual Diagnosis at Queen's University Belfast. 44 staff have completed a 2-day Dual Diagnosis Awareness course provided by the Clinical Education Centre (CEC).

Southern HSC Trust

5 mental health staff have completed a Post Graduate Module in Dual Diagnosis at Queen's University Belfast. 42 mental health staff, between 2014 and 2019, have completed a 2-day Dual Diagnosis Awareness course provided by the Clinical Education Centre (CEC).

Western HSC Trust

8 medical staff have specific post-qualification dual diagnosis training. Staff working within addictions services and other mental health services will have received training that has included aspects of addictions, including dual diagnosis and its treatment. The Trust does not have a database that captures this information succinctly.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health when community dentists, who are working weekends in the COVID-19 emergency dental hubs, will receive payment for this work.
(AQW 8676/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department is currently looking at a proposal to make a temporary amendment to Community Dentists Terms and Conditions of Service, which will allow for the payment of an additional hours rate. A proposal has been sent to the Department of Finance and correspondence is continuing between officials to come to a resolution. A fuller response will be given once all of these aspects have been agreed.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to amend the current one visitor a week policy in hospitals.
(AQW 8677/17-22)

Mr Swann: The restriction of visitors to hospitals has been a key strategic component of managing the pandemic and it was introduced to protect patients, visitors and staff by reducing the risk of infection.

The specific restrictions for each care setting are aligned to the pandemic Alert levels/R value, which represents the risk of the virus spreading from one infected person to another, on average. The guidance is based on the best scientific advice available, with restrictions applying in line with the current Regional Alert Level Position – we are currently at Level 4, defined as “a high or rising level of transmission - enforced social distancing”.

While the situation is kept under constant review, there are no current plans in place to initiate changes to the structure of these existing visiting restrictions.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health how he plans to address the mental health concerns brought up as a result of the pandemic.

(AQW 8678/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am aware of the impact the pandemic and the limitations to daily life have on the mental wellbeing of our population. 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 a bespoke Covid-19 Mental Health Response Plan and the development of a new Mental Health Strategy. Work on this is currently ongoing.

To help mitigate the mental health concerns that have arisen during the pandemic, a Mental Health and Resilience Strategic Working group has been established to coordinate, support and drive the short, medium and longer term response to the psychological impact of the pandemic. A Mental health and Emotional Wellbeing Surge Cell is also in place with partners from statutory and non-statutory sectors.

A number of direct actions have also been taken to provide help and support during this difficult time. This include:

- Free online Stress Control classes;
- Rollout of psychological first aid training;
- A new Apps Library to help people to self help;
- Help and support on mindingyourhead.info;
- Dedicated psychological helplines for health and social care staff, both in the statutory and independent sectors;
- Extra help and support for staff newly qualified; and
- Bereavement support.

This support and these initiatives remain in place as we continue to battle Covid-19 and the impact of the pandemic on our communities' mental health.

Mental health services are also available to those who need it and can be accessed through GPs. For those in need, Lifeline provide 24/7 crisis response service for people in distress or despair. If there is an immediate risk to a person's health, 999 and Emergency Departments are also available.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of provision of gender-affirming care for trans people after the termination of the relationship between ClearChemist and GenderGP.

(AQW 8680/17-22)

Mr Swann: Clear Chemist has suspended fulfilling hormone prescriptions it receives from online transgender clinic GenderGP.

The General Pharmaceutical Council ensures compliance with UK national prescribing guidelines when pharmacies under its jurisdiction work with non-UK registered providers. Aside from those compliance issues, private healthcare such as that provided by GenderGP is outside the remit of my Department.

My officials are however currently working in partnership with health service colleagues and service user representatives to identify a safe model for gender identity services, through the Gender Identity Pathway Review Group.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health how many hospital patients who have tested positive for COVID-19 were admitted from a care home.

(AQW 8684/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of hospital patients who have tested positive for COVID-19 that were admitted from a care home is not available.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what is the average intensive care unit occupancy at this time of year.

(AQW 8685/17-22)

Mr Swann: Table 1 to follow presents the average ICU occupancy levels at each Intensive Care Unit from 1st-20th October 2017-2020. It is important to note that local plans to respond to demand for critical care has enabled the HSC Trusts to direct patients to designated units to maintain appropriate care and infection prevention and control; this has resulted in much higher average occupancy levels in some Units, as well as lower occupancy levels in other Units, during the current year. Unfortunately the Intensive Care Unit within South West Acute Hospital was unable to provide a response in the timeframe required to answer this request.

Table 1: Average Percentage of ICU Beds Occupied, 1st-20th October 2017-2020

Intensive Care Unit	Average % Occupancy: 1st – 20th October 2017-2020	Average % Occupancy: 1st – 20th October 2020
Altnagelvin	73.5	61.3
Antrim	71.4	90.9
Belfast City	65	63.5
Causeway	70	50.5
Craigavon	83	80.2
Mater	68	58.9
Royal Hospital	88	91
South West Acute	Unavailable	Unavailable
Ulster	72	72.4

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to provide further support to nursing students who have given up their super numeracy status to work in hospitals and care homes during the COVID - 19 pandemic.
(AQW 8702/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Nursing and Midwifery Council's Emergency Registration arrangements, which allowed nursing and midwifery students in their final six months of study to undertake their last six months in clinical practice as paid members of staff remunerated at AfC band 4, ended on 30 September 2020.

There is no provision under current NMC regulations to reintroduce these arrangements.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health how he intends to ensure the supply of medicines following Brexit complies with the European Union Falsified Medicines Directive.
(AQW 8704/17-22)

Mr Swann: At the end of the Transition Period when the Northern Ireland Protocol applies, Northern Ireland will remain under the EU acquis for medicines and Great Britain will not. Consequently supplies of medicines in Northern Ireland will continue to comply with the EU Directive on Falsified Medicines Directive (FMD).

As the majority of medicines are currently supplied via the UK supply chain the Pharmaceutical industry will have to adapt their supply arrangements to comply with the Northern Ireland Protocol. A number of different options are being considering by the individual companies and it is unlikely that there will be one solution because companies will make decisions based on their portfolios and products.

Department of Health officials are working with DHSC to engage with industry stakeholders to understand the changes necessary which will take time to fully establish.

To provide more time for the industry to introduce these changes the UK Government has sought a twelve month derogation on FMD requirements from the EU Commission. This is part of ongoing discussions between the UK and EU.

As an additional contingency, on 1 October 2020 DHSC provided updated guidance on the UK Government's interpretation of Article 41 of the Withdrawal Agreement stating that medicines that have been placed on the market anywhere in the EU or UK before the end of the Transition Period and released for sale or supply will be able to remain available for sale or supply between Great Britain, Northern Ireland and the EU after 1 January 2021, without additional regulatory checks. These medicines will be FMD compliant.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health whether further guidance will be issued to previously shielding employees in light of increasing COVID-19 infection rates.
(AQW 8712/17-22)

Mr Swann: Shielding for clinically extremely vulnerable people was paused in Northern Ireland on 31st July 2020.

In light of the increased numbers of cases of Coronavirus in Northern Ireland, the Chief Medical Officer and his team have looked at this position again. Their assessment is that its resumption is not necessary at this stage.

This decision reflects the context of our greater understanding of Covid-19, how to prevent its transmission, and appreciation of the impact of shielding on many people's physical and mental well-being. A number of important changes have taken place in our approach to managing Covid-19 and reducing its transmission since shielding was originally advised. This includes a greater awareness of the importance of social distancing, the requirement to use face coverings, Covid secure workplaces and greater adherence to respiratory and hand hygiene.

The decision to retain the pause in shielding will, however, be kept under review and we will not hesitate to update our shielding advice if this is necessary.

It is important to emphasise that everyone who was previously shielding continues to need to take strenuous precautions in their day to day lives and should scrupulously follow the guidance we set out when shielding was paused. This includes, good hand hygiene; staying at home as much as possible; maintaining social distancing; working from home where possible, or ensuring social distancing when going to and from work; and limiting social contacts.

The advice for those who were previously shielding in relation to employment remains that, if it is possible to work from home, they should continue to do this. However, if a person's employer has taken the proper measures to ensure social distancing in the workplace, and they can travel to work in a way which allows for social distancing, the fact that they were previously shielding is not by itself a reason not to attend work.

Employers have a 'duty of care' for staff which means taking all steps they reasonably can to support the health, safety and wellbeing of their staff.

If anyone has concerns about their safety in the workplace, it is appropriate to discuss these with their employer/HR Department. They will be best placed to advise on appropriate measures for particular roles and workplaces at this time.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health (i) whether the Ulster Hospital is only accepting inpatients to Accident and Emergency (A&E) by ambulance; (ii) to detail the current occupancy at the Ulster Hospital's A&E Department; and (iii) for his assessment of walk-in access to A&E at the Ulster Hospital.

(AQW 8713/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- 1 I can confirm that the Ulster Hospital Emergency Department (ED) accepts patients who self-present (commonly referred to as 'walk ins') and referrals from GPs, as well as patients who attend by ambulance.
- 2 The current total maximum capacity at the Ulster Hospital's ED is circa 100. There are separate areas within ED, each with its own maximum capacity. Occupancy levels in each area depends on the demand at the time as well as the reasons for attending, for example, whether or not the patient has signs and symptoms of COVID-19.
- 3 The Ulster Hospital ED provides treatment and care to patients who self-present 24 hours every day. Under the current circumstances patients who display signs and symptoms of COVID-19 are assessed and treated separately from those who do not.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what measures are in place to ensure that both women and their partners can attend pregnancy, maternity and neonatal services, especially when they have previously experienced a loss.

(AQW 8728/17-22)

Mr Swann: Many difficult requests have been and will continue to be made of the public around maternity care provision, which has had to be adapted in order to reduce the spread of infection and to protect expectant mothers, their families and staff providing care.

The decision to permit visitors into a facility on a day to day basis remains with the person in charge, and will be based on a risk assessment of the ability to ensure safety of patients, staff and the visitor. However, the expectation as set out in the current visiting restrictions is that:

"Birth partners will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to dating scan, early pregnancy clinic, anomaly scan, Fetal Medicine Department, when admitted to individual room for active labour (to be determined by midwife) and birth and, to visit in antenatal and postnatal wards for up to one hour once a week."

Further, in Neonatal units, "One of two nominated parents/caregivers can be accommodated at any given time".

This is not the experience I would hope for expectant mothers and their partners, particularly those who have previously experienced the loss of a baby. However, these restrictions are not in place simply to protect patients and their visitors, but are necessary due to the need to maintain safety for all others, including other families, all our HSC staff and therefore the wider population, through social distancing and ensuring appropriate Infection Control Procedures are followed across all healthcare settings.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what provision has been made to ensure that partners can attend pregnancy, maternity and neonatal services, especially when the woman concerned has previously experienced a loss.

(AQW 8749/17-22)

Mr Swann: Many difficult requests have been and will continue to be made of the public around maternity care provision, which has had to be adapted in order to reduce the spread of infection and to protect expectant mothers, their families and staff providing care.

The decision to permit visitors into a facility on a day to day basis remains with the person in charge, and will be based on a risk assessment of the ability to ensure safety of patients, staff and the visitor. However, the expectation as set out in the current visiting restrictions is that:

"Birth partners will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to dating scan, early pregnancy clinic, anomaly scan, Fetal Medicine Department, when admitted to individual room for active labour (to be determined by midwife) and birth and, to visit in antenatal and postnatal wards for up to one hour once a week."

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Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health for an update on the latest developments for a COVID-19 vaccine, including the anticipated timescale for its introduction.

(AQW 8791/17-22)

Mr Swann: The UK government, acting on behalf of the whole of the UK has secured access to 6 potential COVID-19 vaccine candidates. At present the vaccines are still at various stages of the human trials that they must complete before they can be considered for use in a vaccination programme.

We are planning on the basis that a vaccine(s) might become available for use before the end of the year but there is no guarantee that this will happen and it will be dependent on the successful completion of the human trials.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether there is an adequate supply of personal protective equipment for hospitals, nursing homes and GPs.

(AQW 8792/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are currently in excess of 400 million items of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) in stock across the Health and Social Care (HSC) estate. This compares with the 190 million items of PPE that were distributed to HSC Trusts, Nursing Homes, GP's as well as other organisations providing public health and social care, in the period March to August 2020.

Although the level of supply is currently sufficient to meet demand for most PPE items, the supply market for PPE, whilst improving, still proves challenging in respect of some products across the UK. In response Business Services Organisation has placed contracts with newly established local PPE manufacturers on a number of key lines namely face-shields (visors), type 2R facemasks and FFP3 respirator masks; and continues to work with colleagues from England, Scotland and Wales on a collaborative basis to source alternative products where necessary.

Stocks of PPE have been and continue to be procured with controls in place to ensure that products are only approved for purchase following technical and physical assessment for fitness for purpose.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health why free ear syringing procedures does not exist for patients; and whether he plans to abolish the charges.

(AQW 8798/17-22)

Mr Swann: Under the terms of their contract all GPs are required to provide essential primary medical services to their registered patients. As well as providing essential services GP Practices can also contract with the Board to provide additional services to their patients, for which they would receive additional remuneration; there is no obligation on GP Practices to provide those additional services.

Ear syringing is not regarded as an essential service and therefore GP Practices are not required to provide that service unless they have specifically agreed, as part of their contract, to do so.

In 2018 the National Institute for Clinical Health Excellence (NICE) issued guideline 98 which recommended that the manual syringing method should no longer be used.

It is recommended that GPs should offer ear wax removal using an electronic irrigator, micro-suction or another method of earwax removal (such as manual removal using a probe) for adults in primary or community ear care services, if the practitioner, such as a community nurse or audiologist:

- has training and expertise in using the method to remove earwax;
- is aware of any contraindications to the method, and
- the correct equipment is available.

If the GP is not able to provide this service because they do not meet the NICE recommendations they would make the necessary referrals to ENT/Audiology in a Health and Social Care Trust, for which there will be no charge. However, rather than wait, patients may prefer to seek, and pay for, private treatment.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether student nurses on placements in health and social care are currently prevented from conducting part-time employment in other healthcare settings, including nursing homes.

(AQW 8832/17-22)

Mr Swann: Nursing students undertake a full time academic and clinical practice programme commissioned by my Department that addresses the standards stipulated by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) to be accepted on to their register. Whilst completing their pre-registration training, students receive a non means-tested bursary and may also be eligible for other means-tested allowances such as disabled students' allowance and childcare support, to support them financially.

There is no requirement from the NMC that prevents nursing students from seeking part time employment. However, in line with advice from the Public Health Agency, minimising the movement of staff between healthcare settings, including care homes, is an important measure in curtailing transmission of the COVID-19 virus. Students on clinical placement who are in employment elsewhere are expected to adhere to this guidance.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what steps his Department will take to offset any loss of income for student health professionals, including student nurses, who are prevented from working in dual healthcare settings for infection control purposes during the pandemic.

(AQW 8833/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am aware that some students on healthcare courses undertake part-time work. That is a matter of personal choice.

My Department provides a comprehensive range of support to healthcare students through their training. This varies across the courses but may include the payment of tuition fees, provision of non-means tested bursaries, and other means-tested allowances such as disabled students' allowance and childcare support.

My Department also ensures that students are provided with quality, practical placements which will help fully prepare them for entering the workforce on qualification.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many health and social care posts at Causeway Hospital are permanently vacant; and whether this number has increased since the onset of COVID-19.

(AQW 8845/17-22)

Mr Swann: At 22nd October 2020, there were 11 medical and 16 non-medical vacant positions known to NHSCT Human Resources for recruitment purposes in the Causeway Hospital. It cannot be confirmed if COVID-19 has had an impact on vacancy numbers.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health to detail the level of capacity at which the Royal Victoria Hospital School of Dentistry is operating, broken down by each month since January 2020.

(AQW 8861/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below sets out the number of patient appoints where a patient was seen in the Royal Victoria Hospital School of Dentistry for each month from January 2020 to September 2020.

Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept
2110	2820	2061	31	119	338	692	692	1090

It should be noted that the table includes both new patient appointments and review patient appointments.

I trust that the above is helpful.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health how many outpatient appointments, virtual or otherwise, were carried out over the course of the last 12 months, broken down by (i) Health and Social Care Trust; and (ii) department.

(AQW 8862/17-22)

Mr Swann: There were 990,000 outpatient appointments carried out between 1st October 2019 and 30th September 2020, broken down Health and Social Care Trust and Specialty in Table A.

A further 258,547 virtual outpatient appointments were carried out across the same period, broken down Health and Social Care Trust and Specialty in Table B.

Table A: Number of Outpatient Appointments between October 2019 and September 2020

Specialty	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western	Grand Total
Accident & Emergency	0	363	3,128	0	0	3,491

Specialty	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western	Grand Total
Anaesthetics	67	378	0	34	0	479
Cardiac Surgery	1,005	0	0		0	1,005
Cardiology	16,039	5,006	4,831	2,964	5,766	34,606
Chemical Pathology	0	248	0	170	305	723
Child & Adolescent Psychiatry	10,921	0	0	0	0	10,921
Clinical Genetics	797	0	0	0	0	797
Clinical Neuro-Physiology	1,168	0	0	0	0	1,168
Clinical Oncology	15,040	0	8	0	7,971	23,019
Dental Medicine Specialties	2,504	0	0	0	0	2,504
Dermatology	16,864	6,006	8,012	9,403	7,412	47,697
Endocrinology	7,559	4,624	302	2,976	0	15,461
ENT	13,860	8,760	8,025	10,340	11,043	52,028
Gastroenterology	9,576	5,463	3,948	3,261	0	22,248
General Medicine	3,231	3,483	9,549	578	14,020	30,861
General Surgery	23,757	16,032	13,219	14,723	14,589	82,320
Genito-Urinary Medicine	14,865	0	0	1,258	5,033	21,156
Geriatric Medicine	3,308	2,262	3,672	3,006	2,274	14,522
Gynaecology	15,433	10,360	13,221	17,006	7,821	63,841
Haematology (Clinical)	14,755	5,564	3,964	3,982	5,047	33,312
Infectious Diseases	271	0	0	74	0	345
Joint Consultant Clinics	160	2,606	0	0	0	2,766
Learning Disability	1,743	0	0	148	1,242	3,133
Medical Oncology	8,074	0	0	451	0	8,525
Nephrology	8,868	3,123	1,735	1,821	2,864	18,411
Neurology	9,203	814	2,745	2,267	4,217	19,246
Neurosurgery	2,699	0	0	0	0	2,699
Nuclear Medicine	319	0	0	0	0	319
Obstetrics	14,001	18,071	14,668	20,412	17,163	84,315
Obstetrics (Ante Natal)	6,662	0	0	0	0	6,662
Obstetrics (Post Natal)	315	0	0	0	0	315
Old Age Psychiatry	0	0	3,479	1,449	0	4,928
Ophthalmology	45,207	0	1,939	198	13,795	61,139
Oral Surgery	3,343	0	7,543	84	3,876	14,846
Orthodontics	1,492	1,796		1,057	1,465	5,810
Paediatric Dentistry	1,847	0	0	52	0	1,899
Paediatric Neurology	1,476	0	0	0	25	1,501
Paediatric Surgery	2,121	0	794	0	0	2,915
Paediatrics	32,092	8,661	7,841	10,394	6,647	65,635
Pain Management	1,852	855	1,236	1,152	1,178	6,273
Palliative Medicine	327	0	9	184	265	785

Specialty	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western	Grand Total
Plastic Surgery	1,453	0	10,000	0	0	11,453
Radiology	121	0	0	0	0	121
Rehabilitation	4,161	0	0	0	0	4,161
Restorative Dentistry	4,188	0	0	0	0	4,188
Rheumatology	13,976	5,645	3,788	4,580	4,816	32,805
T & O Surgery	60,469		13,725	20,458	24,390	119,042
Thoracic Medicine	9,527	5,396	5,864	3,859	0	24,646
Thoracic Surgery	1,209	0	0	0	20	1,229
Urology	6,113	0	4,086	3,818	3,712	17,729
Grand Total	414,038	115,516	151,331	142,159	166,956	990,000

Source: Quarterly Outpatient Activity Return

Table B: Number of Virtual Outpatient Appointments between October 2019 and September 2020

Specialty	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western	Total
Cardiology	5,972	2,913	1,033	697	4,357	14,972
Dermatology	6,722	3,043	2,904	3,071	0	15,740
Endocrinology	5,639	3,366	69	2,760	0	11,834
ENT	3,598	5,024	946	4,359	3,213	17,140
Gastroenterology	9,108	6,319	1,174	1,591	0	18,192
Gynaecology	5,025	1,165	756	1,200	392	8,538
Nephrology	1,047	2,062	0	1,835	1,187	6,131
Neurology	6,260	510	1,277	3,909	2,197	14,153
Neurosurgery	2,161	0	0	0	0	2,161
Obstetrics	815	14	75	10	0	914
Ophthalmology	3,387	0	254	0	385	4,026
Orthodontics	32	1	0	0	89	122
Paediatrics	5,120	2,079	2,665	4,342	3,371	17,577
Rehabilitation	692	0	0	0	0	692
Rheumatology	4,386	3,779	1,695	2,927	1,664	14,451
Old Age Psychiatry	0	0	475	0	0	475
General Medicine	2,219	69	3,567	419	4,867	11,141
T & O Surgery	11,031	0	5,795	2,796	7,981	27,603
Clinical Oncology	5,870	0	1,553	0	678	8,101
Urology	7,111	0	1,432	2,304	1,508	12,355
Pain Management	138	71	373	521	296	1,399
Thoracic Medicine	3,166	1,145	1,041	708	0	6,060
Paediatric Surgery	801	0	146	0	0	947
General Surgery	5,263	3,243	871	4,061	2,749	16,187
Haematology (Clinical)	1,654	4,810	1,828	2,029	1,307	11,628
Medical Oncology	2,547	0	0	31	0	2,578

Specialty	Belfast	Northern	South Eastern	Southern	Western	Total
Palliative Medicine	220	0	0	94	74	388
Cardiac Surgery	448	0	0	0	0	448
Geriatric Medicine	2,156	724	1,263	299	307	4,749
Oral Surgery	303	0	436	0	20	759
Paediatric Neurology	1,156	0	0	0	6	1,162
Plastic Surgery	393	0	1,419	0	0	1,812
Joint Consultant Clinics	0	263	0	0	0	263
Thoracic Surgery	566	0	0	0	0	566
Clinical Genetics	1,006	0	0	0	0	1,006
Chemical Pathology	0	146	0	301	42	489
Restorative Dentistry	387	0	0	0	0	387
Paediatric Dentistry	420	0	0	2	0	422
Infectious Diseases	93	0	0	0	0	93
Genito-Urinary Medicine	0	0	0	0	0	0
Dental Medicine Specialties	342	0	0	0	0	342
Learning Disability	544	0	0	0	0	544
Total	107,798	40,746	33,047	40,266	36,690	258,547

Source: Virtual Quarterly Outpatient Activity Return

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health how much additional time are people waiting for orthopaedic surgery and outpatient appointments due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 8873/17-22)

Mr Swann: Data is not available on the amount of additional time people are waiting for orthopaedic surgery and outpatient appointments due to the COVID-19 pandemic, given that waits for many are still ongoing. However, a comparison of the number of patients waiting before the COVID-19 pandemic to those waiting recently is presented in the tables to follow.

Table 1: Number of patients waiting for an inpatient or day case admission in the Trauma and Orthopaedics specialty

Quarter Ending	Number of Weeks Waiting			Total
	0-13	13-52	>52	
Dec 2019	2,712	7,398	7,173	17,283
Sep 2020	1,463	6,145	11,705	19,313

Source: DoH Inpatient Waiting Times Dataset

Table 2: Number of patients waiting for a first outpatient appointment in the Trauma and Orthopaedics specialty

Quarter Ending	Number of Weeks Waiting			Total
	0-9	9-52	>52	
Dec 2019	5,047	8,229	10,948	24,224
Sep 2020	3,990	9,149	12,438	25,577

Source: DoH Outpatient Waiting Times Dataset

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what plans he has to increase the number of staff and intensive care unit beds in hospitals.

(AQW 8883/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Surge Planning Strategic Framework and the individual Trust surge plans, which I published on 6 October 2020, ensure that there are comprehensive plans in place to address both further COVID-19 surges and winter pressures.

As part of this surge planning, the Critical Care Network's regional surge plan provides the ability to flex ICU capacity to a maximum of 158 ICU beds. In addition, to lift pressures from across the system, I have commissioned an additional Nightingale facility on the Whiteabbey Hospital site. This will be an intermediate care facility, providing 100 additional 'step down beds', which will be operational on a phased basis from mid-November 2020.

The availability of staff to respond to the increased demand is extremely challenging and this is exacerbated by the number of staff absent because of COVID-19. While we are taking all possible steps to address this, including relaunching the workforce appeal, we know that operating at peak surge levels, particularly in ICU, is not sustainable for long and will have a major impact on HSC services, including complex elective surgery.

For this reason, I will not hesitate to recommend proposals to the Executive on reintroducing control measures when necessary, as demonstrated recently, to ensure the health and social care system does not become overwhelmed. There is no room for complacency and we must all play our part in efforts to control this virus.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health how many children are subject to witnessing parental conflict, parental alienation post separation; and what plans are in place to address this in the Domestic Abuse and Family Care Proceedings Bill.
(AQW 8991/17-22)

Mr Swann: My department does not collect information in the format requested. My officials are currently working with Department of Justice officials to develop an Action Plan which aims to support parents to resolve disputes outside court wherever possible and to support the early resolution of parental disputes which come before the courts. It is considered that implementation of the action plan has the potential to reduce the negative impact of parental separation on children.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether he will consider requesting assistance from the military for medical personnel or logistical support.
(AQW 8995/17-22)

Mr Swann: Military assistance may include assistance provided by the armed forces to urgent work of national importance, responding to emergencies or in maintaining supplies and essential services. In the initial surge period, military assistance was required to transfer patients requiring Extra Corporeal Membrane Oxygenation (ECMO) to specialist hospitals in England.

While there are currently no specific plans to request military assistance, this will remain a possibility should it become necessary.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what assurances he can give that Graded Exercise Therapy will not be used in the treatment of Long COVID, given the caution advised by experts, including in Healthcare Improvement Scotland, over its use.
(AQW 9000/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is recognised that a small minority of people who have had both mild and severe symptoms of Covid-19 can experience long-term health effects. The Department of Health continues to review the emerging evidence and experience, both locally and nationally, and will develop guidance alongside national guidance to support patients where appropriate.

In particular, my Department is progressing a local enquiry to consider the physical, rehabilitation, psychological and mental health requirements of post-Covid-19 patients. In addition, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence and the Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network are working with the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) to develop a guideline on the persistent effects of Covid-19 which is expected to be published at the end of the year.

The findings of this work will be fully considered alongside the wider body of emerging research to inform future policy and service decisions.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Health for an update on the roll out of the cystic fibrosis drug KAFTRIO; and whether the drug will be offered for the same genetic mutations as is the case in England.
(AQW 9007/17-22)

Mr Swann: Thirty one of the most seriously ill cystic fibrosis patients have commenced treatment with Kaftrio. However, there are more than 500 children and adults who suffer from cystic fibrosis in Northern Ireland. Not all will be clinically suitable for treatment with Kaftrio and not everyone can be treated immediately. Clinical teams are working on prioritising those patients most likely to see the greatest benefit.

To safely introduce the new cystic fibrosis treatments over £1m of recurrent funding has been allocated to recruit additional medical, nursing, pharmacy, psychology, physiotherapy, dietetic, social work and administrative support.

The Vertex Pharmaceuticals agreement for Northern Ireland provides access to the same genetic mutations as England. The agreement also provides for a number of additional genetic mutations specific to Northern Ireland. A clinically led panel is being established at Trust level to support the assessment and suitability of patients for the additional 'off label' (off-license) use of Kaftrio.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of the age profile of people hospitalised with COVID-19.
(AQW 9015/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of admissions to hospital with COVID-19 by age group 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 Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the current restrictions being placed on reflexologists; and whether there are any plans to review their status as being an essential service.

(AQW 9033/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No.9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, introduced on 16 October 2020, refer to the closure of 'close contact services'. Given the nature of reflexology it is considered a close contact service and Reflexologists are required to close under the current restrictions.

There are no plans, at present, to review the status of reflexology during the current period of restrictions.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of public health risks posed by groups of people consuming alcohol in public places and by the congregating of groups of people in public places.

(AQW 9045/17-22)

Mr Swann: Large gatherings increase the risk of infection transmission irrespective of whether participants are consuming alcohol. It is essential that everyone continues to comply with the restrictions and public health advice to protect themselves, protect other people, reduce the spread of infection and bring the epidemic to an end as soon as possible. It is crucial that we all maintain effective measures to minimise exposure to the virus including good hand and respiratory hygiene practices and the wearing of a face covering.

You may attend or participate in outdoor activities as long as there is no contact between participants who are not members of the same household and there is a maximum of 15 persons.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health what reforms will be made to the Contact Tracing system over the next four weeks to ensure it provides improved evidence, notifies people faster and is fit for purpose to ensure we have targeted interventions enabling us to avoid future lockdowns.

(AQW 9086/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department and the Public Health Agency are continually reviewing the operation of the Contact Tracing Service using lessons learned to date to help improve overall efficiency.

For example, in the immediate future there will continue to be a focus on recruitment to help ensure the Service has an appropriate skills mix and a continuing focus on improvements to the operation of the existing delivery model.

This approach will build on the recently launched online self-service contact tracing platform and on the automated text alert service, both of which facilitate more efficient notification to those that are required to self-isolate, and in turn free up time for the manual contact tracing service to deal with cases.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health to publish a detailed plan for mental health services during the latest COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 9098/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am aware of the impact the pandemic and the limitations to daily life have on the mental wellbeing of our population. 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 a bespoke Covid-19 Mental Health Response Plan and the development of a new Mental Health Strategy. Work on this is currently ongoing.

To help mitigate the mental health concerns that have arisen during the pandemic, a Mental Health and Resilience Strategic Working group has been established to coordinate, support and drive the short, medium and longer term response to the psychological impact of the pandemic. A Mental health and Emotional Wellbeing Surge Cell is also in place with partners from statutory and non-statutory sectors.

A number of direct actions have also been taken to provide help and support during this difficult time. This include:

- Free online Stress Control classes;
- Rollout of psychological first aid training;
- A new Apps Library to help people to self help;
- Help and support on mindingyourhead.info;
- Dedicated psychological helplines for health and social care staff, both in the statutory and independent sectors;
- Extra help and support for staff newly qualified; and
- Bereavement support.

This support and these initiatives remain in place as we continue to battle Covid-19 and the impact of the pandemic on our communities' mental health.

Mental health services are also available to those who need it and can be accessed through GPs. For those in need, Lifeline provide 24/7 crisis response service for people in distress or despair. If there is an immediate risk to a person's health, 999 and Emergency Departments are also available.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Health to detail the current waiting time in the Western Health and Social Care Trust for gallbladder removal surgery; and how many patients are currently on the waiting list.

(AQW 9107/17-22)

Mr Swann: In 2020, the average waiting time for gallbladder removal surgery in the Western Health and Social Care Trust was 35.5 weeks.

At the end of September 2020, there were 559 patients on the inpatient and day case waiting list for gallbladder removal surgery within the Western Health and Social Care Trust.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what services in each Health and Social Care Trust are being stopped or reduced to help with tackling the pandemic.

(AQW 9133/17-22)

Mr Swann: Covid-19 is continuing to have a significant impact on the delivery of HSC services. It is not possible to state definitively which services are being delayed as this is a dynamic position and is related to staff absence as well as the rising numbers of Covid-19 inpatients.

I recently published a Strategic Surge Framework and individual Trust Surge Plans. These set out how the HSC system will manage further Covid-19 surges, whilst still trying to maintain as many essential services as possible.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when he will bring forward regulations incorporating a legal duty to self-isolate upon a positive test, as is in place in England.

(AQW 9179/17-22)

Mr Swann: Whilst this is an issue I will keep under close review ultimately it would be a matter for the Northern Ireland Executive to decide if it were necessary.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 7051/17-22, whether he has met with former patients of Muckamore Abbey Hospital and their families on drafting the terms of reference for the public inquiry.

(AQW 9214/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have not yet met with former patients or their families to discuss the terms of reference for the public inquiry. My officials are currently working with the Patient and Client Council (PCC) to develop plans for engagement with both current and former patients and their families and carers to seek their views on the terms of reference of the inquiry. My officials are also working with the Belfast Trust to identify contact information for the families of all patients of Muckamore Abbey Hospital likely to be impacted by the inquiry.

It is expected that this engagement will take place by the end of November.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the full personal protective equipment requirements for Health and Social Care staff in (i) COVID-19 ICU wards; (ii) COVID-19 wards; (iii) Non-COVID-19 wards; and (iv) community services.

(AQW 9216/17-22)

Mr Swann: Guidance for HSC staff (available on the PHA website) recommends different levels of personal protective equipment (PPE) to be worn in HSC settings in Northern Ireland depending on the nature of those settings:

- Within high intensity care areas such as ICU, Covid19 wards and any settings where aerosol generated procedures are carried out the following PPE should be worn long: sleeved gown, disposable apron, disposable gloves, and FFP3 respirator mask and a visor.
- Within settings where there are no aerosol generated procedures such as a non-Covid19 ward and in some community settings the following PPE should be worn: disposable apron, disposable gloves, a fluid shield mask and on a risk assessed basis eye protection such as goggles or a visor.

Within Northern Ireland we are currently following the PHE COVID-19: infection prevention and control guidance Version 3.2 issued on 18 June 2020. This guidance also outlines the PPE requirements in various settings.

Within HSC community services we are currently following the COVID-19: Guidance for Domiciliary Care Providers in Northern Ireland which outlines the relevant PPE requirements.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health whether he will review the current protocols for GP surgeries to enable face to face appointments for GPs with their patients.

(AQW 9225/17-22)

Mr Swann: GP practices are open and are providing face to face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them. All practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to allow them to do so safely.

GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients and the current pandemic does not negate this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how best to prioritise patients to provide this core service whilst maintaining patient safety.

GP practices are operating a telephone first triage system which allows patients to seek medical advice from their GP for both routine and urgent problems. The GP then uses their clinical judgement to decide if the patient can be safely managed over the telephone or whether a face to face appointment is required. This approach ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential. This helps to ensure infection control and social distancing keeping both patients and staff safe.

The telephone first triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face to face assessment to one of the Primary Care COVID-19 centres. This ensures that these patients do not attend the GP Practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimal disruption.

GPs are still expected to clinically assess for risk of serious illness and refer as clinically appropriate for diagnostic tests and to specialist services, such as an outpatient clinic, as they have always done.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices in Northern Ireland on 30 July asking that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices were advised to communicate to patients about the practice services that are available and how to access them with the recommendation that these communications make clear that GP practices are open.

On 7 September, GP leaders from the Health and Social Care Board, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association issued a statement to reassure patients that, whilst patients may be seen in a different way, by phone or video-link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and issue prescriptions. GPs want anyone who has a health concern to feel reassured that they will be able to get an appointment and see a GP if necessary. If people have symptoms or an unexplained illness or have any reason to be concerned, they should in the first instance contact their GP who will be able to provide advice.

A letter was also issued to MLAs and other local political representatives providing an update on the current arrangements and asking that they share the key message with constituents that GP practices are open, but working differently.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges for the planning and delivery of health and social care services in Northern Ireland. General practice has rapidly changed its working patterns in order to cope with the current national emergency. Some of the measures taken are to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread by providing advice by telephone or video where appropriate. Other decisions are based on the potential impact of COVID-19 on conditions, or on the potential impact of treatments on the risk of COVID-19.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Health, following the Executive announcement that those who work from home should work from home, whether all officials and staff members in his Department, who can work from home, are working from home.

(AQW 9236/17-22)

Mr Swann: In response to the outbreak of COVID-19, and in line with Executive and Public Health Agency Guidance, Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) staff including those in the Department of Health (DoH), were instructed to work from home where possible. Staff only work from DoH premises, either on a daily or ad hoc basis, if that work is deemed business critical and cannot be carried out from home.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 8019/17-22, on which topics are officials seeking legal advice.

(AQW 9239/17-22)

Mr Swann: Legal advice was sought on the extent to which a Regional Trauma Network could either prioritise or be limited to certain groups.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Health whether he is still giving consideration to assigning facilities at Balmoral Park as a COVID-19 field hospital; and to detail the rationale for his decision.

(AQW 9273/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have commissioned an additional Nightingale facility on the Whiteabbey Hospital site. As part of the process for identifying this site, I also considered the Eikon facility at Balmoral Park. The Whiteabbey option was superior in both monetary and non-monetary terms.

The key constraint in managing the ongoing pandemic remains staffing availability.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Health what communication he or his Department has had with the Department of Health and Social Care on securing a renewed NHS pay deal.

(AQW 9283/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has representation on the NHS Staff Council at which all matters relating to Pay and Terms & Conditions are discussed on a UK-wide basis.

I am on record as to the value I place on the skill, dedication and hard work of health and social care staff. I have seen at first hand the magnificent job that all HSC workers perform, the risks that they take, and the sacrifices that they make.

I am aware of the Agenda for Changes trades unions' calls to the Westminster Government for an early implementation of the 2021/22 pay award for their members; this proposal must be considered at a national level, as it will impact across the regions of the UK.

Please be assured that both I and my Department remain committed to a fair pay settlement for all our healthcare staff going forward.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when he will finalise the terms of reference for the Inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

(AQW 9303/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have committed to engaging with both current and former patients and their families and carers to seek their views on the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry and my officials are currently working with the Patient and Client Council (PCC) to develop plans for this engagement which I expect to take place by the end of November. This engagement will inform my decision on an Inquiry Chair and the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

I expect to be in a position to appoint the Chair for the Inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital later this autumn and, in line with the Cabinet Office best practice guidance on Government inquiries, I will consult with the Chair about the appointment of other panel members and the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when he will appoint a chairperson to the Inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

(AQW 9304/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have committed to engaging with both current and former patients and their families and carers to seek their views on the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry and my officials are currently working with the Patient and Client Council (PCC) to develop plans for this engagement which I expect to take place by the end of November. This engagement will inform my decision on an Inquiry Chair and the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

I expect to be in a position to appoint the Chair for the Inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital later this autumn and, in line with the Cabinet Office best practice guidance on Government inquiries, I will consult with the Chair about the appointment of other panel members and the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when he will meet the families affected by the issues which led to the Inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital.

(AQW 9305/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have committed to engaging with both current and former patients and their families and carers to seek their views on the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry and my officials are currently working with the Patient and Client Council (PCC) to develop plans for this engagement which I expect to take place by the end of November. This engagement will inform my decision on an Inquiry Chair and the Inquiry's Terms of Reference.

I expect to be in a position to appoint the Chair for the Inquiry into Muckamore Abbey Hospital later this autumn and, in line with the Cabinet Office best practice guidance on Government inquiries, I will consult with the Chair about the appointment of other panel members and the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what process or mechanism exists within his Department whereby a written record is kept of any lobbying of the Minister or special adviser in relation to departmental functions, policies or proposals.

(AQW 9308/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department holds records of all correspondence, lobbying or otherwise using the HP Records Management System.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health whether health and social care staff routinely working in non-COVID-19 specialisms will be abstracted to provide COVID-19-related service under the surge planning framework.

(AQW 9315/17-22)

Mr Swann: A key learning point from the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic was the need for readiness for any subsequent waves. It was on this basis that I published the Surge Strategic Framework along with individual Trust surge plans which outline how future waves will be managed. Depending upon the severity of future waves, it is likely that staff will need to be reallocated to deal with COVID-19 pressures when they arise.

The driver behind any such moves will be both patient and staff safety and there will be a fine balance between maintaining elective care services and managing service demand arising from COVID-19.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister of Health what steps his Department is taking to address pressures at the Emergency Department at Altnagelvin Hospital to ensure patients do not have to queue outdoors.

(AQW 9327/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department recently published its COVID-19 Action Plan for Urgent and Emergency Care, 'No More Silos'. This identifies ten key actions that will be rapidly implemented in order to ensure that urgent and emergency care services across primary and secondary care can be maintained and improved in an environment that is safe for patients and staff. The Document is available on the Department's website.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health what medical advice he has received to cancel direct in-person GP appointments.

(AQW 9330/17-22)

Mr Swann: GP practices are open and are providing face-to-face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them. All practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to allow them to do so safely.

GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients and the pandemic does not negate this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how to best prioritise patients to provide this core service while maintaining patient safety.

GP practices are 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. Some practices have also utilised other technologies such as video conferencing and allowing patients to send photographs by text to facilitate diagnosis of, for example, a skin rash.

This approach ensures that patients are only required to visit surgeries where it is absolutely essential and helps to ensure infection control and social distancing keeping both patients and staff safe.

The telephone first triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face-to-face assessment to one of the primary care COVID-19 centres. That ensures that these patients do not attend the GP practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimum disruption.

The pandemic has meant change across a range of services, including in health and social care and General Practice has rapidly changed its working patterns in order to cope with the current pandemic and the need to protect the public and staff from the virus.

In rebuilding the capacity of the HSC in Northern Ireland we are continuing to develop new and innovative ways of working to support the development of sustainable, safe and accessible primary care services, to meet patient needs.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices in Northern Ireland on 30 July asking that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients who were accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices were advised to communicate to patients about the practice services that are available and how to access them with the recommendation that these communications make clear that GP practices are open.

On 7 September GP leaders from the Health and Social Care Board, the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) and the British Medical Association issued a statement to reassure patients that while patients may be seen in a different way, by phone or video link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and to issue prescriptions. 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 similar communication was also issued to MLAs and local councillors.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health to detail what the medical advice stated regarding the impact of the cancellation of direct in-person GP appointments.

(AQW 9331/17-22)

Mr Swann: GP practices are open and are providing face-to-face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them. All practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to allow them to do so safely.

GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients and the pandemic does not negate this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how to best prioritise patients to provide this core service while maintaining patient safety.

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A similar communication was also issued to MLAs and local councillors.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health what conditions his Department will consider when recommending GP surgeries services return to normal.

(AQW 9332/17-22)

Mr Swann: GP practices are open and are providing face-to-face appointments for those patients who are assessed as requiring them. All practices have been provided with a supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to allow them to do so safely.

GPs have a responsibility to provide core services to their registered patients and the pandemic does not negate this requirement. GPs will however use their clinical judgement to decide how to best prioritise patients to provide this core service while maintaining patient safety.

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A similar communication was also issued to MLAs and local councillors.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on testing for approved driving instructors.
(AQW 8474/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

The qualifying tests for Approved Driving Instructors had not been reinstated before this period of increased restrictions took effect. The DVA is working hard to reinstate these tests as soon as possible after the restrictions end, however due to the longer duration of the on road driving element of this test, it must be fully risk assessed to ensure it can be delivered safely in line with PHA advice and guidance. Whenever the DVA is in a position to resume this service I will ensure this is clearly communicated to all affected customers.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she has considered introducing extra capacity to deal with the backlog in driving tests.
(AQW 8479/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close until 13 November to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision, driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

When testing resumes the DVA also intends to offer driving tests on a Saturday and following consultation with key stakeholders is planning to offer driving tests for Heavy Goods Vehicles on Sundays, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. The DVA will also use overtime to rota off-shift dual role driving examiners to provide additional capacity and to provide cover for scheduled driving tests, where due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, driving examiners are unable to attend work.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to introduce legislation to put active travel on a statutory footing in Northern Ireland.
(AQW 8526/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I believe that my Department currently has sufficient statutory powers to develop active travel infrastructure and to assist Councils in the development of greenways. My objective is to reduce the reliance on private motoring which directly supports the Programme for Government commitment to achieve modal shift with a higher proportion of journeys undertaken by people walking, cycling or using public transport. I have asked my officials to explore a range of options to better develop active travel infrastructure including legislation.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the regulatory measures taken to assist the haulage sector during COVID-19.

(AQW 8548/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise that it is essential that the work of the haulage sector continues to the greatest extent possible through the Covid-19 crisis. A key objective for me and my Executive colleagues at this time is to ensure the maintenance of critical supply routes and that the haulage sector is able to support Northern Ireland's economic recovery in the coming weeks and months. As such, I put in place a range of measures to support the sector including securing a financial package for Ferry Operators funded jointly by the British Government and the Executive and introducing a suspension of all MOT tests for commercial vehicles and relaxations of other requirements in areas such as drivers' hours, CPC, tachographs, medical assessments and planning restrictions.

An EU Regulation came into effect on 4 June 2020 and enabled the extension of the validity of certificates and licences to support those transport operators, individuals and national administrations that, owing to the coronavirus restrictions, were having difficulties fulfilling certain administrative formalities before the expiry of the relevant deadlines. These measures included further relaxations in the areas of driver CPC, driving licences, tachographs and road transport operator financial standing.

In recognising that the haulage industry is critical to restarting the economy and that hauliers operate on very tight margins, the British Government decided to suspend the Heavy Goods Vehicle Levy for a year, with effect from 1 August 2020. The levy suspension provides haulage companies with some relief over the next year and helps to ensure that they can continue to operate, avoiding a potential bottleneck to economic recovery.

I will continue to monitor the impact of Covid-19 on the Northern Ireland haulage sector to see if there is a need for any further regulatory support.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether additional (i) dates; and (ii) examiners will be made available to cover the backlog of applications for driving tests.

(AQW 8593/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close until 13 November to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision, driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

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The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the work currently being undertaken in relation to support for the bus, coach, taxi and haulage sectors.

(AQW 8618/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The First Minister and deputy First Minister asked for my assessment as to whether exceptional circumstances existed within these sectors which would enable a bespoke financial support scheme to be set up under the Financial Assistance (Northern Ireland) Act 2009.

Following an assessment of the evidence available and engagement with the sectors, I wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 23rd October, advising that, in my view, exceptional circumstances do exist for the taxi and private coach and bus sectors. I asked them to consider whether a Determination and Designation should be made urgently to enable financial assistance schemes to be developed for the sectors.

Powers have since been conferred on me by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I will now seek the necessary support and funding from the Executive to swiftly progress support packages for the taxi, private bus & coach sectors and my officials are continuing to work on the development and roll out of the schemes.

Despite initial concerns raised by the Haulage sector, and while circumstances remain difficult, the evidence does not support the exceptional circumstances which would be needed to set up a bespoke support scheme. That said, I will continue to keep the matter under review and I remain keen to provide them with the support that I can within my role. They have been advised of my decision.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, with regards to the electric vehicle charging project FASTER, (i) how many rapid charge points will be installed on the island of Ireland; and (ii) what is the approximate time for their installation.
(AQW 8635/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased that my Department has been able to support this EU Funded project to install EV Rapid Chargers. The project will complement and enhance the existing EV charging infrastructure, which was also co-financed by the EU through TEN-T funding.

The project will install a total of 73 electric vehicle charging points across the eligible area of the Programme i.e. the North, border counties of Ireland and the West of Scotland by 31 March 2023.

The exact location of all installation points has yet to be finalised, but the greatest majority of these will be distributed on the island of Ireland.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she can confirm that (i) the planning permissions for (a) Mullavilly; (b) Drumkee; and (c) Kells Battery Energy Storage Facilities were for 50MW; and (ii) they were assessed in accordance with all criteria listed in 7.2 of the EU Directive 2009/72/EC, as highlighted in (a) the Department for the Economy's Guidance on Article 39 Applications; and (b) also in accordance with Schedule 2 of the Planning Development Management Regulations 2015 for major applications of regional significance with an Environmental Impact Assessment and pre-application community consultation.
(AQW 8681/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The planning permissions referred to by the member are assumed from the descriptions given, to be –

- Mullavilly - LA08/2018/0851/F granted on 21 September 2018
- Drumkee – LA09/2018/0803/F granted on 08 October 2018
- Kells – LA03/2018/0984/F granted on 27 November 2019 PAC

These applications were processed and determined by Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon council, Mid Ulster Council and Antrim and Newtownabbey Council respectively, with the latter being approved on appeal by the Planning Appeals Commission.

Accordingly, the confirmation you seek should be requested from these respective authorities.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for her assessment of the NI Audit Office finding in their report Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy that accredited wind-based and anaerobic digestion-based generating stations in receipt of Renewables Obligation Certificates were operating without planning permission or had not complied with certain conditions set out within their planning approval; (ii) what shortcomings have been identified by her Department that led to this happening; and (iii) how her Department will address these issues.
(AQW 8695/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The recently published NIAO report 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy' was focussed on the Northern Ireland Renewable Obligation (NIRO) scheme under the Department for Economy. It is possible that this report will be the subject of a Public Accounts Committee hearing and, in line with established conventions, it would not be appropriate for me to comment in detail on its findings until the Public Accounts Committee has had an opportunity to consider the report.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to her Department's engagement with City of Derry Airport, for an update on plans to provide additional financial support for the airport until March 2021.
(AQW 8723/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As Minister for Infrastructure my main powers relating to NI's three main airports are set down in the Airports (NI) Order 1994. These are powers to control noise, control land in the interests of the safe and efficient use of airports,

make byelaws, provide for airport constabularies and airport consultative committees and to give grants to assist capital expenditure.

To help City of Derry Airport (CODA) and Belfast City Airport deal with the Covid-19 crisis, the Executive agreed in April a support package of funding assistance of up to £5.7m over 3 months, with the Executive meeting half of the costs and the UKG Department for Transport (DfT) meeting the other half. The funding was channelled through my Department for expediency and logistical reasons. I agreed to the Department acting as a payment conduit for the Executive for the original funding and that this arrangement could continue for any further short to medium term funding.

I remain committed to working alongside my Executive colleagues, the Finance and Economy Ministers, on maintaining air connectivity across these islands and further afield.

Officials from my Department are liaising with their counterparts in the Department of Finance to consider the potential for further short term funding for City of Derry Airport. In addition, I am due to meet with CODA, alongside Executive colleagues given our shared responsibilities, to hear the airport's urgent concerns during the continuing crisis.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the engagement she has had with residents living in and around the Casement Park area in relation to its development.

(AQW 8732/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have had no direct engagement with residents living in and around the Casement Park area in relation to its development. I have however corresponded in writing with a local opposition group and my officials have responded at my request to a number of individuals who had written to me directly.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her decision to grant planning permission for sand extraction from Lough Neagh Special Protection Area includes retrospective permission for extractions that have already taken place.

(AQW 8735/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My decision to grant planning permission for sand extraction from Lough Neagh Special Protection Area does not include retrospective permission for extractions that have already taken place.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her plans for (i) park and ride schemes; (ii) cycle schemes; and (iii) other environmental initiatives being developed to alleviate air pollution around the Casement Park area.

(AQW 8766/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to developing sustainable transport projects to support the green recovery and the expansion of the Park and Ride programme is an integral part of my commitment to encourage the use of public transport alternatives for commuting. Connecting communities and encouraging more active travel, will in turn help to create a cleaner environment and tackle the impact of climate change, cutting down on traffic congestion, and reducing air pollution.

My Department carried out a feasibility of active travel routes through the whole area of west Belfast with a view to feeding into a final Belfast Bicycle Network document, which I plan to publish later this year. This will include a plan of routes which will connect west Belfast to the city centre and beyond.

The GAA has also proposed a number of measures to mitigate the transport impact of redeveloping Casement Park, as outlined in their recent planning application.

The Department for Infrastructure (DfI) also 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. My officials continue to support Councils to help them deliver on their Air Quality Action Plans. 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 whether driving tests booked for during the four weeks from Friday 16 October will be able to proceed.

(AQW 8777/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA

has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on Translink's contactless ticketing solutions.
(AQW 8793/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Translink currently offers multiple contactless ticketing options to customers such as the use of credit/debit cards in Translink ticket offices, at all Glider ticketing vending machines (TVMs) and on the train from conductors. Other contactless options available are on the Translink mobile ticketing app, existing smartcard products and online purchase of tickets via the Translink website. Translink is expanding the existing contactless ticketing options for customers and is developing and planning for a rollout of TVMs at bus stations, rail stations and park & ride facilities this year.

Further planned improvements include offering passengers contactless credit & debit card payments on buses and trains with daily and weekly capping of fares. These will be available on both on Metro and Ulsterbus services by the end of 2021 and on all other services and by mid 2022.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has explored Mobility-as-a-Service as a service technology.
(AQW 8794/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The future of mobility has been identified as one of four key areas, alongside electrification of vehicles, alternative fuels and modal shift, in the work my Department is undertaking in contribution to the Department for the Economy's Energy Strategy.

Mobility as a Service is an emerging measure, linking public and private transport options, including active modes, using information and mobile phone positioning technology and could have an important role to play in how, access to, and knowledge of, the availability of all modes transport can be improved.

The way we are working is changing and reliance on digitalisation is becoming more evident. My Department will be considering how digital technology can be used to prevent unnecessary journeys and consider how these new platforms can provide the capability for people to tap into new transport solutions, providing equality of opportunity across societal groupings.

These solutions may not necessarily be able to be delivered by the transport sector alone but could play a key role in reducing demand for travel and associated energy.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 34826/11-15 (i) how unauthorised sand extraction from Lough Neagh Special Protection Area went undetected for so long; (ii) whether a decision was taken at the time of designation as a European site against enforcement against breaches of planning and European law; and (iii) whether she will order an independent review of the historic handling of the breach of planning control in order that lessons may be learned.
(AQW 8796/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The extraction of sand on Lough Neagh is understood to have been occurring for several decades and indeed appears to predate the current planning system in Northern Ireland. As Minister Durkan explained in AQW 34826/11-15 it is unclear from the Department's records what decisions were made concerning the pursuit of any potential enforcement action and who was responsible for taking decision concerning this.

However, formal enforcement action did commence in 2015 and my Department has followed the direction of the court and the decisions and recommendation of the Planning Appeals Commission to regularise and control this development. I have no plans at present to commence a review into the historic handling of this matter.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will (i) increase charging facilities to balance the ratio of electric vehicle owners to available charging points; and (ii) repair existing broken charging points.
(AQW 8797/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The e-car public charge point network is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) and the market is also now open to other commercial operators who would wish to provide charging infrastructure. My Department has recently been engaging with ESB on their plans to upgrade and improve the reliability of the existing public network. My Department also closely monitors funding opportunities for the installation of additional infrastructure including rapid charging.

The FASTER project proposes to install EV Rapid Chargers in Ireland and Scotland. Whilst there is no confirmation yet of numbers, there are hopes this could mean over 20 new Rapid Chargers heading to the North.

I recently announced my intention to bring forward proposals to assist the expansion of the recharging infrastructure for electric vehicles by providing additional permitted development rights. These allow works to proceed without the need to apply for planning permission. I intend to bring the proposals to the Infrastructure Committee in the coming weeks.

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 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.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail her Department's policy criteria for the repair of potholes on carriageways under the current roads maintenance safety standards.

(AQW 8801/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Article 8 of the Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 places a duty on my Department to maintain all public roads in reasonable condition. We fulfil this duty by complying with a set of Maintenance Standards for Safety. These standards are designed to ensure a consistent service level across the network and safe highways for all road users.

My Department utilises a system of regular inspections of the road network. Inspection frequencies vary between daily cycles for motorways to six monthly for carriageways carrying low volumes of traffic. Our current standards specify a range of response times for the repair of defects, depending on factors such as their severity and the volume of traffic on the road. Response times range from one calendar day for the most serious defects, to periods of five working days and four weeks for less serious defects. However, if it becomes apparent that the relevant response time cannot be met, then my Department has the option of installing signs to warn road users of a possible danger.

In 2020/21, as was the case in 2019/20, the highest priority road defects will continue to be fixed across the entire road network. Safety related defects greater than 50mm depth are being repaired across all roads and, on high traffic roads in both urban and rural locations, defects greater than 20mm are also being repaired.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on flood prevention measures in Sion Mills.

(AQW 8823/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is carrying out a feasibility study to assess the level of flood risk at Sion Mills and to determine if a viable flood alleviation scheme could be taken forward. It is anticipated that the feasibility study will now be completed by January 2021.

My Department continues to carry out weekly inspection and clearance of the designated watercourse inlet structures within the Sion Mills area. In addition, officials are liaising with Derry City and Strabane District Council on a suitable location for a sandbag store within the immediate Sion Mills area.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the traffic calming schemes in the Upper Bann constituency assessed by the Road Service; (ii) the date they were assessed; and (iii) where each rank in terms of priority, over the last five years.

(AQW 8827/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Due to budget reductions over a number of years, my Department no longer has a specific budget for traffic calming schemes and within Roads Southern Division, which includes the Upper Bann constituency, traffic calming solutions are now assessed as part of a suite of engineering measures available within the Local Transport and Safety Measures programme.

An initial assessment of any received safety improvement requests is carried out in line with Departmental policy and procedures to ensure that any identified road safety issues are addressed using the most appropriate engineering methods available and this could include a traffic calming solution or indeed other solutions. Given this approach, a prioritised list of assessed traffic calming schemes is no longer maintained.

However I can advise that, over the last 5 years within the Upper Bann Constituency, there have been a number of traffic calming schemes assessed and subsequently implemented. This includes schemes at Main Street, Donaghcloney; at Kiln Lane, Drumgor Road and Moyraverty Road in Craigavon; and at Ballyeden Meadows in Magheralin.

Details of all roads schemes for each Council area are included in the annual DfI Roads report to local councils; the report to Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council is expected to issue in the coming weeks and the historical reports are also available online via the following link: <https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications>

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the traffic calming measures planned for the Upper Bann constituency over the next two years; and (ii) the date they are to commence.

(AQW 8828/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department implements traffic calming measures as part of a suite of engineering measures available within its Local Transport and Safety Measures programme. I can advise that there are currently no traffic calming measures planned for the Upper Bann constituency during the current financial year. The work programme for next financial year has not yet been determined and its content will take account of the prioritisation of schemes at that time and the level of funding available to me.

Details of proposed roads schemes in each Council area are contained in the DfI Roads report to local councils; the report to Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council, which includes Upper Bann constituency, is expected to issue in the coming weeks.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to adopt the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan in the current mandate.

(AQW 8864/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Whilst the adoption of the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan was found to be unlawful by the High Court and Court of Appeal, it remains in draft form. The draft plan, and all representations received to it, together with the Planning Appeals Commission inquiry reports, continue to be material considerations to be weighted by the decision maker in the determination of planning applications.

Draft BMAP also provides a more up to date evidence base for the creation of local development plans by councils. I am also mindful that of the five councils within the area covered by draft dBMAP, four have published a draft Plan Strategy for their respective areas.

My officials will be briefing me on options in relation to draft BMAP shortly.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has any planned road improvements, including safety measures, for the Park Road junction with the Mallusk Road in Mallusk village.

(AQW 8917/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am advised that onsite observations show that, although the junction is busy during peak times, no major delays or congestion occurs. This junction also has a relatively good safety record with only 2 recorded minor injury collisions within the last 5 years. Therefore my Department has no current plans to take forward any road improvements or safety measures at the Mallusk Road / Park Road junction at this time.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration she has given to adding buses to city centre bus routes which serve schools, including the Glider, from 2 November in order to stop crowding and enable distancing to be maintained during peak hours.

(AQW 8920/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recognise that many pupils rely on our public transport network to travel to and from school. The safety of passengers on public transport remains a key priority for me as we tackle the worrying increase in COVID-19 cases and most likely, a challenging winter ahead.

Translink drivers are required to monitor and report any capacity issues on their vehicles and, where maximum capacity has been reached, encourage customers to board the next vehicle. On Glider and Metro routes, which serve large numbers of school children, additional dedicated school services have already been operational since the start of the school term in September.

I have also approved the addition of over 500 bus services to supplement the public transport network to facilitate social distancing for all passengers, including school children. Translink closely monitors passenger loadings and where there is a consistent requirement for extra capacity, additional services are introduced into the schedule. This ongoing monitoring will continue when the schools resume on 2 November 2020.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether further roll out of parklets in town centres will not be considered until the Ormeau Road pilot scheme has been in place and subject to a full evaluation.

(AQW 8944/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since becoming Minister I have made clear my desire to change the way we use our roads and streets and make sure they work for the whole community including residents and businesses alike. The Ormeau Road parklet scheme was promoted and developed by Belfast Buildings Trust and their partners and formally launched on 12th October 2020. My Department contributed funding towards the construction of the parklet as well as the supply and installation of the associated bespoke cycle parking.

The Ormeau Parklet is a trial project to temporarily turn a small number of on-street parking spaces into outdoor space for cafes and restaurants and support physical distancing, in response to Covid-19 pressures.

I am very keen to support the development of parklets right across the North. Where Councils develop parklet proposals in consultation with local stakeholders and secure their support, my Department will work with them to deliver on the proposals at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following their inclusion in works programmes for the 2019/20 financial year, when pedestrian refuge islands with associated (i) signage; (ii) tactile paving; and (iii) central hatching road markings are due to be completed along Belfast Road, Bangor.

(AQW 8949/17-22)

Ms Mallon: An initial assessment of pedestrian movements along the Belfast Road in Bangor, in the vicinity of the Springfield flyover, indicated there was merit in giving more detailed consideration for potential provision of a crossing facility of some type (controlled push button, puffin type crossing, or uncontrolled refuge islands). Details of plans to undertake a scheme were in fact included in the 2019/20 Roads Council Report to Ards and North Down Borough Council.

Crossings must adhere to certain standards to ensure safety and visibility for road users and pedestrians. My Department has considered a number of options at this site, however, unfortunately due a number of factors including proximity of junctions and locations of businesses and accesses, it was not possible to identify a safe and suitable location for a pedestrian crossing.

Consequently the 2020/21 Roads Council Report does not include a scheme within the current work programme, however, my officials will continue their efforts to identify and assess potential locations for crossings facilities that address the needs of pedestrians and improve the safety of all road users on the Belfast Road adjacent to Springfield flyover.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure to define an unauthorised and rogue quarry, as referred to by her Department in the Strategic Planning Group minutes of September 2018.

(AQW 8970/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In Planning terms, an unauthorised quarry is considered to be one that is operating without the requisite planning permission.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has to upgrade the footpath at Main Road, Cloughey, to complement the portion improved as part of the Village Renewal Scheme.

(AQW 8974/17-22)

Ms Mallon: All roads within the adopted road network are regularly monitored through my Department's cyclic inspection regime and any defects meeting current intervention thresholds are recorded and actioned for repair in accordance with current road maintenance standards for safety.

The footways along Main Road in Cloughey have been adopted and are therefore subject to the afore-mentioned inspection regime. My officials do not consider the present condition of the footways to be at a level which would necessitate reconstruction and therefore there are no plans to carry out works to upgrade the footway at this time.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure when her Department plans to complete the resurfacing of Springfield Road, Portavogie from Anchor Car Park to Seaview Court.

(AQW 8975/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The proposal for the resurfacing of this section of Springfield Road, Portavogie had not been advanced up to now as NI Water had indicated plans to carry out works in this area. However NI Water have recently concluded that these works are no longer required and I am therefore pleased to be able to confirm that Springfield Road will be added to the reserve list of resurfacing schemes and works will be carried out when funding becomes available.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of how a pupil, who has their driving test booked for 16 November, will be up to test standard if they have not had a lesson for nearly five weeks.

(AQW 8979/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Driving instructors were included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close until 13 November to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the Driver and Vehicle Agency (DVA) will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

It is recommended that learner drivers should be able to drive safely without prompting from their driving instructor, or the person helping them to practise, before they book their practical driving test. Learner drivers are encouraged to record their progress in learning to drive using the DVA's 'Driver Record' which is freely available here: www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/planning-and-recording-how-you-learn-drive.

While driving instruction has been suspended during this period of increased restrictions, it may still be possible for learner drivers to continue to practise their driving, provided they and their supervising driver are from the same household.

Candidates who are concerned that they will not be ready for their driving test when testing resumes should contact the DVA to cancel their driving test, obtain a refund and rebook their test whenever the booking service reopens.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Newtownstewart bypass walkway.

(AQW 8987/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that my Department has received a number of requests for a footway along the A5 Newtownstewart bypass which it is recognised would largely facilitate recreational walking. Officials have investigated provision of a footway at

this location however it is not possible to achieve the necessary design standards, including separation of a footway from the carriageway, within the existing road boundaries.

Constraints include insufficient verge width, the location of vehicle restraint barriers adjacent to significant side slopes and most importantly insufficient width on both bridges. It is therefore not currently considered economically viable to provide a footway that would meet current standards, and reduced standards would not be considered appropriate adjacent to a busy road that carries a national speed limit of 60mph. I have however asked my officials to keep this situation under review.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on a proposed footbridge for Newtownstewart.
(AQW 8988/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials are not aware of any proposal to provide a footbridge in Newtownstewart. I would be pleased to receive any additional information that may help to bring clarity to this matter.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure what discussions her Department has had with the Housing Executive regarding (i) crime prevention; and (ii) environmental improvement measures for the Seven Hills area in the New Lodge.
(AQW 9011/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has not had any specific discussions with the Housing Executive on either of these issues. However my officials have in the past attended multi-agency meetings, particularly in relation to unwanted bonfires, in which these matters would have also been discussed.

In relation to crime prevention, I understand that alley-gating of walkways in Pinkerton has been suggested as one of the available measures that might reduce anti-social behaviour. Alley-gating across Belfast is managed by Belfast City Council in liaison with my Department. A site meeting with Council officials took place in January 2020 to consider this issue and I am advised the assessment at that time was that alley-gating would not be appropriate for these walkways due to their more general public use.

Whilst the Department for Communities leads on environmental improvement schemes, my Departmental officials are available to offer advice and assistance as and when requested to do so.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans she has to expand the gully cleaning programme in the Limavady area before winter.
(AQW 9018/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department aims to clean all road gullies once per year in accordance with our current maintenance guidelines. Gully cleaning has already begun with the intention of having all of the approximately 17,000 gullies in the Limavady area cleaned by the end of March 2021, using a combination of both inhouse resources and external contractors.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she plans to modernise the water and sewerage systems in Limavady.
(AQW 9019/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have been advised by NI Water that investment of approximately £4m is scheduled for the upgrade of the Limavady sewer network. This investment will be undertaken, subject to funding being available, through the Price Control 21 (2021 – 2027) investment programme agreed between NI Water and the Utility Regulator. This is a high priority project to address sewer capacity and development constraints affecting the town. The preparation work for this will start during this financial year.

There are currently no specific plans to upgrade the water infrastructure in Limavady. However, NI Water does have active programmes for watermains rehabilitation and lead pipe replacement across Northern Ireland.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether any lead pipe work remains in the supply of water to private residences.
(AQW 9020/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am advised by NI Water that lead pipe work remains within its supply network and the private supply pipe work of customer's homes.

NI Water has proactively replaced almost 11,000 lead pipes, in response to a target set by the Utility Regulator, during its PC15 (2015/16-2020/21) programme of works. This forms part of NI Water's overall lead strategy to reduce lead in drinking water. The Utility Regulator has set NI Water a new target for its PC21 (2021-2027) programme of works. The target set for PC15 and PC21 was agreed with various stakeholders including the Drinking Water Inspectorate, Utility Regulator, Consumer Council for NI and my Department. To date NI Water has achieved the PC15 target.

In addition to NI Water's proactive programme, lead communication pipes are also replaced where there has been a lead sample failure, at the request of a customer (when they replace their private supply pipe), and opportunistically during water mains rehabilitation. Other initiatives during PC15 have included NI Water's joint work with the education authorities to replace lead pipes supplying schools and nurseries.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans there are to ensure Translink buses and trains will (i) adopt new technology future proofing; and (ii) meet any new emission standards.

(AQW 9021/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) The procurement of all public transport vehicles will incorporate optimum future technology to decarbonise the rail and bus network.
- (ii) I am committed to providing a low, and eventually zero, emissions public service. All new buses and trains will, as a minimum, meet the latest European emission standards. Many of the new buses that Translink purchases already exceed this standard through the incorporation of micro hybrid technology and Translink is actively developing programmes to introduce zero emission vehicles in to the Belfast and Derry fleets.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what inspection and maintenance plans there are to address overgrown areas of embankments on the River Roe.

(AQW 9022/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department carries out inspections of the flood defences on the River Roe on an annual basis and the grass on the flood defences is cut prior to any inspections. Any works identified in the inspections are prioritised so that they can be planned and taken forward. The last flood defence inspections were carried out in February 2020 and my Department plans to carry out works to the flood defences on the River Roe in the 2021/2022 financial year.

My Department has also recently completed works in September of this year to repair the flood defences on the River Roe at Limavady Rugby and Cricket Club.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the development of the new park and ride at Drumahoe.

(AQW 9027/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to be able to confirm that construction of the new park and ride facility at Drumahoe, part of the A6 Dungiven to Drumahoe Dualling scheme, is almost complete and officials are working closely with the contractor to determine the date on which it will become operational.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure why Gransha Road, Bangor was resurfaced when there appeared to be nothing wrong with the road surface.

(AQW 9050/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Roads (Northern Ireland) Order 1993 places a duty on my Department to maintain all public roads and footways in reasonable condition to ensure that these assets remain safe and serviceable for users. To this end, a system of regular safety inspections is undertaken to ensure that essential responsive maintenance is identified and completed as necessary.

In determining the need for road resurfacing, factors including road usage, general surface condition and structural deformation are considered in the preparation and prioritisation of the Department's annual reconstruction and resurfacing programme. This inspection and road condition assessment process confirmed Gransha Road was in poor condition and as such it was included in this year's programme.

I am pleased to advise that work on laying the final surface layer is underway and the scheme will be completed shortly.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure when she plans to allocate funding to NI Water to upgrade the wastewater treatment works in (i) Castle Archdale; (ii) Ederney; (iii) Garrison; (iv) Belleek; and (v) Enniskillen, Co.Fermanagh.

(AQW 9074/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below sets out recent and proposed capital investment by NI Water at the five named wastewater treatment works. NI Water is not currently planning any capital investment to upgrade these wastewater treatment works within the coming six year price control period 2021-2027 (PC21).

Castle Archdale	These works received significant investment (ca £1 million) in PC15 (2015 to 2021) to deliver a sustainable Integrated Constructed Wetland serving the area. This was a PC15 Nominated Output WwTW project. Investment during the 6 year PC21 period (2021-2027), other than base maintenance is not anticipated by NI Water.
Ederney	A PC15 capital upgrade for this works was delivered in 2018 delivering £315k of investment. Investment during the 6 year PC21 period (2021-2027), other than base maintenance is not anticipated by NI Water.
Garrison	Investment during the 6 year PC21 period, other than base maintenance, is not anticipated by NI Water.

Belleek	Investment during the 6 year PC21 period, other than base maintenance, is not anticipated by NI Water.
Enniskillen	Investment during the 6 year PC21 period, other than base maintenance, is not anticipated by NI Water. However investment in the sewerage network is anticipated to take place within the first four years of PC21, with delivery completed by the end of March 2025 (subject to adequate funding of NI Water's PC21 Business Plan).

NI Water is suffering from historic underfunding. If this was to continue, the company would be unable to address the majority of wastewater service issues that are constraining economic development in many locations, and it would lead to increasing occurrences of failed environment compliance.

The Utility Regulator published its PC21 Draft Determination on 30 September 2020, indicating a capital allocation for NI Water of just short of £2bn, against actual capital funding over the PC15 period of around £940m. Therefore, the forward look into PC21 is likely to be very challenging. I will continue to make the case for increased funding for our water and waste water infrastructure to the Finance Minister and Executive colleagues.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given her Department's oversight and scrutiny role, whether she has any concerns as to how planning permission for CO2 tanks at the port of Warrenpoint was granted by Newry, Mourne and Down District Council (LA07/2015/0056/F) (i) through delegated powers of decision making; (ii) without a Habitats Regulations Assessment; and (iii) without transboundary notification.

(AQW 9110/17-22)

Ms Mallon: This planning application was determined by Newry, Mourne & Down District Council on 21 October 2015. The obligations for the management of such a local application are laid out in legislation and it is a matter for a district council, in its role as local planning authority, to satisfy itself that these obligations have been met.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will safely increase testing capacity when it restarts in order to help address the increased backlog of driving tests.

(AQW 9123/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

When testing resumes the DVA also intends to offer driving tests on a Saturday and following consultation with key stakeholders is planning to offer driving tests for Heavy Goods Vehicles on Sundays, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. The DVA will also use overtime to rota off-shift dual role driving examiners to provide additional capacity and to provide cover for scheduled driving tests, where due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, driving examiners are unable to attend work.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following the Executive announcement that those who work from home should work from home, whether all officials and staff members in her Department, who can work from home, are working from home.

(AQW 9124/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that all officials within my Department are working from home, unless they are unable to do so.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment on the Utility Regulator's draft determination of the funding for NI Water's PC21 Business Plan.

(AQW 9136/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am very supportive of the role of the Utility Regulator as it provides an independent assessment of the level of funding necessary to deliver a high quality and cost effective water and waste water service in the North.

The challenges laid out in the Draft Determination are significant. It highlights the legacy impact of historic underfunding of the water infrastructure in the North, particularly with respect to wastewater assets. It is estimated that it will take three fully funded Price Controls to fully address these issues.

The PC21 Draft Determination proposes a requirement of nearly £2bn in capital budget, to invest in the major infrastructure improvements which our people deserve. This is against a Public Expenditure budget allocation of around £940m in the current Price Control. This is a significant increase which will present a challenge for the Executive, but without that level of funding, NI Water will not be able to deliver the water and wastewater service improvement required to sustain good public health, help the economy recover and protect our environment.

The Utility Regulator, Northern Ireland Water and my officials continue to work on these issues in the run up to the publication of the Final Determination in March 2021. This work is complicated by the need to assess costs associated with EU Exit and Covid-19.

I will also be meeting with the Finance Minister to discuss this pressing need for investment.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how much was spent on pop-up walking and cycling infrastructure during lockdown; and (ii) how this was specifically allocated, broken down by constituency.

(AQW 9137/17-22)

Ms Mallon: For the period 1 April 2020 to 30 September 2020 £240,000 was spent on pop up walking and cycling infrastructure to aid social distancing during lockdown: £211,000 of this was spent in Belfast and £29,000 in Derry. Expenditure is not recorded on a constituency basis.

I have written to all Councils seeking details of their priority projects for walking and cycling measures in their areas and this includes their ideas for pop-up infrastructure. I want to work with Councils to deliver projects that will make a real difference to their communities.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she plans to alleviate the long list of applicants waiting for their driving tests.

(AQW 9139/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close until 13 November to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

When testing resumes the DVA also intends to offer driving tests on a Saturday and following consultation with key stakeholders is planning to offer driving tests for Heavy Goods Vehicles on Sundays, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. The DVA will also use overtime to rota off-shift dual role driving examiners to provide additional capacity and to provide cover for scheduled driving tests, where due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, driving examiners are unable to attend work.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many applicants in the West Tyrone constituency have booked and are awaiting completion of their driving test.

(AQW 9140/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The number of driving test applications 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 has recently introduced a new publication providing provisional monthly statistics on vehicle, driving and theory tests conducted. DVA statisticians published the first edition on 15 October, relating to September 2020, which is available on the Department's website. Application statistics will be added to the November publication and will include figures for the October period.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the delivery of a COVID-19 financial support scheme for the (i) taxi sector; (ii) haulage sector; (iii) private coach sector; and (iv) driving instructors.

(AQW 9143/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The First Minister and deputy First Minister asked for my assessment as to whether exceptional circumstances existed within these sectors which would enable a bespoke financial support scheme to be set up under the Financial Assistance (Northern Ireland) Act 2009.

Following an assessment of the evidence available and engagement with the sectors, I wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on 23rd October, advising that, in my view, exceptional circumstances do exist for the taxi and private bus and coach sectors. I asked them to consider whether a Determination and Designation should be made urgently to enable financial assistance schemes to be developed for the sectors.

Powers have since been conferred on me by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. I will now seek the necessary support and funding from the Executive to swiftly progress support packages for the taxi, private bus & coach sectors and my officials are continuing to work on the development and roll out of the schemes.

Despite initial concerns raised by the haulage sector, and while circumstances remain difficult, the evidence does not support the exceptional circumstances which would be needed to set up a bespoke support scheme. That said, I will continue to keep the matter under review and I remain keen to provide them with the support that I can within my role. They have been advised of my decision.

Driving instructors will be able to avail of support under the Department for Economy's recently announced 'Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme'.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she is aware of the recent NI Audit Office report on renewable energy in Northern Ireland, which revealed a very high level of subsidy payments to wind farm owners.

(AQW 9153/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report. This recently published report 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy' was focussed on the Northern Ireland Renewable Obligation (NIRO) scheme under the Department for Economy. It is possible that this report will be the subject of a Public Accounts Committee hearing and, in line with established conventions, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on its findings until the Public Accounts Committee has had an opportunity to consider the report.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to the findings of the NI Audit Office's investigation into the levels of subsidies paid to the owners of wind turbines, whether she will refuse all further planning applications for wind farms in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 9154/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It is possible that the NIAO report will be the subject of a Public Accounts Committee hearing and, in line with established conventions, it would not be appropriate for me to comment in detail on its findings until the Public Accounts Committee has had an opportunity to consider the report. In relation to any future wind farm applications to be determined by my Department, each one will be considered on the basis of its individual merits and in line with extant legislative and policy requirements.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure what budget has been allocated for the provision of bus shelters in this financial year.

(AQW 9155/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In 2020/21, Translink has a capital budget of £300,000 for the refurbishment and erection of new bus shelters.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the timescale for the commencement of a strategic review of the Transport Regulation Unit; and (ii) the terms of reference of that review.

(AQW 9156/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department intends to complete a strategic review of its role in the licensing and regulation of goods vehicle operators in Northern Ireland as soon as possible. However, due to the significant backlog of public inquiries, and the immediate impact this is having on the road freight industry, the Department's primary objective is to clear the backlog.

The review is intended to set out a clear vision of the role, responsibilities and functions of Transport Regulation Unit in the enactment of my Department's wider regulatory responsibilities and the terms of reference will be finalised in due course.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, with regard to winter and public safety, whether she plans to increase the level of street light repairs.

(AQW 9203/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to be able to confirm that I have allocated a budget of £5m for street lighting maintenance for the current financial year. This funding will allow for delivery of a full street lighting repair service by my Department. Typically repairs will take up to 5 working days, however, there may be slight delays in some areas due to the impact on staff numbers associated with the Covid 19 pandemic.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure, when a sewerage system is listed at capacity in an area, to detail the grounds that NI Water, as a statutory consultee, will or will not recommend a major housing application for approval.

(AQW 9210/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water is a statutory consultee in the planning process and, when an application is received for an area in which the sewerage infrastructure is at, or nearing, capacity NI Water will consider carefully before making a recommendation.

In some cases, it may be possible to recommend approval of the application, based on certain information, for example:

Where developers can demonstrate (including calculations, where applicable):

- Extant, previously approved, development (where NI Water has given a positive response).
- Like for like development - i.e. on a brown field development site where the discharge from the proposed development is similar to the former development site discharge.
- Reduced hydraulic loading - i.e. on a brown field development, which will offer a reduced loading on the receiving sewer network. This may include storm separation and/or attenuation (may be subject to Article 154).
- The provision of a temporary Wastewater Treatment Works (WwTW) by the developer to treat sewage discharge until the public wastewater system can be upgraded. The construction, operation and maintenance of this temporary WwTW will be the responsibility of the developer and will be subject to receiving the required statutory approvals. This WwTW cannot be offered to NI Water for adoption.
- The provision of a permanent WwTW by the developer to treat sewage discharge. This WwTW will be subject to receiving the required statutory approvals and can be offered to NI Water for adoption in accordance with current NI Water adoption procedures.
- Where NI Water and the developer have agreed a downstream engineering solution to mitigate the capacity issues and allow connection for the development proposal. This solution is to be fully funded and delivered by the developer and would normally be a Condition applied to approval.

However, in some cases, a recommendation to refuse the application will need to be made, based on certain information, for example:

- The receiving WwTW has no capacity. This means that the WwTW is operating beyond the capacity for which it was designed, and the works is operating in breach or is at risk of breaching its Water Order discharge consents standard that is issued by Environmental Regulator, Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA).
- The receiving WwTWs catchment has no capacity which is confirmed by Drainage Area Plan (DAP) Model data or a localised Network Capacity Check also utilising DAP Model data. Indicators of lack of capacity within a catchment can also include Unsatisfactory Intermittent Discharges (UIDs) events, terminal or other wastewater pumping stations (WwPS) operating in breach of Water Order consent, and properties are at risk to internal flooding.
- An application may also be refused based on outcomes from a Wastewater Network Screening Tool, used where DAP Model data is not available. This process will require a Network Capacity Check to confirm actual capacity of the network and the developer is encouraged to consult with NI Water to ascertain whether any necessary alternative drainage/treatment solutions can be agreed.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure what are the grounds for determining whether a sewerage system is at capacity.

(AQW 9211/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has confirmed that a sewerage system can be determined as 'at capacity' if the receiving wastewater treatment works (WwTW) has no capacity and/or if the receiving WwTW catchment has no capacity.

The receiving WwTW is determined as having no capacity if the existing population equivalent (PE) served exceeds design population equivalent and the works operates in breach, or is at risk of breaching its Water Order discharge consents standard that is issued by Environmental Regulator, Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA).

The receiving WwTW catchment is determined as having no capacity if it is confirmed by Drainage Area Plan (DAP) Model data or by a localised Network Capacity Check, also utilising DAP Model data. Where DAP Models do not exist, indicators of lack of capacity within a catchment include:

- * Unsatisfactory Intermittent Discharges (UIDs) - Where a Combined Sewer Overflow (CSO) operates in breach of its Water Order consent (i.e. excessive number of spills and/or volume of spills) and after discussions and agreement with NIEA, a CSO is classified as a UID.
- * Terminal or other Wastewater Pumping Stations (WwPS) operating in breach of Water Order consent i.e. excessive number of overflow events and/or volume of spills. Overflows from these facilities can also be classified as UIDs.
- * Properties subject to internal flooding caused by overloaded sewers, confirmed by detailed investigations.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the occasions; and (ii) the locations in South Belfast where contaminated water from sewers has entered the river system, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 9212/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am advised by NI Water that it is currently aware of 18 Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) that are classified as unsatisfactory in the South Belfast area. The Company does not have monitoring equipment throughout its sewer network, and therefore cannot identify the occasions when the CSOs spill. Work is underway, however, to build a model for predicting spills from sewerage infrastructure which will be used to assess the spill frequency of CSOs and identify future sewer upgrades.

Through the Living With Water Programme, my officials are developing a strategic drainage infrastructure plan for the greater Belfast area. The draft plan will indicate that around £1.4bn of investment is needed over the next 12 years to upgrade the drainage and wastewater infrastructure in the greater Belfast area to: protect against flooding; enhance the environment; and allow growth in the economy. This includes addressing around 50% of the 340 estimated CSOs that have been assessed as being unsatisfactory across the sewerage network in the greater Belfast area. Development of the draft plan for Belfast is ongoing, with public consultation to commence in November 2020.

The Table below lists the 18 CSO locations with Unsatisfactory Intermittent Discharge points in South Belfast.

South Belfast Constituency Unsatisfactory Intermittent Discharges

	Name	Drainage area (DA)
1	Balmoral Court CSO	Belfast DA
2	Church Road, Knockbreda CSO	Newtownbreda DA
3	Distillery Street CSO	Belfast DA
4	Donegall Place, Royal Avenue CSO	Belfast DA
5	Fane Street Primary School CSO	Belfast DA
6	Glenmachan Street Wastewater Pumping Station	Belfast DA
7	Hampton Park CSO	Newtownbreda DA
8	Hughes Court CSO	Kinnegar DA
9	Knockbracken River CSO	Newtownbreda DA
10	Knockbreda Park, Knockbreda CSO	Kinnegar DA
11	Knockbreda Road, Rosetta CSO	Kinnegar DA
12	Ladas Drive CSO	Kinnegar DA
13	Lisburn Road, Cranmore CSO	Belfast DA
14	Mill Road West CSO	Newtownbreda DA
15	Park Royal CSO	Belfast DA
16	Purdys Lane CSO	Newtownbreda DA
17	Riverdale Park South CSO	Belfast DA
18	Upper Falls, Boucher CSO	Belfast DA

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the average annual maintenance cost per house to her Department for sewerage treatment works installed by developers on sites, as opposed to the general sewerage system.

(AQW 9213/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am advised by NI Water that it has not adopted any sewerage treatment works installed by developers on sites, and therefore is not in a position to provide the costs detail as described. NI Water is in the early stages of adopting a small number of waste water treatment plants installed by developers, but as yet has no costs.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will carry out an assessment for traffic calming measures for College Gardens, Newry.

(AQW 9226/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department recognises the importance of road safety measures and is committed to exploring solutions that deliver better for communities and improve lives across the North. I have requested that College Gardens, Newry is added to the existing list of locations that my officials are assessing for possible provision of traffic calming measures in accordance with our established framework.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) when she will bring her proposals for financial support for taxi drivers, private bus companies and hauliers to the Executive; and (ii) when she anticipates such a scheme opening.

(AQW 9238/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I intend to seek support from the Executive on 29 October to fund the schemes for the taxi and private coach and bus industries.

Despite initial concerns raised by the haulage sector, and while circumstances remain difficult, the evidence did not support the exceptional circumstances which would be needed to set up a bespoke support scheme for this industry.

I anticipate that the scheme for the taxi industry will launch week commencing 9 November and will be an on-line process. The application form, eligibility criteria and guidance will be provided at that time. The scheme for the coach and bus sector will follow as quickly as possible thereafter.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what action her Department is taking to ensure that people that have had driving tests cancelled as a result of additional COVID-19 restrictions, will be prioritised for rebooking when possible.

(AQW 9266/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close until 13 November to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision, driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

When testing resumes the DVA also intends to offer driving tests on a Saturday and following consultation with key stakeholders is planning to offer driving tests for Heavy Goods Vehicles on Sundays, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. The DVA will also use overtime to rota off-shift dual role driving examiners to provide additional capacity and to provide cover for scheduled driving tests, where due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, driving examiners are unable to attend work.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) when the last full survey of street lights was carried out across the Craigavon District Electoral Area; (ii) how many faults were detected; and (iii) the time scale for repairs to be carried out.

(AQW 9278/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can advise that, due to resource pressures, my Department no longer carries out night time surveys of street lights with the last survey being completed in April 2015. Outages are now picked up through notification from elected

representatives or members of the public via the on-line reporting system <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/report-street-light-fault> or by telephone on 0300 200 7899.

Typically outage repairs will take up to 5 working days however there currently may be slight delays in some areas due to COVID 19 related impacts on the availability of internal and external contractor personnel.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether there will be (i) longer opening hours at MOT centres to facilitate the back log of MOTs; and (ii) a greater number of Driving Test Examiners and dates made available to facilitate the back log of applications for driving tests.

(AQW 9286/17-22)

Ms Mallon: From 20 July, the DVA resumed MOT testing, at all test centres, for priority vehicle groups, including those vehicles that are not able to avail of a Temporary Exemption Certificate (TEC). This includes taxis and buses due a first time test, vehicles not previously registered in Northern Ireland, vehicles whose MOTs have expired by more than 12 months that includes vehicles previously declared SORN and those sold by car dealerships.

From 1 September, MOT testing was further extended to include four year old cars and motorbikes and three year old light goods vehicles. Vehicle testing also resumed for vehicles in this category that currently have a TEC, they will be called for test when the TEC expires. In addition, the DVA also resumed the testing of heavy goods vehicles and trailers.

TECs will continue to be issued for all other eligible vehicles until vehicle testing services can be fully reinstated. Vehicles whose existing MOT certificate expired from 26 March 2020 or will expire before testing for their category resumes will be automatically exempt from testing for a full 12 months, with their new MOT expiry date pushed forward into 2021.

The DVA have no plans at present to extend MOT Centre opening hours as they can currently test all vehicles that require an MOT. However they are currently in the process of recruiting additional examiners and will also use overtime to provide additional capacity and cover for vehicle tests, if due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, examiners are unable to attend work.

The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close until 13 November to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

When testing resumes the DVA also intends to offer driving tests on a Saturday and following consultation with key stakeholders is planning to offer driving tests for Heavy Goods Vehicles on Sundays, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. The DVA will also use overtime to rota off-shift dual role driving examiners to provide additional capacity and to provide cover for scheduled driving tests, where due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, driving examiners are unable to attend work.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the flood studies carried out following the August 2017 flooding in West Tyrone.

(AQW 9291/17-22)

Ms Mallon: As a result of the North West Flood event in 2017 my Department has carried out flood alleviation feasibility studies in the West Tyrone area at Altamuskin Road Sixmilecross, Station Road Artigarvan, Tullyard Bridge Duncastle Road Dunnamanagh, Presbyterian Bridge Burdennett and Castle Brae Road Newtownstewart.

In addition, my Department is carrying out other feasibility studies in the West Tyrone area that do not have their origins in the 2017 flooding. These studies are at Elem Wood Green Castlederg, Sion Mills Village, Strabane Town and at the dry arch of Campsie Bridge, Lower Market Street Omagh.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in instances where an appeal against an Enforcement Notice is withdrawn, whether the period for compliance still runs from the original date the Notice took effect.

(AQW 9307/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A person can withdraw an appeal at any time before it is decided. If they do withdraw, the Enforcement Notice will take effect immediately and the time period for compliance with any steps in the notice will run from that date.

This information can also be found on the nidirect website which contains information on Planning Enforcement Notice Appeals –

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/planning-enforcement-notice-appeals>

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the annual maintenance spend on (i) roads; and (ii) footpath repair each year since 2015.

(AQW 9318/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below provides details of my Department's structural road maintenance budget outturns for all completed financial years since 2015 and the proportion spent on footway repairs:

	2015/16 £k	2016/17 £k	2017/18 £k	2018/19 £k	2019/20 £k
Structural Maintenance	54,123	88,257	69,518	108,525	106,294
Proportion relating to footway repair*	3,814	6,118	3,302	5,745	5,961

*resurfacing and patching

The outturns will have been determined by budget availability and capacity in a given year.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of whether Newry, Mourne and Down District Council should have notified her Department to undertake a transboundary notification and consultation to Louth County Council concerning the recent Nikkon Gas UK and Ireland development.

(AQW 9340/17-22)

Ms Mallon: This planning application was determined by Newry, Mourne & Down District Council some time ago on 21 October 2015. I can confirm that my Department has not received a transboundary notification for this application from Newry, Mourne and Down District Council.

The obligations for the management of such a local application are laid out in legislation and it is a matter for a district council, in its role as local planning authority, to satisfy itself that these obligations have been met.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 8280/17-22, to detail (i) the average; and (ii) the median response time in days for statutory consultee responses to consultation requests for planning applications, broken down by statutory consultee, for each of the last three years. [R]

(AQW 9341/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The table below outlines the mean and median response times (days) to consultation requests for planning applications for key statutory consultees over the last three years.

Statutory Consultee	Mean (Days)			Median (Days)		
	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
DfI Roads	20	19	21	18	17	18
DAERA (Environment Marine and Fisheries Group and NIEA)	13	20	20	13	16	15
DfI Rivers	23	33	36	20	27	31
Health and Safety Executive NI	21	18	30	11	7	13
DfE / Geological Survey NI	20	18	19	20	16	15
Belfast International Airport	15	15	21	13	13	20
Belfast City Airport	5	2	3	3	2	1
City of Derry Airport	5	1	5	4	1	2

Statutory Consultee	Mean (Days)			Median (Days)		
	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
NI Water	12	14	14	6	5	3
DfC Historic Environment Division	16	17	21	16	15	15
NI Housing Executive	15	23	24	10	17	11

Note: These data are extracted from a live system and will be subject to change overtime. Councils (as statutory consultees) have not been included as numbers of consultations are minimal.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure how much funding her Department has committed to the development of the Forth Meadow Greenway, broken down by year.

(AQW 9342/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In my announcement on 16th September 2020 I committed £375K to the Forth Meadow Greenway project – £250K in 2020/21 and £125K in 2021/22. My officials are currently in discussion with the Council about further funding for the project. No allocations have yet been made as the funds are subject to receipt of an approved business case and Department of Finance approval for the making of the capital grant.

Any decision regarding potential funding in the future will depend on budget allocations to the Department in 2021/22 and beyond.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many driving tests have been cancelled due to the new restrictions; and (ii) when they will be rescheduled.

(AQW 9359/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. Approximately 2,500 driving tests have been cancelled during this period. Motorcycle lessons and tests are not affected by these new restrictions. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

When testing resumes the DVA also intends to offer driving tests on a Saturday and following consultation with key stakeholders is planning to offer driving tests for Heavy Goods Vehicles on Sundays, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. The DVA will also use overtime to rota off-shift dual role driving examiners to provide additional capacity and to provide cover for scheduled driving tests, where due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, driving examiners are unable to attend work.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure what consideration is being given to extend enforcement action of cars parked on footways beyond where there are parking restrictions on the adjacent carriageway.

(AQW 9379/17-22)

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, including for people with visual impairment and mobility issues.

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 posted on our road safety and sustainable travel social media channels.

I am, however, keen to explore if further measures may be necessary and I can confirm that my Department is currently investigating options for dealing with pavement parking on a broader basis.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the planned works at the Orchard Road and Bellspark Road junction, Strabane.

(AQW 9380/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My officials have designed an alternative layout for the Bellspark Road / Orchard Road junction. The proposed layout will provide a staggered crossroads and enhance visibility both on the approaches to the junction and at the junction itself. Funding is in place to acquire the land required and negotiations are ongoing with landowners.

Delivery of the scheme thereafter will be dependent upon the successful completion of the land acquisition stage and availability of funding.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether consideration is being given to piloting the creation of short-term click and collect on-street parking spaces.

(AQW 9412/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department considers that, in towns and cities across Northern Ireland, parking within Controlled Parking Zones and limited waiting areas already provides customers with the opportunity to use the spaces for any reason and to park for as long as the local restrictions permit. There are therefore no current plans to pilot new parking measures to exclusively serve click and collect customers.

Department of Justice

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice when the Assets Recovery Community Scheme will reopen for applications.

(AQW 8757/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): The current funding round of the Assets Recovery Community Scheme (ARCS) commenced in December 2018 and is due to end on 31 March 2021.

My Department is currently considering options for the administration and scope of ARCS beyond March 2021. As you may be aware, payments against confiscation orders made by the Court following a criminal conviction (where there is associated financial benefit) have been impacted by Covid-19.

The pandemic has also had a significant impact on a range of organisations, some of which are currently in receipt of ARCS funding.

While I remain committed to maintaining the ARCS Scheme, it is predicated on funding from confiscations to maintain it, the future and timing of any new call for applications will therefore need to be considered in that context.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) how expert witnesses involved in private and public family proceedings are trained to identify the difference between parental alienation and estrangement; and (ii) what qualifications they must hold to be classed as an expert witness in this field.

(AQW 8906/17-22)

Mrs Long: Policy on alienation is a matter for the Department of Health and where it is suspected in family proceedings, it is for social workers to advise the court which will consider evidence of alienation alongside all other evidence when deciding what is in the best interests of the child. I understand the Department of Health will explore guidance and training for professionals supporting for families experiencing acrimonious dispute and associated negative behaviours as part of work we are progressing to identify means of better supporting the early resolution of parental disputes. I will continue to work collaboratively with Minister Swann to scope and support any future actions. As regards the giving of evidence more generally, it is for experts to satisfy themselves on receiving instructions that they are in a position to comment on the issues arising and early and full disclosure is encouraged to both facilitate the best instructions to experts and ensure they can fully consider all the issues. The court will also wish to satisfy itself as to the expertise of witnesses before it.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail the accessibility of course service information for parents involved in private and public family proceedings.

(AQW 8907/17-22)

Mrs Long: There is a range of information and support already available to parties to private and public law proceedings including through the legal aid fund, information for those attending the family courts on NI Direct and forms and guidance on the NICTS website. Communication is a key component of ongoing work with the Department of Health to improve outcomes

for families involved in private family law proceedings and further improving the accessibility of information is a current focus for my Department.

My Department is also supporting a Litigant in Person Reference Group which includes representatives of the Department, NICTS, the judiciary, the legal profession, the University of Ulster, the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and a number of litigants in person. The Group is currently focused on developing supports and information for parties to private law proceedings but I expect that learning will inform the development of information on other types of application in the future.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail how the justice system intends to deal with parental alienation.
(AQW 8908/17-22)

Mrs Long: Policy on alienation is a matter for the Department of Health and where it is suspected in family proceedings, it is for social workers to advise the court which will consider evidence of alienation alongside all other evidence when deciding what is in the best interests of the child. I understand the Department of Health will explore guidance and training for professionals supporting for families experiencing acrimonious dispute and associated negative behaviours as part of work we are progressing to identify means of better supporting the early resolution of parental disputes. I will continue to work collaboratively with Minister Swann to scope and support any future actions.

I also expect the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceeding Bill I have brought forward to help. The Bill makes behaviour that is coercive or controlling or which amounts to psychological or emotional abuse a criminal offence. Abusive behaviour can be indirect and where the victim is under 18, a child sees, hears or is present during an incident of abusive behaviour or is used to abuse a victim, the Bill will provide for the offences to be treated as aggravated and increased sentencing may apply. This may assist in cases where alienation is present.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department plans to expand the access criteria for legal aid.
(AQW 8968/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department has no current plans to expand the access criteria for legal aid. Like all areas of discretionary government expenditure, legal aid must be targeted towards those who need it most. In the prioritisation of those needs, difficult choices are often required. Eligibility for legal aid funding in civil legal services therefore remains subject to means and merit testing. Although a number of applications are rightly not subject to financial eligibility or merits criteria (primarily public law applications relating to care, supervision and adoption) applications for legal assistance in other civil legal matters are subject to checks and controls. These controls ensure the limited resources available are focused towards ensuring access to justice for those areas of greatest need. The Department seeks to ensure costs to the legal aid fund continue to represent value for money and will keep the matter under review.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Justice how bans on drinking in public places are being enforced.
(AQW 9047/17-22)

Mrs Long: Section 90 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 1972 gives district councils the power to make bye-laws prohibiting the consumption of intoxicating liquor in designated public places.

Once a council has designated an area, it is an offence to consume consumption of intoxicating liquor in that area. I understand this legislation provides councils and police with the power to take names and addresses of offenders for consideration of prosecution proceedings by councils. Prosecutions can be disposed of by way of a fine up to £500, a conditional discharge or a formal caution. The Department for Communities has responsibility for this piece of legislation.

The police also have additional powers in the Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 to issue fixed penalty notices for a number of public order offences related to public drinking. These provisions allow for fines to be levied for being drunk in a public place, indecent behaviour, disorderly behaviour and behaviour likely to cause a breach of the peace.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice how many prisoners have been moved from the prison estate to Larne House short-term holding facility since 23 March 2020.
(AQW 9148/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service plays no part in the movement of individuals to Larne House. This is a matter for the Home Office.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Justice why, in late July 2020, she advised the Minister for Infrastructure that the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunal Service would no longer be willing to facilitate hearings required by the the Department for Infrastructure's Transport Regulation Unit.
(AQW 9149/17-22)

Mrs Long: As the Department for Infrastructure's Transport Regulation Unit had previously struggled to obtain suitable accommodation the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) agreed to grant access to courtrooms in Antrim, Ballymena, Lisburn and Newtownards courthouses. However the COVID-19 situation closed a number of these courthouses and the planned hearings were not scheduled.

When the Minister for Infrastructure wrote to me in July 2020 the NICTS were still working through a series of COVID-19 Risk Assessments on operational buildings to ensure that they complied with PHA guidelines on managing the risk of COVID-19 and were safe for staff, judiciary and court users. Consequently it was explained that it was not possible to facilitate DFI hearings at that time.

Courtroom capacity has been significantly reduced as a result of the coronavirus pandemic and the need for social distancing. All non-essential visits to courthouses have ceased and the majority of court and tribunal business is being conducted remotely.

NICTS have been looking at alternative additional accommodation for civil and family hearings, office based staff and jurors. During this process, NICTS have been in contact with DFI colleagues to establish if their requirements can be factored into any additional accommodation leases that might be pursued.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice when the Northern Ireland Prison Service Independent Pay Review Body finding on this year's pay award will be released.

(AQW 9158/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Prison Service Pay Review Body submitted their pre-publication report on 25 September. In line with Northern Ireland Public Sector Pay Guidance, a pay remit has been submitted to the Department of Finance seeking approval for the award.

At the conclusion of this process, I will ask the Prison Service Pay Review Body to publish their report.

Department for the Economy

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the average number of responses to her Department's consultations over the last 5 years.

(AQW 7876/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): My Department has received on average, 321 responses to consultations, over the last five years. However this figure includes one consultation which received 1,149 responses. Without that unusually high response the average would be 287 responses

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether any preparations have been made for provision of support to businesses in the event of a short-term circuit breaker lockdown.

(AQW 8178/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On 14th October, the Executive announced a four week period of increased restrictions throughout Northern Ireland in an attempt to curb the very worrying spread of Covid-19.

This decision was not taken lightly and was deemed necessary, primarily in response to the latest advice and evidence presented to the Executive by medical and scientific experts, as well as lead officials across a number of relevant policy and operational business areas.

In parallel with this decision on further restrictions, the Finance Minister announced a new support scheme for those businesses that were instructed to close as a consequence. The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) will run for the four weeks of enforced restrictions, at an estimated cost of £35million. This scheme opened to new applications from Monday 19th October.

Further to this, on Thursday 22nd October, I announced an additional support package to help businesses affected by the recent restrictions announced by the Executive.

The Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) will support businesses which meet the following criteria:

- The business is restricted within the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 but is not eligible for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS); or
- The business is within the supply chain of businesses restricted by the Regulations and as a result has been significantly impacted; and
- The business is operating in Northern Ireland and was trading immediately prior to 16 October 2020; and
- The business is not included in the scope of funding already allocated to Executive Departments to respond to Covid restrictions.

The new CRBSS, which also applies for the same four week period, will open for applications as soon as possible. My officials are working with colleagues in InvestNI, who will administer the scheme on our behalf.

In addition, I have asked my officials to develop a tourism and hospitality scheme to address issues associated with current restrictions and a scheme to support those recently self-employed

All Executive Ministers have been asked to bring forward options to determine what support options may be considered for those who may not qualify for these latest schemes, or who may not have been able to avail of previous opportunities.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what steps employers have to take if one of their members of staff test positive for COVID-19; and (ii) whether they have to inform other members of staff.

(AQW 8405/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Employers should ensure that they follow the latest guidance from the Public Health Agency (PHA) when responding to COVID-19 within the workplace.

Information on this advice can be found at:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/contact-tracing/covid-19-business-setting-quick>

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy why the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation scheme legislation does not require generating stations to have (i) planning permission; and (ii) to comply with environmental regulations, prior to being accredited.

(AQW 8693/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Audit Office report recognises that the primary responsibility for the enforcement of planning and environmental legislation rests with those bodies tasked with doing this. My Department does not have legislative powers in either of these areas.

The Audit Office has recommended that my Department should take a lead role to strengthen and formalise partnership arrangements across government for any future support schemes, to ensure a joined-up approach to accreditation, monitoring and enforcement. The Department has accepted this recommendation and will ensure it is addressed going forward.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to detail how she plans to assist trade unions who are struggling to get access to their own members now that many are working at home.

(AQW 8733/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: For many people, working from home is likely to continue for several months.

Having reduced access to an office based environment may present new challenges for employees in how they access support, such as face to face meetings with line management, colleagues and trade union representatives.

As the Member will appreciate, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the internal operational activities of trade unions. I would, however, expect employers to have a clear understanding of when home working employees will be working and how and when they can be contacted.

Further, I would encourage employers to ensure they provide employees with the necessary equipment in order to do their jobs at home, and I would encourage them to facilitate trade unions contacting their members by appropriate means such as e-mail.

The Industrial Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1992, places a number of responsibilities on employers concerning employees and trade union membership. For example, this Order permits trade union representatives to take time off during their working hours for the purpose of carrying out their duties. These provisions remain applicable, even in the context of home working circumstances.

Employees should also, insofar as possible, keep in regular contact with their line manager, team members and colleagues. This may involve new ways of working with the use of, for example, video or tele-conferencing technologies.

I would encourage all employers, staff and trade unions to explore and make use of these applications, where possible, to ensure regular communication is maintained and support is provided at this difficult time.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of her Department's drafting of legislation, given the observation from the National Audit Office that legislation drawn up by its predecessor, the Department for Enterprise, Trade and Investment in relation to renewable energy, was vague and non-specific.

(AQW 8783/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation operates in parallel with the Renewables Obligations in Great Britain and the associated legislation generally mirrors the legislation there. The Northern Ireland Audit Office recognises this in their report.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office observation relates specifically to the legislative provision for the permitted use of electricity in the context of a very small number of accreditations that are not connected to the electricity grid.

The report includes a recommendation that supporting legislation for any future schemes should be more specific about the permitted uses of the electricity generated, particularly if it is not exported to the grid. The Department has accepted this recommendation and will ensure it is addressed going forward.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy how she will ensure that future COVID-19 business support schemes do not unfairly exclude sole traders, and those who have previously been unable to avail of support.
(AQW 8802/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In recent months, the NI Executive and UK Government have introduced an unprecedented range of support measures to businesses across all sectors. These packages of financial support were established to mitigate against the worst impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, to prevent businesses from closing and to retain jobs.

To date, my Department has provided over £340 million of support to over 32,000 local businesses through the grant schemes for large, small and micro-sized businesses.

On Friday 17th October 2020, the Finance Minister announced a new support package for businesses and employers throughout Northern Ireland. This will be in place for at least four weeks, with an estimated spend of £35 million during this initial period.

Further to this, on Thursday 22nd October, I announced an additional support package to help businesses affected by the recent restrictions announced by the Executive.

The Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) will support businesses which meet the following criteria:

- The business is restricted within the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 but is not eligible for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS); or
- The business is within the supply chain of businesses restricted by the Regulations and as a result has been significantly impacted; and
- The business is operating in Northern Ireland and was trading immediately prior to 16 October 2020; and
- The business is not included in the scope of funding already allocated to Executive Departments to respond to Covid restrictions.

The new CRBSS, which also applies for the same four week period, will open for applications as soon as possible. My officials are working with colleagues in InvestNI, who will administer the scheme on our behalf.

In addition, I have asked my officials to develop a tourism and hospitality scheme to address issues associated with current restrictions and a scheme to support those recently self-employed

All Executive Ministers have been asked to bring forward options to determine what support options may be considered for those who may not qualify for these latest schemes, or who may not have been able to avail of previous opportunities.

Financial Support for Further and Higher Education Distance Learning. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister for the Economy what financial support her Department will provide to Further and Higher Education institutions and students to facilitate a recommended move to distance learning.
(AQW 8803/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has allocated £3.1 million to Further Education (FE) colleges to enable delivery of curriculum provision online, thereby enabling students and staff to work remotely during this period of uncertainty in order to complete vocational qualifications. This funding will provide additional IT equipment, peripherals and licences.

My Department has also ensured that current FE student support arrangements with an annual value of £13 million continue to operate effectively, or have been adapted, to direct support to students in need, including facilitating distance learning. For example, eligibility criteria for FE Grants and Hardship Fund have been updated to facilitate claimants participating in distance learning, acceptance of electronic applications and evidence, and paying childcare despite the student studying from home.

An additional £0.4 million has been allocated to fund direct payment of Free School Meal Allowances into the households of almost 1,900 eligible school-age FE students for the remainder of the 2019/20 academic year and to facilitate summer payments, when students were not able to attend college. For 2020/21 Term 1, I am seeking to allocate an additional £0.17 million to fund direct payment of Free School Meal Allowances into the households of eligible school-age FE students to ensure students are not disadvantaged by distance learning. This arrangement will be reviewed for Term 2.

My Department will continue to keep FE student support arrangements under review and adapt these as required in response to evolving needs.

For Higher Education students studying online from home in 2020/21, their student finance will continue to be paid as normal, as if they were studying on site at university or college. Students should ensure that their living location details are up to date on their online account at www.studentfinancenl.co.uk. As part of their student finance agreement, students must keep Student Finance NI up to date with where they'll be living each term, as this may affect how much they have to repay and when. In addition to this support, I have doubled the amount of hardship funds available to students from £2.8m to £5.6m in 2020/21. These funds are distributed by the universities on behalf of my Department, and any students who are experiencing

genuine financial hardship should contact the Student Support team at their university to see if they are eligible for a hardship payment.

While my Department is responsible for funding NI higher education institutions insofar as teaching and research is concerned, as autonomous institutions, it is for the universities themselves to decide how that teaching will be delivered, taking into account prevailing public health guidance. I understand, however, that as part of their Covid-19 operational planning, both Queen's University and Ulster University already have in place contingencies to pivot fully to online delivery.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department will publish advice to businesses, permitted to continue operation, on following additional COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 8804/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Guidance documents to help businesses from various different sectors operate had already been published prior to the latest restrictions being imposed, these documents are available on the www.nidirect.gov.uk and the www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk.

In the constantly changing setting of Covid 19, the guidance documents to aid businesses are regularly reviewed and updated when deemed appropriate, however there are no specific plans to publish new guidance for businesses that are permitted to continue operating whilst the latest restrictions are being imposed.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what financial support she will provide to businesses impacted by additional COVID-19 restrictions; and what is the timeframe for distributing such support.

(AQW 8806/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Following the difficult, but necessary decision by the Executive to impose a four week restriction period for all of Northern Ireland, the Finance Minister announced a new support scheme for those businesses that were instructed to close as a consequence. The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) will run for the four weeks of enforced restrictions, at an estimated cost of £35million. This scheme opened to new applications from Monday 19th October and block payments will be issued as soon as applications are approved.

On Thursday 22nd October, I announced a further support package to help businesses affected by the recent restrictions announced by the Executive.

The Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) will support businesses which meet the following criteria:

- The business is restricted within the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 but is not eligible for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS); or
- The business is within the supply chain of businesses restricted by the Regulations and as a result has been significantly impacted; and
- The business is operating in Northern Ireland and was trading immediately prior to 16 October 2020; and
- The business is not included in the scope of funding already allocated to Executive Departments to respond to Covid restrictions.

The new CRBSS, which also applies for the same four week period, will open for applications as soon as possible. My officials are working with colleagues in InvestNI, who will administer the scheme on our behalf.

In addition, I have asked my officials to develop a tourism and hospitality scheme to address issues associated with current restrictions and a scheme to support those recently self-employed

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will review her Department's business skills and training criteria to ensure small and medium sized enterprises and self-employed enterprises with under 10 employees can access all courses, including digital skill set development.

(AQW 8815/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department and associated Arm's Length Bodies provide a wide range of programmes specifically tailored to meet the needs of small and medium sized enterprises, including enterprises with fewer than ten employees. A summary of these schemes is set out in the table below.

Programme	Description
Skills Focus	Upskilling for employees, including those who are furloughed. Available to SMEs, (fewer than 250 employees) and now fully funded by the Department. The programme has an annual budget of £1.5m.
Innovate Us	Fully funded programme offering free training to small businesses, including Social Enterprises, with fewer than 50 employees, delivering up to 60 hours of bespoke training and skills development support per project. The programme has an annual budget of £1.7m.

Programme	Description
Assured Skills	Is a short, demand-led, pre-employment training programme, which is fully funded by the Department, to upskill individuals and help them compete for guaranteed job vacancies in new Foreign Direct Investment companies and expanding businesses. The programme has an annual budget of £2.3m
Bridge to Employment	Open to business of all sizes looking to expand. It provides customised training to participants, in particular long term unemployed people, with the skills necessary to compete for new employment opportunities on an equal basis with others. The programme has an annual budget of £280K.
ApprenticeshipNI and Higher level Apprenticeships (HLA'S)	DfE funds the cost of off-the-job training for apprentices aged 16-24 on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme as well as 50% for off-the-job training for apprentices aged 25 years and over in the priority economic areas. HLA's are open to participants of all ages, without restriction. The Department spends approximately £26m per annum on its Apprenticeship programmes.
Covid-19 Skills Interventions	To assist those employees who had been furloughed, made redundant, or in receipt of support for the self-employed, to develop skills and qualifications, in order to gain, sustain or progress in employment. To date over £6m has been invested in these programmes.
Invest Northern Ireland Skills Interventions	Typically take the form of a grant that can be used to access relevant training and/or upskilling. Over the last three years Invest NI has made 640 separate skills offers, of which 525 (82%) were made to SMEs. The grant value of the offers to those SMEs was £15.41m.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the findings of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation scheme.
(AQW 8837/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I welcome that the Northern Ireland Audit Office report has recognised the many achievements of the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO). Most notably, the role that the NIRO played in ensuring that the Executive's 40% renewable electricity consumption by 2020 target was achieved a year early, with the figure now at almost 48%.

I recognise that the report has made three recommendations that are specifically for my Department, and I will ensure these are implemented going forward.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what action she is taking in respect of the findings of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation scheme.
(AQW 8838/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Of the six recommendations in the report, three are specifically for my Department. The Department has accepted these recommendations and will ensure they are addressed going forward.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether small scale wind turbines and anaerobic digesters were over subsidised, as indicated by the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation scheme.
(AQW 8839/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Neither anaerobic digestion plants nor the biogas they produce are eligible for support under the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO). The NIRO supports the generation of renewable electricity, including electricity generated by stations fuelled by biogas produced through the anaerobic digestion process.

This is an important distinction as any revenue streams for anaerobic digestion plants that do not relate to electricity production by a generating station are not within the scope of the NIRO. I therefore cannot comment on the rates of returns of anaerobic digesters themselves.

The levels of returns for renewable electricity generating stations are based on a number of factors, not just the Renewable Obligation Certificate (ROC) banding levels set, and the rates of returns will differ substantially depending on assumptions about the individual circumstances of generators used to calculate any figures.

The Audit Office report includes a recommendation to carry out a review of the levels of support available and rates of return for renewable generators, and I have accepted this.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy what is the relationship between her Department and Geological Survey NI; and what are the governance arrangements for Geological Survey NI.
(AQW 8852/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Geological Survey of Northern Ireland (GSNI) is established as an office of DfE under the Minerals (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 1959.

GSNI is staffed by scientists from UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) who provide geological research and technical services to government departments and NI councils. GSNI services are provided as part of a recurring three year work programme under a Service Level Agreement (SLA).

The governance arrangements between the Department and UKRI are outlined in detail in this SLA and include provision for the Department's nominated officer to meet with the Director of GSNI on a quarterly basis to review progress against objectives and to discuss arising matters of interest.

Furthermore, the SLA requires the UKRI to, if invited by the Department, assist the Department, or any committee appointed for that purpose, to consider the conduct and progress of the work of GSNI.

A GSNI Scientific Advisory Committee has been established by GSNI, the Department is a member and can act as the Chair. The membership is agreed with DfE and comprises representatives from DfE, other NICS departments, the British Geological Survey (BGS), the Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI), industry and academia. The role of the Committee is to advise on the strategic direction of GSNI's work and its relevance to stakeholders; to suggest new avenues of research; and to review and comment on the Annual Report.

GSNI is subject to regular audit with the latest being carried out in January 2017 to examine contract management and governance arrangements; performance and delivery of the agreed service; and financial and budgetary management arrangements; all of which were found to be satisfactory which is the highest level that can be achieved.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy what is the procedural guidance or regulations in relation to cooling off periods for members of staff who leave the Department, its agencies or arm's-length bodies taking up a position in the private sector in a related area.

(AQW 8853/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The rules for all Civil Service staff who wish to accept outside business appointments, employment or self-employment after leaving the NICS are contained within paragraph 8 and Annexes 4-6 of the NICS HR policy 6.01 Standards of Conduct. These rules will also apply to those staff in the Department of Economy's Agencies and ALBs that follow the NICS Handbook.

The rules allow that such movement following NICS employment should not be frustrated by unjustified public concern over such appointments but equally that there should be no cause for any suspicion of impropriety. Accordingly, the rules provide for waiting periods (referred to as "cooling off periods" within this question) and conditions to be applied to any appointment which may give rise to concerns.

Approval must be sought by former Civil Servants who wish to take up employment as follows:

- If they are the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, Permanent Secretaries (including equivalent grades), during the two year period after leaving office and without exception;
- If they are in the Senior Civil Service, Grade 3 or Grade 5, (and equivalents), or Special Advisers, during the two year period after leaving office if the individuals circumstances match one or more of those outlined in the policy;
- If they are Grade 6 and below, the rules normally apply for one year after the individuals last day of paid service, if the individuals circumstances match one or more of those outlined in the policy.

Full details of the circumstances where applications from staff at Grade 3 and below are required are detailed within paragraph 4.2 of the policy.

In relation to DfE ALB's they do not have procedural guidance or regulations in relation to cooling off periods with the exception of the Consumer Council and the Health and Safety Executive (NI) both of which follow the NICS policy and guidelines. Whilst the Further Education colleges have no procedural guidance or regulations in relation to cooling off periods you may wish to note that clause 26 of the standard contract for 'Chief Executives of Further Education Colleges in Northern Ireland', agreed by the sector, deals with Post Termination Restrictions and references the provision or supply of "Restricted Services".

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department will be providing additional funding for students facing hardship as a result of the updated COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 8858/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: 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. The administration of applications to the support funds will continue as normal during the current restrictions and any student facing financial hardship should contact the student support services in their university to discuss what support may be available.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy whether petroleum licence applications PLA1/16 and PLA2/16 have been wholly assessed and will continue to be wholly assessed under existing policy and within the existing petroleum licensing legislative framework, regardless of any outcomes from her Department's proposed research.

(AQW 8866/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The assessment of both petroleum licence applications PLA1/16 and PLA2/16 is on-going.

My Department has commissioned research into the impacts of petroleum exploration and development which 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. In response to previous AQW 7150, I have previously confirmed to you on 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.

It is not appropriate to comment further for fear of prejudicing the independence of the review process.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her commitment to collective bargaining in the further and higher education sectors; and for her assessment of the role of trade unions in negotiating on behalf of these staff.

(AQW 8868/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am fully aware of the important role which collective bargaining plays in both sectors and am supportive of the arrangements which have been developed in each sector to facilitate negotiation between employers and trade unions.

It is important to note that Higher Education Institutions and Further Education colleges in Northern Ireland are employers in their own right and are responsible for setting the terms and conditions for their staff and for deciding how they engage with trade unions as part of that process.

However, I also recognise that trade unions also have an important role to play when negotiating collective agreements, relating to terms and conditions, with employers and I would encourage both employers and trade unions to make full use of the opportunities offered within the respective spheres to seek to resolve any issues which arise.

It may be useful to note that the Labour Relations Agency may be able to provide practical guidance to respective parties in relation to certain aspects of the collective bargaining process. For further information, they can be contacted on 03300 555 300.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will publish the Transform to Deliver paper that proposes to reform conditions of employment in the further education sector and the details of its origin; and whether the paper was written by officials in her Department.

(AQW 8870/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As I set out in my response to AQW 8536/17-22, while they are Non-Departmental Public Bodies of the Department, the Further Education Colleges are also employers in their own right and are responsible for setting the pay and terms and conditions for their staff including the development of any proposals to reform those terms and conditions.

It is therefore for Colleges Employers Forum (CEF), which represents the six Further Education Colleges in college negotiating arrangements, rather than the Department to bring forward any such proposal for reform. Where such a proposal requires the investment of additional Departmental funding, a Business Case has to be submitted to the Department, through the Director of Further Education as senior sponsor, in order to allow it to be assessed prior to my consideration and approval. As senior sponsor, it is the role of the FE Director to regularly engage with colleges to ensure that governance and funding arrangements, including any business cases which are developed, are sufficiently robust to provide the Department with the assurance required.

I understand that in 2016, a draft Business Case was submitted to the Department by the CEF to secure funding from the Public Sector Transformation Fund which if successful would have formed the basis for a bid for additional funding in order to provide an increase to lecturers' pay and to transform terms and conditions and industrial relations within the sector. Had that Business Case been approved, it would have then formed the basis for negotiations to reach an agreed position with Trade Union Side. However, the Business Case was not approved and it was subsequently decided by CEF that any Business Case developed should be on the basis of an agreed position, negotiated with TUS. This is the basis on which I understand the College Employers' Forum has engaged in the most recent negotiations. If agreement had been reached with TUS, both sides were clear that Colleges would then develop a Business Case for any additional funding required based on the agreed proposals for submission to the Department for consideration and necessary approvals.

As I have indicated in previous replies, and as I have set out above, discussions on staff pay, terms and conditions are a matter for negotiation and agreement between the Lecturers Negotiating Committee of the CEF and Trade Union Side. I continue to strongly encourage both parties to re-engage in negotiations to resolve the outstanding issues and reach an accommodation so that a plan, informed by this negotiation process, and an associated business case can be developed, and approvals and funding secured.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the future of the North West Regional College site in Strabane.

(AQW 8912/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: North West Regional College is currently operating the Strabane campus with the necessary safety measures in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic. My Department was recently consulted on a Strategic Outline Case for a replacement campus in the town centre, as part of the proposed Strabane Canal Basin Regeneration project under the Derry/Londonderry and Strabane Region City Deal.

Comments on the proposal were provided and raised some issues that require further clarification. It is anticipated that the proposal will be developed further as an Outline Business Case as part of the overall Strabane Canal Basin Regeneration project, and this will be then be subject to assessment and evaluation by my officials in due course.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the postcodes in West Tyrone that will benefit from Project Stratum.

(AQW 8913/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The postcode areas (which contain the 9,973 premises) in the West Tyrone constituency that are included in the Project Stratum target intervention area are provided in the attached annex. It is not possible to confirm which specific premises will benefit from the project until after contract award, however the overarching aspiration of the project is to maximise broadband coverage across the target intervention area.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what objective criteria was used by her Department to not reduce subsidies to small scale wind turbines and anaerobic digesters in or about 2015 in line with the approach taken in Great Britain.

(AQW 8926/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Decisions on a review of small scale Northern Ireland Renewable Obligation Certificate (ROC) banding levels, for a number of technologies, followed a statutory consultation process supported by an independent report to provide an assessment of changes in technology costs, which was the main criteria used in making such decisions.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what records exist of the discussions and decisions of her Department to support the incentivising of small scale wind turbines and anaerobic digesters

(AQW 8927/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) was introduced in April 2005. As with all the Renewables Obligations across the UK, the scheme was technology neutral and was open to a wide range of technologies including small scale onshore wind and stations fuelled from biogas produced from anaerobic digestion.

All decisions about the introduction of the NIRO and Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation Certificate (NIROC) banding levels were informed by public consultations, with the rationale for decisions regarding support levels set out in these and in associated Government Responses.

All decisions to amend NIROC banding levels were scrutinised by the Enterprise, Trade & Investment Committee, and debated in the Assembly where the associated legislation was subsequently passed.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the level of gaming in the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation scheme as highlighted by the NI Audit Office report and the investigation by OFGEM; and (ii) what actions her Department is taking to address these issues.

(AQW 8932/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Almost 24,000 generating stations have been accredited to the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation. The Northern Ireland Audit Office report refers to an issue relating to two generating stations.

The matter was thoroughly investigated by Ofgem, as administrator of the scheme, and has been rectified. It is important to note that the owners and operators of the stations concerned were not found guilty of any wrong doing.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy (i) for her assessment of the NI Audit Office finding in their report entitled Generating electricity from renewable energy, that the supporting governance structures and policies required to proactively identify and manage the risks associated with [renewable generating stations] should have been more robust; and (ii) to detail the work of her Department in addressing these issues.

(AQW 8933/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Audit Office opinion in their report about supporting governance structures and policies is directly followed by a list of recommendations.

Of the six recommendations included, three are specifically for my Department. The Department has accepted these recommendations and will ensure they are addressed going forward.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy, with regard to the internal policy review into petroleum licencing which her Department undertook in 2019, in the absence of a Minister (i) the start and end dates of the review; (ii) whether a public

interest test was conducted in line with the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018; and (iii) whether the internal review overlapped with the public consultations on PLA1/16 and PLA2/16 at any time.

(AQW 8945/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department's review of petroleum licensing policy commenced in February 2019. This began with a high level internal review by officials to scope out the issues impacting on petroleum licensing. The initial findings were set out in a submission to the Permanent Secretary dated November 2019 which recommended independent research into the impacts of petroleum licensing to inform next steps. As this was a preliminary review at official level, a public interest test in line with the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 was not required.

This initial stage of the review overlapped with the period of public consultation on PLA1/16 and PLA2/16.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of the Assembly's decision to request her to instigate a moratorium on petroleum licensing while waiting for legislation to enact a permanent cessation, (i) how her Department's tendered research will cater for the cessation of petroleum licensing scenario when only development outcomes are considered as scenarios within the tender specification; (ii) whether she will instruct her Department to change the tender specification; (iii) if not, how she justifies spending £75,000 of public money on a review that does not embrace fully the new circumstances; and (iv) whether she has appraised the Minister of Finance that the review specification is now outdated.

(AQW 8978/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The commissioned research is intended to be an independent assessment of the potential impacts of the development of oil and gas resources in Northern Ireland. It will not make recommendations on the continuation or cessation of petroleum licensing but it will provide a solid regional evidence base on the impacts of petroleum licensing. The Department will use the information gathered to consider options and develop, through stakeholder engagement and consultation, evidence based petroleum policy proposals which will consider the need or otherwise for a petroleum licensing regime.
- (ii) The specification was drafted to reflect a range of potential development scenarios as there is considerable uncertainty over the likely future development path of conventional and unconventional oil and gas. One of the scenarios, entitled Climate Change, reflects a move to a low carbon economy with barriers to oil and gas development.
- (iii) The commissioning of research to establish an evidence base is a well-established approach to policy development. Scotland, Wales and England all employed external expertise to undertake independent regionally-specific research before arriving at their various policy positions on petroleum issues.
- (iv) There is no reason for me to write to the Minister for Finance with regard to the specification for research.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what records exist of lobbying of her Department, including the Minister and special adviser, in support of incentivising small scale wind turbines and anaerobic digesters.

(AQW 9004/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: All of the Renewables Obligations across the UK, including the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO), were technology neutral and from their introduction were open to a range of technologies including small scale onshore wind and stations fuelled from biogas produced from anaerobic digestion.

All decisions relating to the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation Certificate (NIROC) banding levels have been informed by information gathered through public consultation.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what liaison there was with the planning and rating authorities before her Department embarked on incentivising small scale wind turbines and anaerobic digesters.

(AQW 9005/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) was introduced in April 2005. As with all of the Renewables Obligations across the UK, the scheme was technology neutral from its introduction and was open to a wide range of technologies including small scale onshore wind and stations fuelled from biogas produced from anaerobic digestion.

There is no record of formal liaison between the Department and the responsible authorities for planning and rates at that time.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) when employers have to carry out a deep clean; and (ii) the course of action if they refuse to carry out a deep clean.

(AQW 9061/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) HSENI refers businesses to the published Public Health Agency (PHA) advice which states that, in a business setting, if an employee has a suspected case of COVID-19 or an employee tests positive for COVID-19, the premises should be thoroughly cleaned as normal, paying particular attention to anywhere the employee has touched frequently (door

handles, hand rails, light switches, telephone, computer keyboard, etc). If two or more employees test positive, PHA will review the situation and may contact the employer. This will be determined on a case by case basis and may result in recommendations including enhanced cleaning as well as other preventative measures. Where appropriate, the HSENI or Local Council may be involved.

- (ii) The action taken can range from the provision of specific advice to support the employer achieve the required standards through to, where required, issuing enforcement letters or notices.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she is committed to maintaining the current terms and conditions for further education college lecturers.

(AQW 9064/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As employers, Further Education colleges are responsible for setting the terms and conditions of their own staff. I am aware that negotiations on lecturer's pay and conditions of service have been taking place between college management and Trade Union Side through the Lecturers' Negotiation Committee.

If agreement is reached through this process, a Business Case will be submitted to the Department to seek approval for any additional resources required. However, until that point, I am not in a position to comment other than to encourage both parties to fully engage in the negotiation process in order to reach a satisfactory conclusion as soon as possible.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department is progressing plans to reform the employment contracts of further education college lecturers.

(AQW 9065/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I would refer the Member to my answer to AQW 9064/17-22.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for the Economy what discussions have been held with (i) Queens University; and (ii) Ulster University with regard to the availability of funding for doctorates or post doctorate research and study relating to the centenary of Northern Ireland.

(AQW 9079/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Each academic year, my Department provides grants to both universities to administer and allocate the Department's Postgraduate Studentship Award scheme, with a particular focus on economically relevant subjects.

Whilst there are broad terms and conditions related to how this funding may be spent, the Universities have discretion to allocate the studentships based on their respective internal assessment criteria.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy, given that the Chief Commissioner of the Planning Appeals Commission NI has confirmed that planning permission for Kells BESS (2018/A0248) was given by the Commission for a non-generating facility, is it tenable for her Department to maintain that the generating consent given by the Department for Kells BESS is valid.

(AQW 9090/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department is satisfied Kells battery storage plant falls within and requires consent under Article 39 of the Electricity (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 Order. Accordingly, and as the application was in order, the Department granted the consent requested.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether the Dowra Sandstone reserves are conventional or unconventional from a geological analysis and in terms of technology.

(AQW 9119/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In Petroleum geology, the term unconventional refers to the characteristics of the geological reservoirs or rock formations containing the hydrocarbons rather than the technology used to extract them. Shale gas, tight gas and coalbed methane are examples of unconventional natural gas. In the case of tight gas reservoirs, they are characterised by a low porosity (often less than 10%) and a very low permeability (usually less than 0.1 millidarcy). The average porosity and permeability of the Dowra Sandstone falls below this threshold, and any natural gas present within the Dowra Sandstone would be considered "tight gas" and therefore "unconventional".

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether the licence application from Tamboran Resources related to Dowra Sandstone is for conventional or unconventional extraction techniques.

(AQW 9120/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The terms conventional and unconventional are not typically applied to the technique of extraction of hydrocarbons, but to the hydrocarbons themselves or the reservoir from which they come.

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 test and extract gas from the Bundoran Shale. A secondary exploration target of the Dowra Sandstone was also identified.

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 and instead proposes the use of a number of other techniques. The Department is awaiting further information from TRUK on their proposed extraction methods.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy what discussions her Department has had with FlyBe to help with bringing the airline back from administration.

(AQW 9129/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I welcome the news being reported in the media about the potential that Flybe could restart operations. Flybe was a UK-wide airline, based at George Best Belfast City Airport, and provided key access for Northern Ireland passengers to Great Britain and beyond.

My Department has not been approached to engage on this matter.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of the move to Level 5 restrictions in the Republic of Ireland, whether she has considered closing non-essential retail.

(AQW 9145/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The level of restrictions introduced in Northern Ireland on 16 October 2020 were as a result of discussions and agreement of the Northern Ireland Executive. At that time, and based on the evidence provided, it was decided not to include the closure of non-essential retail.

These restrictions are kept under review and any changes would require a decision by the Executive.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for the Economy whether she is aware of the findings of the recent NI Audit Office report on generating electricity from renewable energy, which found that the amount paid in subsidies to the owners of wind turbines will far exceed those received by the operators of wood pellet boilers under the RHI Scheme.

(AQW 9151/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am aware of the findings of the report.

The report does not include the finding included in your question.

Mr Wells asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of the findings of the NI Audit Office report on generating electricity from renewable energy, whether she will commission an independent inquiry into wind energy in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 9152/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Audit Office report does not include a finding or recommendation for an inquiry as suggested in your question.

The report includes six recommendations and three are specifically for my Department. The Department has accepted these recommendations and will ensure they are addressed going forward.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for the Economy, given the increasing numbers of people working from home, what her Department is doing in terms of enhancing broadband provision, especially in rural areas, between now and Project Stratum.

(AQW 9157/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I fully appreciate the importance of access to good broadband services, particularly in the current circumstances. Contract award for Project Stratum is anticipated by mid-November, with initial deployment activities expected to commence shortly thereafter. The target intervention area consists of just under 79,000 premises, some 97% of which are rural, defined as NISRA Band H – settlements of fewer than 1,000 and open countryside. Residents and businesses may check if their premises have been included in the target intervention area at

<https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/services/check-if-your-address-might-get-faster-broadband> .

There are a number of other UK Government broadband schemes operating in Northern Ireland and available to both citizens and businesses. These are listed below and links have been provided:

Universal Service Obligation: <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/phones-telecoms-and-internet/advice-for-consumers/broadband-iso-need-to-know>

Rural Gigabit Connectivity Scheme: <https://gigabitvoucher.culture.gov.uk/>.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the development and expansion of Ulster University, Magee Campus.

(AQW 9167/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Ulster University confirmed in correspondence to my Department in September 2019, that it remained committed to securing expansion of its Magee campus, however confirmed that the business case required updating prior to any consideration by the Department or Executive.

To date my Department has not received a further proposal for consideration, however I am committed to working with the University around the consideration of any expansion proposals that it develops.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what is the assessment of how much of the profits from the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation scheme have gone, and will go, to financial institutions.

(AQW 9182/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation is a market based scheme and operates on the basis of trading Renewable Obligation Certificates (ROCs) across the UK. The price that individual station operators receive for their ROCs is commercially sensitive and as such is not available.

It is recognised that generators may need to enter into arrangements with financial institutions in order to raise finance. However, information on any generators commercial arrangements with financial institutions is not available.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for the Economy whether she would consider the development of an apprenticeship programme in partnership with the Northern Ireland Assembly.

(AQW 9204/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: At present Public Sector Apprenticeships are not funded under my Department's ApprenticeshipsNI or Higher Level Apprenticeship programmes although there are some in operation in areas such as IT and engineering.

However, public sector apprenticeships have a role to play in our economic recovery and my officials are currently engaging with other organisations to identify the potential to develop a range of apprenticeships across the public sector in a broad range of areas such as, for example, audit, procurement, veterinary science and construction. Sectors where there are skills needs both in the public and private sectors.

I am happy to include possible apprenticeships within the Northern Ireland Assembly as part of this wider engagement with the public sector.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has received Ulster University's audited accounts for 2018/19.

(AQW 9230/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has not received Ulster University's audited Financial Statements for 2018-19. Ulster University has advised that they will be put forward for approval by the University Council in November 2020. Draft Financial Statements were received in December 2019.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 8036/17-22, whether she is aware that the Northern Ireland Economic Advisory Group has a website which is not functioning and which has not been functioning for an extended period of time.

(AQW 9231/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: A website was established for previous iterations of the Economic Advisory Group (EAG). This website was temporarily deactivated earlier this year whilst the new EAG considered its approach.

The Chair of the EAG has since agreed that there is no specific requirement to reactivate the dedicated website. I will make relevant documentation, or recommendations to me as Minister, necessitating wider circulation publicly available through the DfE website.

My officials will archive material from the previous EAG website in due course.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy, following the Executive announcement that those who work from home should work from home, whether all officials and staff members in her Department, who can work from home, are working from home.

(AQW 9237/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: All officials in my Department who can work from home are working from home.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy how many (i) full time; and (ii) part time students are registered in each of the higher education colleges for this academic year, broken down by college.

(AQW 9279/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department receives validated statistics regarding the higher education sector, including those related to enrolments, from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Validated HESA data on enrolments for the 2020/21 academic year is not yet available.

The most up-to-date data available on student enrolments is published on the Department's website at: <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/articles/higher-education-enrolments>

You may wish to contact the higher education institutions directly for information related to the current academic year, although I would caution that any such data is likely only to be preliminary and therefore indicative, and has not been formally validated.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, whether she will allow international students access to the student hardship fund.

(AQW 9280/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled at Northern Ireland Higher Education Institutions who fall within a category (excluding paragraph 9) mentioned in Part 2 Schedule 2 to the Education (Student Support) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2009, as amended, and are facing genuine financial hardship may apply to their Institution's hardship fund for support. Categories of students eligible for support include persons who are settled in the United Kingdom, refugees and their family members, persons with leave to enter or remain and their family members and persons granted section 67 leave, amongst other categories. These payments are provided for through my Department's Support Funds budget.

Separately, Queen's University, Ulster University, Stranmillis University College and the Open University have complementary funds in place to provide hardship payments to students who sit outside these categories, including international students. These payments are provided for from the Institutions' own budgets. St Mary's University College has no international students enrolled.

Given that the provision for hardship payments to international students already exists, I do not intend to amend the eligibility criteria for the Support Funds to include international students.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Economy what measures have been taken to make the application process and access to the Further Education Hardship Fund easier and payments issued in a shorter timeframe.

(AQW 9281/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Hardship Fund is widely promoted throughout further education campuses and online through college websites, digital screens and social media platforms. Students are also advised of the Hardship Fund through the colleges' induction processes.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, a temporary arrangement was put in place to permit the use of electronic applications rather than using a paper based application process for forms and associated evidence.

In accordance with Departmental guidance, colleges should aim to process applications for the Hardship Fund within six weeks. However, payments are usually made within four weeks from application.

Should a student make an application in an emergency situation, payments can be issued in a short timeframe subsequent to supplementary evidence being available. In this situation, payments can be made within 2-3 days.

The Department is keeping all aspects of student financial support including the Hardship Fund under review, in light of ongoing developments with COVID-19.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for the Economy, given the price drop in fossil fuels, (i) whether the appropriate tariff for small/medium biomass boilers is more than 7p/kWh; and (ii) when she will bring forward legislation to enact the change which should have been effective from 1 April 2020.

(AQW 9284/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I am aware of the significant changes in the cost of fossil fuels since the completion of the Cornwall NIRHI Tariff Review and my Department's subsequent consultation earlier this year. The Cornwall recommendations, participants' views and evidence provided via the consultation and analysis of recent fuel price movements are being considered as part of the ongoing work towards closure of the Non-Domestic RHI Scheme, in line with the commitment detailed in the New Decade, New Approach deal. This work is a priority within my Department, and fairness towards those who have participated in the Scheme in good faith, along with value for money for the taxpayer, are key factors. Final decisions on closure will be taken by the Executive.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what objective criteria was used by her Department to increase subsidies to small scale wind turbines and anaerobic digesters in or about 2011.

(AQW 9390/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The decision to increase Northern Ireland Renewable Obligation Certificate (ROC) banding levels for small scale onshore wind from April 2010 was informed by information gathered through a public consultation.

The decision to increase Northern Ireland ROC banding levels for generating stations fuelled by biogas produced from anaerobic digestion from April 2011, was based on information received from a call for evidence and subsequent public

consultation to provide an assessment of changes in technology costs, which was the main criteria used in making such decisions.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for the Economy what plans she has to ensure continuity of services when European Social Fund programmes run out in March.

(AQW 9396/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The European Social Fund Programme provides important support to a large number of individuals who face a range of barriers to employment. Priorities 1 and 2 currently support 66 projects, which are due to conclude in March 2022, while the support under priority 3, which part funds the Department's Apprenticeship NI programme, continues until 2023. A joint project with the Department for Communities has been established to consider the future policy and delivery options in relation to priorities 1 and 2.

A key consideration for any replacement provision will be access to the necessary funding. This is being progressed by the Department of Finance on behalf of the NI Executive.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will initiate action to improve the Health and Safety Executive website to assist staff and the public to report allegations of working practices that are in breach of COVID-19 regulations and guidelines.

(AQW 9414/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: HSENI provides a number of options for the public to report allegations of working practices that are in breach of COVID-19 regulations and guidelines. Such complaints can be made via the online form available on HSENI website, by email or by post. During the COVID-19 pandemic, HSENI experienced high volumes of complaints, many of which were for workplaces enforced by the local authorities, such as retail outlets, bars and hairdressers. In order to address this, recent changes have been made to the relevant section of the HSENI website to provide greater clarity on appropriate enforcement authority for workplaces, and contact details for each local authority have also been added. HSENI also accept complaints via telephone but at busy times they encourage the use of their online reporting options as telephone lines can be busy.

If HSENI receives a complaint regarding a business which falls under another enforcing authority's remit, they endeavour to pass on the complaint in a timely manner where there is sufficient detail to enable them to do so.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 6 November 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what reviews of the Race Relations (NI) Order 1997 have been carried out since the publication of the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025.
(AQW 5173/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): As committed to in the Racial Equality Strategy, the Race Relations Order (NI) 1997 has been reviewed against comparable legislation.

The emerging findings are being analysed and validated to inform policy options to address any identified gaps or weaknesses.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what work has been done to address victimisation on the grounds of age in the provision of goods, facilities and services, in each of the last five years.
(AQW 5551/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Consideration of extending age discrimination legislation to the provision of goods, facilities and services was commenced under the previous Executive. A decision was not made in respect of the scope of that legislation prior to the end of the last Assembly. The issue requires further work to inform the potential scope of any legislation.

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.

The Commissioner for Older People, appointed by the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly, provides assistance to individual older people who need advocacy or legal support. The Commissioner's team also signpost a lot of enquiries to the right agency or organisation that provides the most relevant assistance.

In addition, the Executive Office sponsors the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland which delivers a range of work aiming to improve equality of opportunity for everyone. Their services include giving free and confidential advice and support to individuals with potential complaints under the anti-discrimination legislation. In some circumstances the Commission can take legal action against individuals and organisations.

Mr McNulty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) whether they are aware of any legislation passed by the Assembly in the last ten years which was contrary to domestic or international law; and (ii) whether they would consider, at any time, introducing legislation to the Assembly which would be to contrary to domestic or international law.
(AQW 6471/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: All legislation introduced to, and passed by, the Assembly, must be within its legislative competence as set out in section 6 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether the panel of independent assessors used by the Commissioner for Public Appointments to provide a representative on every public appointment panel reflect an appropriate religious and gender balance.
(AQW 6693/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Commissioner for Public Appointments has provided the following breakdown for her current panel of 29 Independent Assessors:

Breakdown of Independent Assessors by Gender and Community Background*

Gender	Male	10
	Female	19
Community Background	Roman Catholic	13
	Protestant	12
	Neither	4

* This information was gathered anonymously in line with Equality Commission guidance.

Mr Dickson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they will instruct officials to issue advice for civil servants concerned that they are being asked to work on Brexit policy that may break the law.
(AQW 7003/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Guidance already exists for civil servants in respect of circumstances where they consider that they are being asked to act in a way which conflicts with the Northern Ireland Civil Service Code of Ethics, including the requirement to comply with the law and uphold the administration of justice.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail (i) the role of junior Ministers; and (ii) the estimated time requirements for both, in the development of a strategic Programme for Government.
(AQW 7009/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Determination made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister under section 19 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 specifies that the function of the Junior Ministers is to assist the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the exercise of their functions in relation to the Executive Office.

Executive Ministers, including the Junior Ministers, are committed to developing a new, outcomes-based strategic Programme for Government for commencement from April 2020, informed by citizen and stakeholder engagement and co-design. All Ministers will invest significant time on this over coming months.

Mr Chambers asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the level of decision-making powers held by the junior Ministers.
(AQW 7086/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The functions of the Junior Ministers, set out in, and exercised in accordance with, the Determination made under Section 19 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, are subject at all times to the direction and control of the First Minister and deputy First Minister.

Mr Chambers asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the purpose of the junior Ministers.
(AQW 7087/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Determination made by the First Minister and deputy First Minister under section 19 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 specifies that the function of the Junior Ministers is to assist the First Minister and deputy First Minister in the exercise of their functions in relation to the Executive Office.

Mr Beattie asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will bring forward the new Ministerial Code that incorporates changes necessary following Royal Assent for The Executive Committee (Functions) Bill.
(AQW 7101/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Consequential amendments to the Ministerial Code to reflect the changes in the law introduced by the Executive Committee (Functions) Act 2020 will be referred shortly to the Executive Committee for its agreement. The approval of the Assembly will be sought as soon as practicable thereafter.

Ms Bailey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on plans to develop a new Programme for Government through citizen engagement and co-design, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 7305/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive has agreed that an activity based recovery programme is to be developed as the basis for driving economic, health and societal recovery from COVID-19, which will continue for the remainder of 2020/21, and a new, strategic outcomes-based Programme for Government is to be developed for commencement from April 2021, informed by Citizen and Stakeholder engagement and co-design.

Miss Woods asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on plans to strengthen the ability of the parties in opposition to hold the Executive to account, as outlined in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 7487/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The measures set out in paragraphs 3.6 and 3.7 of Annex C of New Decade New Deal relating to the Official Opposition are for the Assembly, and not the Executive Office, to implement.

Mr McNulty asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, further to my question to the deputy First Minister on the Ministerial Statement on the North/South Ministerial Council on Monday 21 September, whether they will publish the legal guidance upon which the deputy First Minister advised that the responsibility for financial support for northern cross-border workers lies with the Irish Government and not with the jurisdiction in which they reside.

(AQW 7605/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Department for Communities has lead responsibility for the Executive's Covid-19 support measures for workers. A number of measures have been introduced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic which are also available to cross-border workers.

Depending on a person's circumstances, financial assistance is available to those impacted by the Covid-19 outbreak through Universal Credit, New Style Jobseekers Allowance, and New Style Employment Support Allowance. Further information can be found at the following - <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-and-benefits>

Officials from the Department for Communities are available to advise and support cross-border workers in signposting them to the benefits available to them.

Ms McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in relation to the commitments to expand Magee campus in New Decade, New Approach and in the Republic of Ireland's Programme for Government, whether they will place on the agenda of the next North South Ministerial Council the development of plans for the expansion of higher education provision in Derry.

(AQW 7763/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: At the Plenary meeting of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in Dublin on 31 July 2020, the Council received an update on New Decade New Approach commitments. It was agreed that further discussion on potential co-ordinated approaches to higher education in the North West will be taken forward bilaterally by the Department for the Economy and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

The Council agreed that an update on implementation of New Decade, New Approach commitments will be brought to the next NSMC Plenary meeting. It is proposed that the next Plenary meeting will take place in December 2020 and we will provide a report to the Assembly following the meeting.

Ms Anderson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the stated intention of the British Government to abandon its commitments in the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, for their assessment on what impact this will have on the functions of the (i) Human Rights Commission; and (ii) Equality Commission as the dedicated mechanism to ensure no diminution of citizens' rights.

(AQW 7767/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The UK Government has stated its commitment to ensuring that the withdrawal of the UK from the EU will not lead to any diminution of rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity in Northern Ireland, as set out in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

This is to be implemented by a "dedicated mechanism", which will provide new oversight powers and resources to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

The European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 gives legal effect to this commitment by amending the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

The UK Government has confirmed that the necessary funding is in place to allow the Equality Commission to carry out its role as part of the "dedicated mechanism". The Commission is now in the process of establishing a new Dedicated Mechanism Unit.

Ms Bailey asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when AQO 629/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 7936/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: A response to AQO 629/17-22 issued on 9 October 2020.

Mr Dickson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the average length of time for answers to Written Questions to be issued.

(AQW 8071/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Between January 2020 and 16 October 2020 the average length of time taken was 34 working days.

Mr Gildernew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the spend on their COVID-19 public awareness campaign (i) to date; and (ii) planned for the rest of 2020.

(AQW 8266/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Total expenditure incurred to 30 September 2020 on the COVID-19 public information campaign is £1,269,319.18. This has included a high profile multi-channel campaign across a wide range of channels including TV, radio, print, outdoor, social and digital media. The campaign is currently ongoing and activity for the rest of 2020 is being developed. This current activity along with future bursts of the campaign will determine spend for the rest of 2020.

Mr O'Dowd asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for a timeframe for the implementation of the New Decade, New Approach commitments on rights, language and identity.

(AQO 634/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: TEO officials continue with preparatory work, to legislate for core elements of the Rights, Language and Identity proposals contained in the New Decade, New Approach, including arrangements to progress the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Amendment No. 1) Bill which provides for the establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression.

We will progress the legislation during 2020/2021, as the operation of the Assembly and available resources permit during the current crisis.

Further details will be provided to Members in due course.

Mr McGlone asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression.

(AQO 631/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: TEO officials continue with preparatory work, to legislate for core elements of the Rights, Language and Identity proposals contained in the New Decade, New Approach, including arrangements to progress the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (Amendment No. 1) Bill which provides for the establishment of the Office of Identity and Cultural Expression.

We will progress the legislation during 2020/2021, as the operation of the Assembly and available resources permit during the current crisis.

Further details will be provided to Members in due course.

Mr Chambers asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the reasons for the withdrawal of the assistance of junior Ministers in bringing COVID-19-related health regulations to the Assembly.

(AQO 745/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: In light of the demanding and significant workload during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Junior Ministers welcomed the opportunity to provide support to the Minister of Health by leading the Assembly scrutiny of the Coronavirus subordinate legislation.

Looking ahead and reflecting the need to address the evolving priorities of the recovery phase, which includes the development of a Programme for Government and implementation of the New Decade New Approach document, it is now appropriate for this role to return to the Department of Health.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the current conservation status of the Knockninny Area of Scientific Interest.

(AQW 6315/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Knockninny Hill ASSI was last surveyed in 2018 for its two terrestrial habitat features, calcareous grassland and mixed ashwoods, when both were assessed as being in unfavourable condition. The site invertebrate assemblage was last surveyed in 2008, when this feature was considered to be in unfavourable condition, and the site vascular plant assemblage feature in 2004, also considered to be unfavourable.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail the current regulatory framework for (i) the management of waste tyres; and (ii) the reuse or recycling of waste tyres.

(AQW 6609/17-22)

Mr Poots: Waste tyres, just like any other type of controlled waste, must be managed in compliance with current waste legislation. The current regulatory framework for the management of controlled waste, including waste tyres, is detailed in the Duty of Care Code of Practice which can be found on the DAERA website at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/duty-care>

All waste facilities accepting waste tyres, including for their reuse or recycling, must hold a relevant waste authorisation. Regular monitoring inspections of authorised sites are carried out by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

The landfilling of waste tyres is prohibited under the Landfill Regulations. Specific guidance on dealing with waste tyres is available at: <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dae/waste-guidance-rps-used-tyres-risks-responsibilities-2016.pdf>

The majority of waste tyres collected in Northern Ireland are therefore exported for recycling or recovery either directly or through Great Britain.

In addition to regular inspections of those sites authorised to manage waste tyres, NIEA Enforcement Branch continues to carry out inspection and awareness raising / educational visits to tyre retailers.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the issue of puppy smuggling and other illegal importation of pets to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 6974/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department undertakes risk based checks on consignments of dogs and other animals entering Northern Ireland at Belfast and Larne ports, working collaboratively with commercial ferry operators and other enforcement agencies in order to prevent illegal movements. There is no evidence or intelligence to suggest there has been any increased illegal importation of pets into Northern Ireland as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what plans he has for improving the regulation of the sale of puppies and kittens, especially when sold on the internet or in pet shops.

(AQW 6975/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have no immediate plans to regulate the sale of puppies and kittens via the internet or from third parties such as pet shops. I am, however, committed to ensuring that Northern Ireland maintains its high animal welfare standards and continues to protect the wellbeing of pet animals. I, therefore, intend to keep this matter under review.

In the meantime, my Department is represented on the Pet Advertising Advisory Group which comprises of representatives from the four UK jurisdictions, animal welfare organisations, trade associations and veterinary bodies and works to ensure that pet animals are advertised for sale legally and ethically. The Department is also proactive in encouraging the public to be mindful when buying a pet.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) when the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) will commence operations in Northern Ireland; and (ii) to detail the work of his Department in preparing for the OEP to be operational in Northern Ireland on 1 January 2021.

(AQW 7065/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) Subject to the approval of the Assembly, the OEP will commence operations in Northern Ireland as close to 1st January 2021 as is practicable although delays to the Environment Bill's progress as a result of the Covid-19 crisis have made that task much more challenging.
- (ii) My officials have worked closely with their Defra counterparts on the development of the Bill provisions and continue to maintain close contact as more detailed arrangements are considered. In preparation for the OEP becoming operational I am preparing to launch a Discussion Document on Environmental Plans, Principles and Governance for Northern Ireland, part of which seeks the views of the public and stakeholder groups on the proposed operational arrangements and functions of the OEP.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) why the report from Stage 1 of the Northern Ireland Fishing and Seafood Development Programme study commissioned by his Department, and due for release in March 2020, has been delayed; and (ii) to detail the expected timeframe for its delivery.

(AQW 7309/17-22)

Mr Poots: The report from Stage 1 of the Fishing and Seafood Development Programme (FSDP) was published on the 26 September and is available on the Departments website.

The issue of this report was delayed due to the need to respond to the impacts of the COVID-19 on the fishing and aquaculture sectors, and prepare for the end of transition. We also wished to provide a response to accompany publication that clarifies the next steps in the process as per the table below.

Next Steps	Completion date
FSDP Stage 2 and final report	January 2021
Assessment of impacts of EU/UK Fisheries Agreement and NI Protocol on NI fishing and seafood sector.	December 2020 to January 2021
Programme Level Business Case for fishery harbour investment	November 2020 to March 2021
Publish response to final FSDP report addressing strategic investment in fisheries.	April 2021

Harbour development is complex and expensive and further business case approvals, from both DAERA and Department of Finance are needed at each stage. Relevant environmental, marine licensing and planning approvals also 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 Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when AQW 6604/17-22 will be answered. (AQW 8096/17-22)

Mr Poots: Please note AQW 6604/17-22 was answered on 05 October 2020.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of how derogations from the EU Nitrates Directive have impacted upon the status of Natura 2000 sites. (AQW 8856/17-22)

Mr Poots: Farms operating under the Nutrients Action Programme (NAP) derogation must adopt specific nutrient management, land spreading restrictions and record-keeping measures, in addition to complying with the NAP measures. Derogation requirements include preparation of annual fertilisation plans and accounts, regular soil analysis and a farm phosphorus balance limit. The purpose is to ensure that operating at the higher grazing livestock manure limit of the derogation does not adversely impact on water quality.

The Test of Likely Significance, as part of the screening procedure under Article 6 of the Habitats Directive, on the previous NAP Regulations for 2014 - 2018 noted potential effects for various Natura 2000 sites. In summary, these were a reduction in diffuse and point source water pollution and an improvement in surface water and groundwater quality. The NAP measures controlling methods of slurry storage and application should also have reduced the potential for ammonia emissions leading to nitrogen deposition and nutrient enrichment of sensitive habitats.

The NAP measures will have had no effect on some Natura 2000 features. For those features which may have been affected by the NAP measures, any impact resulting from implementation of the NAP was likely to be beneficial. Therefore, the findings of the screening report concluded that the measures in the NAP were unlikely to have any significant [detrimental] effects (either alone or in combination with other plans or projects) on Natura 2000 sites.

Farms operating under the NAP derogation are required to comply with all the NAP measures and the additional derogation measures, and this helps to reduce potential detrimental impacts on freshwater Natura 2000 sites.

In relation to potential impacts on terrestrial Natura 2000 sites, farms operating under the NAP derogation are now also required to use Low Emission Slurry Spreading Equipment (LESSE) for any slurry applications after the 15th June of each year. This new condition in the NI derogation for 2019 – 2022 is an ammonia reduction measure and will help to reduce potential impacts of Nitrogen deposition from derogated farms on any surrounding habitats in Natura 2000 sites. Some 420 farms are currently operating under the NAP derogation and the large majority are not in close proximity to Natura 2000 sites.

There has been greater awareness in recent years of the impact of nitrogen deposition on the environment. Therefore we are learning from past experience and the emerging evidence to deliver for a healthy environment, including protection and improvement of Natura 2000 sites, and for sustainable agriculture. An important element of this will be developing a comprehensive approach to ammonia and I intend to publish these proposals for consultation soon.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what work his Department is doing to prevent long delays at border control posts disrupting food supply chains in Northern Ireland. (AQW 9104/17-22)

Mr Poots: Keeping food on our shelves has been recognised as a key issue by the Northern Ireland Executive. Accordingly, DAERA was assigned by the Executive on 1 May 2020 to lead on Food Supply Security.

I remain clear that the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol needs to be implemented in a way that minimises any frictions on the flow of agri-food trade and works for our businesses and consumers. I have reinforced this point to the UK Government, and I

am seeking progress on a number of relevant policy issues which will be essential for the successful design and operation of our Points of Entry.

Following a review, Programme delivery has been assessed as RED, meaning the programme team will not be able to deliver the operational delivery arrangements in full by the end of the Transition Period. Therefore, the team, whilst continuing to work on the full implementation of all requirements, are now engaged in contingency planning to identify what can be achieved during this period.

The following details provide a brief update:

A business case for the work necessary to carry out the required Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) checks at Northern Ireland's Points of Entry has been approved by the Department of Finance and Her Majesty's Treasury. This includes building work, additional staff and IT functions. Funding has been secured for some £43 million, of which £37 million relates to capital expenditure. A further £6 million will also be required for recruiting, training and employing additional personnel and programme implementation costs.

One of the most significant aspects of the programme has been to identify suitable site locations for the Points of Entry facilities. There are key drivers for the site selection, for example, they must be within the Port and Custom boundary, they must fit the needs of the DAERA operating model in terms of size and to be successful, they have to align with the Port's operating model. There has been detailed engagement with port authorities and airports to: (1) assess current site infrastructure; (2) identify any additional infrastructure that is required; and (3) agree in principle suitable site locations for development at each portal facility. After a period of intensive work, specific sites have been identified and the programme team is in negotiations with the ports through Land and Property Services and DSO Commercial to secure the relevant lease agreements.

Proposed facilities will, of course, need to have the relevant planning consents to proceed. Legal advice has been that DAERA should confirm the position with the local planning authorities, therefore applications have been submitted for each of the ports for proposed Certificate of Lawful Use or Development (CLUD) to the relevant Council authorities to confirm that the development falls within permitted development rights.

The programme team have completed the tender process for the design and build phase for the required inspection facilities, in line with the programme procurement strategy, which was agreed with the Department of Finance. The contract award letters for the design and build of proposed inspection facilities at Warrenpoint, Larne and Belfast Harbours issued to the successful contractors on 7 October 2020. Meetings with the successful contractors are now ongoing to agree the delivery timelines for the design and build programme of works.

Work is being finalised with initial ground survey work being undertaken for each of the Seaport sites (Belfast Harbour, Larne Port, Warrenpoint Port and Foyle Port) in order to inform the forthcoming detailed design process.

Over the coming months, to ensure businesses are kept up to date, a communication and engagement plan will be implemented in conjunction with the relevant government departments including Defra and HMRC. This will include a series of stakeholder engagement sessions to guide traders step by step through the journey from GB to Northern Ireland.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in relation to his Department having undertaken work along with Inland Fisheries to trial a new surface on part of the road around the public fishery at Moorlough, Co.Tyrone, (i) for his assessment of that trial; and (ii) given the impact the state of the current road is having on disabled access, when his Department will complete the roll out of the trial surface on the entire route around the lough.

(AQW 9108/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) Resurfacing sections of Moorlough access road using recycled road tar/stones (known as tar shavings) has proved very successful to date.
- (ii) The length of roadway to be repaired is 1.8km and my Department is undertaking the process in stages. The necessary tender documentation to repair the next section of the lane way is being prepared and it is anticipated that this will be completed for the start of the new game angling season in March 2021. The final 500 metres of roadway will be repaired when finance becomes available. However some temporary repairs will be carried out to the most damaged areas this year.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) to detail his Department's current policy for geological disposal in Northern Ireland; (ii) whether his Department responded to the 2018 consultation on geological disposal facilities; and (iii) if so, whether he will lay a copy in the Assembly library.

(AQW 9109/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department continues to support UK Government policy that the siting process for a geological disposal facility (GDF) for radioactive waste is one based on a voluntarism and partnership approach with communities willing to host a GDF. The siting process is being taken forward in England and Wales only. Northern Ireland does not have any higher activity waste and there are no plans to site a GDF here.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs jointly participated in a consultation on the 2018 White Paper Implementing Geological Disposal – Working with Communities, with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on 25th January 2018. The results of this consultation are available at <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/radioactivity>

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs how his Department can help reintroduce thornback rays, which are currently extinct from Belfast Lough.
(AQW 9350/17-22)

Mr Poots: Thornback rays are an Oslo-Paris Convention (OSPAR) threatened and/or declining species and as the UK is a contracting party to OSPAR, the actions of my Department will be guided by the OSPAR recommendation on furthering the protection and conservation of the thornback ray in the OSPAR maritime area. This recommendation includes investigating the inshore distribution of thornback ray and considering whether any of the key areas justify selection and designation as Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).

My Department has included thornback ray on the Northern Ireland Priority Marine Feature (PMF) list, meaning that consideration will be given to designating an MPA for this species. The PMF list includes other shark, skate and ray species but when the initial tranche of Marine Conservation Zones were designated in 2016, there was insufficient evidence on which a designation could be made.

In response to this evidence gap, my Department is collaborating with the Interreg Va Seamonitor project and the Ulster Wildlife Sea Deep project. The data produced by these projects will improve understanding of species abundance and distribution and will be used to identify aggregation sites and critical habitats for pupping and nursery grounds.

My Department will consider any recommendations made by these projects that could further the protection and conservation of thornback rays, and other shark, skate and ray species.

OSPAR also recommends taking measures to address threats to thornback rays and Belfast Lough is already afforded protection through The Inshore Fishing (Prohibition of Fishing and Fishing Methods) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1993 which prohibits the use of any trawl net or any seine net for the capture of sea fish. My Department is developing further fisheries management measures for MPAs in the Northern Ireland inshore region and measures to prohibit bottom trawling will be beneficial for the conservation of thornback rays.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department plans to conduct a survey of marine life in Belfast Lough.
(AQW 9351/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department undertakes a comprehensive monitoring and survey programme of the Northern Ireland marine area, including Belfast Lough, to assess status of chemical and biological indicators and the condition of species and habitats. Assessments are on a six year rolling cycle with an overall classification for each water body given at the end of each cycle.

Monitoring of the condition and biodiversity of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) is also undertaken on a 6 year rolling cycle, with condition assessment reports produced at the end of each reporting cycle. Monitoring of protected species including seabirds and marine mammals also contribute to these assessments.

My Department also makes use of data collected through citizen science initiatives such as those carried out by Seasearch, Ulster Wildlife, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) and the Northern Ireland Seabird Network. Data recorded from these projects is shared with the Centre for Environmental Data and Recording (CEDaR) and therefore available to my Department and other statutory management organisations across the UK and Ireland.

The monitoring that is undertaken in Belfast Lough contributes to the overall UK marine monitoring programme which is currently out to public consultation. The consultation document sets out a comprehensive framework for assessing, monitoring and taking action across our seas to achieve the UK's shared vision for clean, healthy, safe, productive and biologically diverse seas. The consultation closes on 17 November and information on how to respond can be found at the following link. <https://consult.defra.gov.uk/marine/updated-uk-marine-strategy-part-two-marine-monitor/>

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department plans to create marine protection areas within Belfast Lough.
(AQW 9352/17-22)

Mr Poots: There are currently 10 marine protected areas (MPAs) within Belfast Lough, these include:

- North Channel Special Area of Conservation (SAC)
- Outer Belfast Lough Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ)
- East Coast Marine proposed Special Protection Area (pSPA)
- Outer Ards Special Protection Area (SPA)
- Belfast Lough SPA
- Belfast Lough Open Water SPA

- Inner Belfast Lough Area of Special Scientific Interest (ASSI)
- Ballymacormick Point ASSI
- Outer Ards ASSI
- Outer Belfast Lough ASSI

These MPAs have been designated to protect rare, threatened and vulnerable marine habitats and species and contribute to the wider Northern Ireland MPA network. Further information on the designated features can be found at <https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/protected-areas>

An MPA network assessment undertaken in 2018 concluded that the current suite of MPAs in the Northern Ireland inshore region is very close to delivering an ecologically coherent network and my Department currently has no plans to designate additional MPAs within Belfast Lough. This position will be kept under review and my Department will continue to gather evidence that could inform future designations or the addition of designated features to existing MPAs.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether his Department plans to create a sustainable sea angling or fishing policy for Belfast Lough.

(AQW 9353/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department does not currently have any plans to create a specific sea angling or fisheries policy for Belfast Lough. The Fisheries Bill at Westminster, which is due to be enacted shortly, provides the legal framework for the United Kingdom to operate as an independent coastal state after it has left the EU. It sets high level sustainable fisheries objectives that must be met by the UK Fisheries Administrations. The Bill requires the Administrations to develop a Joint Fisheries Statement (JFS) which will set out how the Administrations will meet the eight objectives in the Fisheries Bill. Specifically, the sustainability objective will be underpinned in the JFS which will include fisheries management plans to achieve sustainable stocks in the UK's waters including inshore areas.

Mr Lunn asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the potential markets which will be available to local meat farmers and producers from 1 January 2021.

(AQO 1001/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Great Britain and EU markets, as well as our own Northern Ireland market, will be available to local meat farmers and producers from 1 January 2021. The Northern Ireland Protocol enables Northern Ireland to export to the EU without customs and regulatory checks and the UK Government has legislated for NI goods to have unfettered access to the GB market from 1 January 2021.

The UK Government has also been in negotiations with countries that have a free trade agreement with the EU with the aim of putting in place a continuity agreement that would apply equivalent provisions to the UK. These negotiations have made good progress and it is expected that for a large majority of these countries, a continuity agreement will be in place from 1 January 2021. Trade with other countries will be able to take place on WTO terms as is the case at present.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the state of readiness of our ports as we near the end of the transition period.

(AQO 1003/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am clear that the Northern Ireland Protocol, and the SPS implementation programme need to be realized in a way that minimises frictions on the flow of agri-trade and works for our businesses and consumers. I have reinforced this point to the UK Government, and I am seeking progress on a number of relevant policy issues which will be essential for the successful design and operation of our Points of Entry.

Following a review Programme delivery has been assessed as RED, meaning the programme team will not be able to deliver the operational delivery arrangements in full by the end of the Transition Period on 1 January 2021. Therefore, the programme team, whilst continuing to work on the full implementation of all requirements, are now engaged in contingency planning to identify what can be achieved during this period.

The following details provide a brief update;

A business case for the work necessary to carry out the required SPS checks at Northern Ireland's Points of Entry has been approved by the Department of Finance and Her Majesty's Treasury. This includes building work, additional staff and IT functions. Funding has been secured for some £43 million, of which £37 million relates to capital expenditure. A further £6 million will also be required for recruiting, training and employing additional personnel and programme implementation costs.

One of the most significant aspects of the programme has been to identify suitable site locations for the Points of Entry facilities. There are key drivers for the site selection, for example they must be within the Port and Custom boundary, they must fit the needs of the DAERA operating model in terms of size and to be successful they have to align with the Port's operating model. There has been detailed engagement with port authorities and airports to: (1) assess current site infrastructure; (2) identify any additional infrastructure that is required; and (3) agree in principle suitable site locations for development at each portal facility. After a period of intensive work, specific sites have now been identified and the programme team is in negotiations with the ports through Land and Property Services and DSO Commercial to secure the relevant lease agreements.

Proposed facilities will, of course, need to have the relevant planning consents to proceed. Legal advice has been that DAERA should confirm the position with the local planning authorities, therefore applications have been submitted for each of the ports for proposed Certificate of Lawful Use or Development (CLUD) to the relevant Council authorities to confirm that the development falls within permitted development rights.

The programme team have completed the tender process for the design and build phase for the required inspection facilities, in line with the programme procurement strategy, which was agreed with the Department of Finance. The contract award letters for the design and build of proposed inspection facilities at Warrenpoint, Larne and Belfast harbours were issued to the successful contractors on the 7 October 2020. Meetings with the successful contractors are now ongoing to agree the delivery timelines for the design and build programme of works.

Work is being finalised with initial ground survey work being undertaken for each of the Seaport sites (Belfast Harbour, Larne Port, Warrenpoint Port and Foyle Port) in order to inform the forthcoming detailed design process.

Over the coming months, to ensure businesses are kept up to date, a communication and engagement plan will be implemented in conjunction with the relevant government departments including Defra and HMRC. This will include a series of stakeholder engagement sessions to guide traders step by step through the journey from GB to NI.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether water quality in the Connswater River is meeting the set standard.

(AQO 1004/17-22)

Mr Poots: Routine water quality monitoring is carried out on the Connswater River at the Con O'Neill Bridge. Chemical monitoring is undertaken on a monthly basis and biological monitoring is carried out on a seasonal basis as part of a rolling programme.

The Connswater River is a Heavily Modified Water Body and is designated for flood risk management. This means that NIEA assess its ecological potential rather than its status, taking into account the constraints imposed by the physical alterations.

In the most recent classification, published in 2018 the Connswater River was assessed as having Poor Ecological Potential. The target for the Connswater is to be of Good Ecological Potential but is failing to meet the standards required for invertebrates, aquatic plants and Phosphorus. This assessment of the water quality is unchanged from the assessment made in 2015 but has improved from 2009 when the river was assessed as Bad status.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what work his Department is undertaking to prevent delays to live animals at border controls becoming an animal welfare issue.

(AQO 1005/17-22)

Mr Poots: The welfare of animals is a priority for my Department. DAERA's Veterinary Service Animal Health Group (VSAHG) takes the welfare of animals very seriously and will safeguard animal welfare at points of entry to Northern Ireland now and in the future.

VSAHG's Portal Branch is experienced in the control of animal movements through Northern Ireland's ports and airports. There is a dedicated livestock inspection facility in Larne port which provides a round-the-clock service to ensure that animal health and welfare standards are protected. My staff in Portal Branch monitor the welfare of animals moving through the port as part of their normal duties and take action when non-compliance is detected.

To ensure that inspections at all points of entry can be delivered efficiently and with as little delay as possible, the Department is recruiting additional vets and animal health and welfare inspectors; installing new equipment including electronic tag readers to speed up the animal inspection process; and will clearly communicate process requirements to stakeholders.

Live animal inspections will be prioritised to minimize delays. When increased numbers of live animal movements are anticipated managers will ensure that adequate resource is available to carry out the necessary checks in a timely way.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether he plans to bring forward legislation to eradicate bovine tuberculosis.

(AQO 1006/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am currently considering proposals for a bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) Eradication Strategy for Northern Ireland. Some of the proposals, including those relating to wildlife intervention and finance, will require legislation.

The eradication of bTB remains one of my top priorities and, subject to Executive approval, I intend to move forward with the Strategy as soon as is practicably possible.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she has made any assessment of the impact of working from home on mental health or anxiety-related absences.

(AQW 7967/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): To date no assessment has been made on the impact of working from home on mental health or anxiety-related absences. However, an analysis of the overall levels of sickness absence in the NICS

from April to September 2020 (inclusive) shows that there has been a 31% reduction in the number of sick absence days reported when compared to the same period in 2019. Within the Department for Communities for this same period, there was a reduction of 34% in the number of sick absence days reported.

I recognise the need to provide staff and managers working at home or in the office with the necessary support and advice, particularly during this period of uncertainty and change in the COVID-19 pandemic. NICS HR provides a range of support services for staff which can be found on the dedicated NICS Covid-19 Information Hub: <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/landing-pages/covid-19-guidance-nics-employees>. The Hub can be accessed by staff either through the DfC intranet or the Department of Finance internet, making it widely available to staff whether in the office or at home. This Hub also signposts staff to wider resources and information on how to take care of your mental health and wellbeing, including links to relevant pages on the NI Direct and Public Health Agency sites.

In June 2020, my department issued a short survey to all staff which sought to understand the impact of COVID-19 on our people. A total of 2,463 responses were received, with 84% responding that they felt good, or very good at that time; and 76% of those who responded advised that they would be happy to have home working become a regular part of their future working pattern.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number of intimidation points awards, in each of the last 5 years, broken down by constituency.
(AQW 8012/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has provided the following table which details the numbers of Applicants who have received intimidation points from the Housing Executive in each of the last five years.

The Housing Executive has advised that this data cannot be extracted from the Housing Management System at constituency level and therefore is provided on the basis of Local Council Area. Where there have been less than 10 Applicants awarded intimidation points this has been denoted by <10 to anonymise this data and mitigate the potential risk of identifying individuals and individual households.

Council Area	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council	45	33	24	34	18
Ards & North Down Borough Council	38	42	70	75	54
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council	<10	<10	<10	<10	<10
Belfast City Council	196	150	154	98	61
Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council	<10	14	<10	<10	0
Derry City & Strabane District Council	31	32	40	58	26
Fermanagh & Omagh District Council	0	0	0	<10	<10
Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council	39	70	47	16	24
Mid and East Antrim Borough Council	31	27	<10	72	51
Mid Ulster District Council	11	<10	<10	<10	<10
Newry, Mourne and Down District Council	14	<10	0	<10	<10
Grand Total	414	382	355	374	255

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for Communities what preparations have been made to provide support to people in areas of heightened COVID-19 restrictions.
(AQW 8073/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Since the beginning of the pandemic, my Department has adopted a cross sectoral partnership approach to ensuring support is in place for the most vulnerable. This involves working closely with other Executive Departments and Local Government within the civil contingencies framework and enabling the Voluntary and Community Sector response.

Anyone in need of support, including those within the areas of heightened restrictions, can contact the COVID-19 Community Helpline (Freephone 0808 802 0020, Email: covid19@adviceni.net, Text: ACTION to 81025) which will provide personalised advice and referral to appropriate support depending on an individual's circumstances.

In order to ensure that sustainable grassroots support is in place, my Department has confirmed an additional £1.75m for the COVID Community Support Fund, through Councils to support the Voluntary and Community Sector response to hardship created by the pandemic. We are also working with partner organisations to support and coordinate volunteering, liaising with local councils to tailor support to changing circumstances.

Improving access to food and a sustainable response to food poverty, is at the heart of my Department's response and we have invested almost £800k to support Fareshare to deliver an increased supply of food to community food providers. We have also made a further £750k allocation to Councils for a COVID-19 Access to Food Fund. This will help deliver a more strategic response to the issue, recognising that whilst food is at the forefront of need, support and advice on wider issues is needed to reverse longer term need. This will be factored into the development of the Anti-Poverty Strategy.

It is important that financial support to meet immediate needs is in place to enable the most vulnerable to comply with restrictions. My Department has introduced a new COVID-19 living expenses grant to the Discretionary Support scheme. This grant is available where a person or any member of their immediate family is diagnosed with COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate in accordance with published guidance.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) each current strategy within her departmental remit; (ii) the current status of each strategy; and (iii) the funding allocated for each strategy.
(AQW 8092/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Please see attached table provided by Officials at Annex A which lists each current strategy within my departmental remit, its current status and the funding allocated.

Annex A

Strategy	Status	Background	Funding Allocated
People and Place - A Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal	Currently delivery is through the Neighbourhood Renewal, Areas at Risk and Small Pockets of Deprivations programmes - a Review of the Strategy is ongoing	<p>People and Place - a Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal was launched in 2003 with aim of tackling deprivation and improving opportunities and outcomes for those living in our most deprived (urban) communities.</p> <p>The strategy includes four interlinking Strategic Objectives (or pillars) to tackle the complex, multi-dimensional nature of deprivation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Community Renewal *Economic Renewal *Social Renewal *Physical Renewal <p>Using the Noble Indices of Multiple Deprivation and following consultation 36 Neighbourhood Renewal Areas (NRA) were identified for support across the North; around 1 in 6 (290, 000) of the NI population currently reside within the areas targeted for support. Neighbourhood Renewal Partnerships (NRP) comprising representation from political, statutory, voluntary, community and private sector stakeholders are in place in each NRA. The NRP serves as a vehicle for planning and implementation, and have developed long term visions and action plans designed to improve the quality of life for those living in the area.</p>	<p>People and Place has an annual revenue budget of £18.06m, supporting over 300 projects delivered through the Neighbourhood Renewal, Areas at Risk and Small Pockets of Deprivation programmes.</p> <p>Whilst there is no set capital budget, some capital projects identified as priorities within NRAs are supported as capital monies are made available. Minister has ring-fenced the Neighbourhood Renewal revenue budget until 2021/22.</p>

Strategy	Status	Background	Funding Allocated
'Sport Matters': The NI Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-2019'	Current and ongoing until the process to establish a new 10 year strategy for physical activity and sport is concluded	<p>In 2009 the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure published 'Sport Matters: The NI Strategy for Sport and Physical Recreation 2009-2019' a 10 year Strategy for Sport with a clear Vision that reflected the Government's policy and priorities for sport and with which stakeholders could identify. That Vision is: "...a culture of lifelong enjoyment and success in sport..."</p> <p>To underpin this vision, 'Sport Matters' identified 26 high level targets, set the key strategic priorities and key steps to success for sport and physical recreation from 2009 to 2019.</p> <p>The 'Sport Matters' Strategy remains the key driver for the development and delivery of physical activity and sport for NI and a co-design project is currently underway to establish a new 10 year strategy for physical activity and sport that will build on the successes achieved in partnership with key delivery stakeholders over the past ten years.</p>	<p>Branch Budget - £0.288m p.a. Sport NI Exchequer - £7.654m Sport NI Lottery - £11.681m.</p> <p>*Please note that these figures are based on 2020-21 baselines and will be subject to fluctuation over the 10-year period which can't at this point be quantified.</p>
VCD - Volunteering Strategy for NI	Current and Ongoing. This will continue until a new 3 year strategy (2018 to 2021) is complete	<p>Northern Ireland's first ever Volunteering Strategy was launched in In March 2012. This provided a 5 year policy framework within which Government support for volunteering was structured. The aim was to involve more people in volunteering and help build a better future for the people of Northern Ireland.</p> <p>The process of refreshing the strategy provides an opportunity to recognise the changing environment that we live in, the increasing demands on people's time, the huge technological changes that are continuing at a pace and the need to be more creative in ensuring that volunteering opportunities should adapt and respond accordingly.</p> <p>Three Strategic Goals are:</p> <p>Diverse Inclusivity - Volunteers are representative of the diversity of our community;</p> <p>Meaningful experience - Everyone can enjoy a meaningful volunteering experience;</p> <p>Public Value - Everyone appreciates and values the contributions volunteering makes to people and communities.</p> <p>An Action Plan will be developed to support delivery throughout the life of the strategy.</p>	<p>Funding Allocated under the Volunteering Infrastructure for 20/21 totalled £596K.</p> <p>This was allocated to 6 Volunteer Centres - Craigavon; Omagh; Mid Ulster; Causeway; Limavady and North West and DfC Strategic partner Volunteer Now.</p>
Redevelopment of Armagh Observatory and Planetarium (AOP)	Strategic Outline Case approved and work commenced in preparation for Outline Business Case	This project will consider how best to protect and develop the long-term viability and sustainability of AOP	£190,000
INSPIRE / CONNECT / LEAD: A five-year strategic framework for developing the arts 2019-2024	Approved by ACNI Board.	ACNI is the development and funding agency for the Arts in Northern Ireland.	£15,738,105.50

Strategy	Status	Background	Funding Allocated
The Urban Regeneration and Community Development Policy Framework	The strategy is live.	Published in July 2013, sets out the department's policy objectives for urban regeneration and community development.	Physical Regeneration Component - £22m plus (£2m for Laganside) per year.
Disability employment strategy "Supporting Equality Through Inclusive Employment"	Live. Launched March 2016. Ends March 2021	A new disability employment strategy is in development by the Department, which will align with the Executive level Disability Strategy under the New Decade, New Approach commitments.	The current disability employment strategy had no specific funding allocation, but themes have been delivered upon collaboratively by the Department and Disability Sector.
2011 Fuel Poverty Strategy (Warmer Healthier Homes)	As this Strategy was published 9 years ago we are currently developing a new Fuel Poverty Strategy, and aim to have proposals for Public Consultation by the end of March 2021.	The then Department for Social Development published "Warmer Healthier Homes – A New Fuel Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland" in March 2011. The strategy highlighted 3 main factors which impact on fuel poverty as, income, fuel prices, and energy efficiency of households and proposed methods to ease fuel poverty. Key areas for action were: Targeting of resources, improving energy efficiency, achieving affordable energy, and building strong partnerships. The Department's vision at that time was - "...one of homes that are free from cold and damp, of homes in which people enjoy living; that are healthy and enhance the quality of their occupants' lives. Our vision is of a society in which people live in a warm, comfortable home and need not worry about the effect of the cold on their health." This theme will carry into the new Fuel Poverty Strategy which is currently being developed by the Department.	Various programmes (not just those led by the Department for Communities) mentioned in the Strategy have their own funding arrangements. Funding for the Affordable Warmth Scheme for 2020-21 is £12m and £1m for Boiler Replacement Scheme.
Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Homelessness Strategy: "Ending Homelessness Together" 2017-22	Year 3 of a 5 year Strategy and preparations are being made for the development of a new 5 year Strategy 2022-2027. The Housing Executive has already started preparations for the development of a Homelessness Strategy for 2022-27.	The Northern Ireland Housing Executive has statutory responsibility for responding to homelessness, and published its Homelessness Strategy: "Ending Homelessness Together" 2017-22 in April 2017. It contains five objectives: • To prioritise homelessness prevention; To secure sustainable accommodation and appropriate support solutions for homeless households; To further understand and address the complexities of chronic homelessness across Northern Ireland; To ensure the right mechanisms are in place to oversee and deliver this strategy; and To measure and monitor existing and emerging need to inform the ongoing development of appropriate services In respect of Year 3 (2019/20) of the Homelessness Strategy, the Year 3 Annual Progress Report which outlines progress against the activities and outcomes contained within the Homelessness Strategy has been submitted to the Housing Executive Board with an online conference to launch the report scheduled for Wednesday 4th November.	No specific funding for the development of the Strategy. In 2020/21 the Housing Executive has allocated total funding of £46.6m to homeless services which funds over 3,000 temporary units and a range of services. This figure comprises £27.1m from the Homelessness service element of the Supporting People budget of £72.8m and a further £19.5m from the homelessness services budget (including additional funding for Covid-19).

Strategy	Status	Background	Funding Allocated
Tenant Participation Strategy	The current Tenant Participation Strategy for Northern Ireland is in place from 2017 to 2020.	Within Department for Communities the current Tenant Participation Strategy for Northern Ireland is in place from 2017 to 2020. Therefore this is now under review. The current strategy explores how social landlords and tenants can work together to improve services by giving tenants the opportunity and choice to participate in decisions that affect them. It encourages Housing Associations to increase the effectiveness and involvement of tenant participation. Tenant Participation is the method by which social landlords effectively involve and communicate with tenants and residents with an end goal of improving the delivery of services. Although the Strategy is currently only being developed for 2020, there will be a co-design approach as mentioned above and more information will be detailed on this as soon as it is known.	The funding allocated for each strategy - at this stage funding is limited to staffing resources and the costs of public consultation.
NIHE Inspection Strategy 2019- 2022	The Strategy is currently in year 2.	DfC Housing Inspection Branch (HIB) has a NIHE Inspection Strategy 2019-2022 in place. It is a three year Strategy which contains details of the inspections to be carried out and the DfC HIB approach when undertaking these inspections.	There are no additional costs incurred for this Strategy as it is part of the DfC Core Work
Social Inclusion Strategies: Disability, Gender, Anti-Poverty, Sexual Orientation	In development	The Executive agreed the commencement for the development of the Social Inclusion Strategies on 24 September 2020. Co Design commenced early October with Expert Panel meetings. A timetable for this work has been published and can be found at https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/articles/social-inclusion-strategies Strategies are scheduled for publication and launch by December 2021, subject to Executive approval.	Costs of implementing actions that will be included in each of the strategies cannot be predicted at this stage. As these Strategies are cross cutting it is likely that implementation costs will be incurred by a range of departments.
Active Ageing	Live	The current Active Ageing Strategy 2016-2021 is due to conclude in January 2021. Work on a review of the Strategy has been ongoing. Contributing departments have provided updated and refreshed actions in fulfilment of their commitments within the Strategy. Recommendations have been presented to the Executive in relation to republishing the refreshed Strategy and extending it to May 2022.	No specific funding is allocated to the Active Ageing Strategy, individual departments are responsible for resourcing the actions therein.
Child Poverty	Live	The 2016-19 Child Poverty Strategy expired in March 2019. The Executive extended the Strategy to May 2022. Engagement with key stakeholders will commence to determine the best way forward in relation to dealing with Child Poverty post May 22.	Funding has not been specifically allocated to the Child Poverty Strategy. The costs of implementing the actions associated with the Child Poverty Strategy cut across most departments therefore each department funds its own actions.

Strategy	Status	Background	Funding Allocated
Departmental Strategy	In Development It is anticipated the strategy will be launched in November 2020 (subject to Ministerial approval).	Officials are currently preparing an overarching DfC Five Year Strategy (2020-2025). This will be used internally to set out how we will work across government, with our Arm's Length Bodies and with communities to deliver our common purpose of Supporting People, Building Communities and Shaping Places.	No additional cost has been incurred for the development of the strategy.
Public Appointments Strategy	Live since 2017	It sets out the Department's public appointment principles and strategic priorities, being closely aligned to the vision of the Commissioner for Public Appointments NI and her Code of Practice. It is supported by an underlying Action Plan. The Strategy is due to be reviewed taking on board outcomes from the DoF-led review of ALB Sponsorship and Board Effectiveness	No specific funding has been allocated to it.
The Future Method of Payment (FMoP) Strategy	Prioritising payments to customers during the DWP's response to Covid19 meant that the FMoP Project was effectively paused as staff were redeployed to support front line services. The project has recommenced at a reduced level and will be ramping up steadily over the coming months.	Commercial Services is representing the Department in the implementation of the Future Method of Payment (FMoP) strategy in Northern Ireland. This is a DWP lead strategy and aims to improve the methods used to pay pension and benefits to customers through the introduction of innovative, secure and efficient methods of payment. A key objective of the strategy is to introduce improved payment exception services for pension and benefit customers who rely on the current payment exception services for receiving their payments.	DfC funding was approved for the DfC contribution of £1.56M to the DWP project costs and funding of £0.26M for the DfC FMoP team. The contract costs for exiting the exception payment service and the new Payment Exception Service will be met within the existing baseline budget, as overall savings are expected.
NIHE's Asset Management Strategy and was approved on 26th January 2016.	Although approved by previous Minister its full implementation is currently temporarily suspended, in October 2017, pending the resolution of the NIHE's long term funding.	The NIHE Asset Management Strategy set out that the NIHE would: • Adopt an active asset management approach whereby investment decisions would be based on financial and social performance of properties aimed at ensuring the financial viability of the organisation and its property portfolio; Target major investment in stock with a sustainable, long term life; Investment to the Commonly Adopted Standard; Conduct option appraisals for stock currently performing poorly prior to committing to major investment; Create a longer term investment plan; and Procure contracts commensurate with the long term plan. However due to a reduction in funding the NIHE have temporarily suspended the aspiration to achieve the Commonly Adopted Standard and its strict adherence to focusing investment on the better performing stock. However they have continued with other principles of the strategy.	The Asset Management Strategy was predicated on the delivery of a long term funding solution which has not materialised.

Strategy	Status	Background	Funding Allocated
The Northern Ireland Child Maintenance Compliance and Arrears Strategy	Legislation to support the Strategy went through the NI Assembly on the 1st June 2020. The Strategy is being delivered under a Project which is nearing completion. The Project is currently on track to deliver within the agreed timescales and within budget, and it is anticipated that it will close at the end of this financial year.	The objectives of the Strategy are to: Continue to prioritise resources to benefit children of today <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to encourage parents to collaborate over their child maintenance arrangements where possible, as this is in the best interests of their children • Continue to minimise the amount of unpaid maintenance in the Child Maintenance Service • Further improve compliance through changes to child maintenance calculations for parents with complex income, such as people who are self-employed and/ or company directors • Strengthen collection powers • Address the historic arrears that built up under the 1993 and 2003 schemes • Avoid taxpayers funding activity which will not result in more money going to children 	The additional funding allocated to the Project to deliver the Strategy is £1.08m.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the money returned by her Department to the Department of Finance in each of the last five years.

(AQW 8243/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As the Department for Communities was formed in May 2016, information is only available for the last four years (2016/17 to 2019/20).

Reduced Requirements

Year	Resource (£m)	Capital (£m)
2019-20	75.8	40.8
2018-19	57.1	24.2
2017-18	113.9	2.1
2016-17	60.9	11.2

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities to detail the number and type of new build homes to be delivered in the Belfast East constituency in this financial year.

(AQW 8249/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Within the Belfast East Parliamentary Constituency:

There have been 26 social housing units completed to date in 2020/21. The detail of these units and the relevant housing mix is included in Table 1 below.

There are currently 102 social housing units under construction, which are scheduled to complete in 2020/21. The detail of these units and the relevant housing mix is included in Table 2 below.

There are 143 social housing units programmed to start within the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) Year 2020/21. The detail of these units and the relevant housing mix is included in Table 3 below.

Please note that the figures provided include all Scheme Types. Full details of Scheme Types are available at <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/scheme-types>.

Table 1: Belfast East Parliamentary Constituency social housing units completed to date in 2020/21 (26 Units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Type	Need Group	Completed Year	Housing Mix
Ark	5 Hornby Crescent	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	2020/21	1 x 2 Bed House

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Type	Need Group	Completed Year	Housing Mix
Choice	55 Belle Bashford Court	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	2020/21	1 x 1 Bed Bungalow
Choice	71 Inverary Avenue	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	2020/21	1 x 3 Bed House
Clanmil	5-7 Connsbrook Avenue	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	2020/21	8 x 1 Bed Apartments 13 x 2 Bed Apartments
Connswater	15 Connswater Grove	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	2020/21	1 x 3 Bed House
St Matthews	71 Beechfield Street	Rehabilitation	General Needs	2020/21	1 x 4 Bed House

Table 2: Belfast East Parliamentary Constituency social housing units under construction, scheduled to complete in 2020/21 (102 Units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Type	Need Group	Completion Year	Housing Mix
Alpha	123 Barnetts Road	Competitive Design & Build	CAT1 Elderly	2020/21	14 x 2 Bed Apartments
Choice	Ballybeen Square Phase 2 (T)	New Build	General Needs	2020/21	22 x 2 Bed Houses 4 x 3 Bed Houses
Choice	Ballybeen Square Phase 2 (T)	New Build	Wheelchair	2020/21	1 x 2 Bed Bungalow 1 x 3 Bed Bungalow
Choice	179, 181, 187, 197, 199-203 Beersbridge Road	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	2020/21	9 x 1 Bed Apartments 9 x 2 Bed Apartments
Choice	4a Galway Mews	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	2020/21	1 x 1 Bed Apartment
St Matthews	50 Harper Street	Rehabilitation	General Needs	2020/21	1 x 2 Bed House
St Matthews	22 Beechfield Street	Rehabilitation	General Needs	2020/21	1 x 2 Bed House
South Ulster	Redcar Street	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	2020/21	7 x 1 Bed Apartments 5 x 2 Bed Apartments
Triangle	98 Hollywood Road (formerly East Belfast Competitive Design & Build)	Competitive Design & Build	CAT1 Elderly	2020/21	9 x 1 Bed Apartments 16 x 2 Bed Apartments

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Type	Need Group	Completion Year	Housing Mix
Triangle	98 Holywood Road (formerly East Belfast Competitive Design & Build)	Competitive Design & Build	Wheelchair	2020/21	2 x 1 Bed Apartments

Table 3: Belfast East Parliamentary Constituency social housing units programmed to start in 2020/21 (143 units)

Housing Association	Scheme Name	Type	Need Group	Completion Year	Housing Mix
Ark	1-3 Evelyn Avenue	New Build	General Needs	2021/22	6 x 2 Bed Apartments
Ark	Ravensdale Street	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	2021/22	3 x 1 Bed Apartments 3 x 2 Bed Apartments
Choice	Park Avenue	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	2021/22	3 x 2 Bed Houses 18 x 3 Bed Houses
Choice	Sirocco Works Site (Waterside)	New Build	General Needs	2022/23	16 x 1 Bed Apartments 34 x 2 Bed Apartments 20 x 3 Bed Apartments
Choice	Sirocco Works Site (Waterside)	New Build	Wheelchair	2022/23	3 x 1 Bed Apartments 3 x 2 Bed Apartments 1 x 3 Bed Apartment
Choice	50 Reaville Park	Rehabilitation	Wheelchair	2021/22	1 x 4 Bed Bungalow
Choice	Lewis Square	Competitive Design & Build	General Needs	2021/22	27 x 2 Bed Apartments
Choice	Lewis Square	Competitive Design & Build	Wheelchair	2021/22	2 x 2 Bed Apartments
Connswater	15 Ballygowan Road	Rehabilitation	General Needs	2020/21	1 x 2 Bed House
Connswater	2 Knocknagoney Avenue	Existing Satisfactory Purchase	General Needs	2021/22	1 x 2 Bed House
Connswater	2A Knocknagoney Avenue	Off The Shelf	General Needs	2021/22	1 x 3 Bed House

Programmed schemes can be lost or slip to future programme years for a variety of reasons, for example, relating to delays in acquiring sites and/or failure to secure Planning Permission.

Additional schemes can also be added to the SHDP in-year through the purchase of Existing Satisfactory / Off-the-shelf properties.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 4369/17-22, when a decision will be made on the future of the shops and maisonettes in Knocknagoney Avenue.

(AQW 8251/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The business case recommending the redevelopment of 64-86 Knocknagoney Avenue was approved by the Housing Executive Board at its meeting on the 30th September 2020.

It was received by the Department of Communities on 6th October 2020 and is currently being considered.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities when employees notified that they are being made redundant at the end of the furlough period should make an application for Universal Credit.

(AQW 8326/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is committed to supporting people at this difficult time and my priority has been to ensure that the social security system remains flexible, to relieve hardship and to ensure those people most in need get the help and support they require. This remains the case for those who will be impacted by the end of the furlough scheme.

As Universal Credit is for people on a low income or no income and, subject to meeting the eligibility criteria, a person currently on furlough can apply for Universal Credit. Details on making a claim for Universal Credit including the eligibility criteria can be found at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/you-claim-universal-credit>.

However, for anyone receiving Tax Credits I would advise that they should refer to <https://www.gov.uk/tax-credits-calculator> if they are considering making a claim to Universal Credit.

Prior to making a claim a person can also check the 'entitled to' benefit calculator to get an estimate of how much they may be entitled to. <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/benefits-adviser>

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities how her Department is encouraging Housing Association representatives to attend Supporting Communities Inter-Agency meetings in North Down.

(AQW 8401/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As part of the regulation of Registered Housing Associations (RHAs), my Department requires RHAs to demonstrate that they actively encourage tenant participation and community engagement.

The Department's Regulatory approach assesses whether RHAs comply with Governance, Finance and Consumer Standards. The Consumer Standard focuses on tenants' interests and requires the RHAs to demonstrate evidence that they are participating in a variety of Supporting Community initiatives. This encourages engagement opportunities for tenants and others within the community.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Communities what investment there has been in Neighbourhood Renewal areas in (i) Brownlow; (ii) Lurgan; and (iii) Portadown, broken down by (a) scheme; and (b) region, in each of the last five years.

(AQW 8416/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Annex A details the Neighbourhood Renewal investment made within Brownlow, Lurgan and NW Portadown Neighbourhood Renewal areas. This is broken down to show capital and revenue funding over the last five financial years for these three areas in Upper Bann.

Annex B details investment via the Women Involved in Community Transformation Programme (WICT). To note the information is not held in a year-on-year basis and the amount for January - March 2017 and July - August 2017 cannot be broken down between the 2 areas as the total amount was allocated to the delivery partner to delivery in both areas. Kilwilkee falls in under the Lurgan Area, and Mid Ulster and North Armagh both included Portadown.

The Housing Executive has identified broad areas of investment spend across business areas in response to this query. Unfortunately the level of breakdown requested to specific geographical area is not readily available and it is not possible to confirm how much of the spend listed below was within Neighbourhood Renewal areas. We have provided the relevant summary information for the Council area and where possible, we have provided a further breakdown between Lurgan and Portadown in Annex C.

Annex D details investment that has been provided by my Department for affordable housing in Brownlow, Lurgan and Portadown in each of the last five financial years.

My Department has also provided funding of £130,000 for revitalisation and environmental improvements to William Street, Market Street and Church Walk, Lurgan, all of which lie in the Lurgan Neighbourhood Renewal area. The annual breakdown of funding is £90,000 in 2018 and £40,000 in 2019.

Annex A

Brownlow NRA

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Neighbourhood Renewal Revenue	£423,722.06	£369,241.26	£321,478.87	£302,024.26	£283,557.39
Neighbourhood Renewal Capital	£167,640.00	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£14,943.54
Total	£591,362.06	£369,241.26	£321,478.87	£302,024.26	£298,500.93

Lurgan NRA

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Neighbourhood Renewal Revenue	£432,732.67	£351,932.67	£298,203.24	£276,691.67	£260,856.68
Neighbourhood Renewal Capital	£8,460.80	£319,379.75	£317,459.17	£0.00	£14,943.54
Total	£441,193.47	£671,312.42	£615,662.41	£276,691.67	£275,800.22

NW Portadown NRA

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Neighbourhood Renewal Revenue	£204,340.43	£260,445.95	£316,028.72	£296,623.28	£284,706.01
Neighbourhood Renewal Capital	£558,478.28	£0.00	£0.00	£0.00	£19,923.54
Total	£762,818.71	£260,445.95	£316,028.72	£296,623.28	£304,629.55

Annex B

Date	Scheme	Areas	Investment
30 Jan – 31 March 2017	Women's Early Intervention Programme – 'Early Fresh Start'	Kilwilkee Mid Ulster (included Portadown)	£4730.07
10 July – 31 August 2017	Women's Early Intervention Programme – 'Interim Project'- Conversation with event	Mid Ulster (included Portadown)	£1750.00
8 Sept 2017 - 30 June 2019	Women Involved in Community Transformation Programme (WICT)	Kilwilkee North Armagh (included Portadown)	£36,000 £57,000
1 July 2019 – 31 March 2021	Women Involved in Community Transformation Programme (WICT Extension)	Kilwilkee North Armagh (included Portadown)	£49,500 £16,500
Total			165,480.07

Annex C

Category	Area	2015/16 £k	2016/17 £k	2017/18 £k	2018/19 £k	2019/20 £k
Stock Maintenance	Lurgan and Portadown	7,740	8,297	8,284	7,328	7,026
Stock Improvements	Lurgan and Portadown	64	797	1,483	757	562
Disabled Adaptations to Stock	Lurgan and Portadown	606	441	387	829	607
Affordable Warmth	Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	1,289	2,433	2,035	1,622	1,014
Boiler Replacement	Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	360	182	177	212	134
Private Sector Grants	Armagh Banbridge and Craigavon	1,120	1,304	1,103	1,346	1,565
Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP - New Build)	Lurgan/ Brownlow/ Portadown	2,188	511	618	847	1,109
Total		13,367	13,966	14,087	12,942	12,017

Annex D

NICHA – Housing Association Grant (HAG) Funding

Area	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Brownlow	143,000	0	0	0	295,000
Lurgan	27,000	0	32,000	0	275,000
Portadown	0	0	0	0	0

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities what departmental and arm's-length body spend there has been in the last ten years on recreational provision in (i) Armoy; (ii) Bushmills; (iii) Dervock; (iv) Mosside; and (v) Stranocum.

(AQW 8430/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Since 2010, Sport NI, an arm's length body of the Department, has awarded grant funding totalling £36,277 to sports clubs in the (i) Armoy; (ii) Bushmills; (iii) Dervock; (iv) Mosside; and (v) Stranocum areas. Details are included below: -

Year	Organisation	Grant Amount	Programme	Fund
2010	Causeway Judo Club	£8,501	Sport Matters: Capital and Equipment Programme	Exchequer
2014	Ballymoney Youth Academy	£2,160	Active Awards for Sport	Lottery
2015	Ballymoney Youth Academy	£4,715	Active Awards for Sport	Lottery
2016	Armoy Motorcycle Road Racing Club Ltd	£8,761	Ring Fenced	Exchequer
2017	Glen Rovers GAC	£4,920	Pitch Maintenance Programme	Exchequer
2019	Causeway Coast & Glens Heritage Trust	£3,220	Business Case Investment	Exchequer
2020	Glen Rovers GAC	£2,000	Sports Hardship Fund	Exchequer
2020	Bushmills and District Motorcycle Club	£2,000	Sports Hardship Fund	Exchequer

In addition, I can advise that, between 2016 and 2018, Sport NI also provided the following sports clubs with Defibrillators valued at £700 each, under the Defibrillators for Sport programme:

- Armoy Rugby Football Club
- Ballymoney United Youth Academy
- Sporting Ballymoney Football Club
- Ballymoney Amateur Swimming Club
- Ballymoney Rugby Football Club
- North Antrim Rifle & Pistol Club
- Dunluce Outdoor Bowling Club
- Bushmills and District Motorcycle Club
- Dunaghy Football Club

The Department for Communities provided funding of £350,000 in 2016/17 for the development of a 3G pitch at the Joey Dunlop Leisure Centre in Ballymoney. Prior to that the Department for Culture, Arts and Leisure provided funding of £1,494,000 for the development of the sport and leisure facilities at Rugby Avenue, Coleraine. Individuals, clubs and communities from the areas in question, will have benefited from the significant recreational provision offered at both these venues.

Further details of funding awarded to sports clubs prior to the establishment of the Department for Communities in May 2016 can be accessed through the Government Funding Database at the following link <https://govfundingpublic.nics.gov.uk/Search.aspx>

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities to detail the Housing Executive maintenance schemes scheduled in Lagan Valley.

(AQW 8552/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has provided the following tables which outline the current planned maintenance programme for its stock in Lagan Valley for this year and next year.

Only one of this year's schemes has already started on site: Glenmore Walk (Roofing). Given continuing uncertainty on the impact of the Covid pandemic on the delivery of construction works it is not possible to provide exact start dates for the other schemes at present.

2020/21

Project No	Scheme	Work Stream	Dwgs
19871000	Glenmore Walk (Roofing)	Roofing	18
19781004	Knockmore	External Cyclic Maintenance	191
19781006	Ballymacoss	External Cyclic Maintenance	285
19661034	Lisburn Emergency 2020/21	Heating Installations	100
19661027	Lisburn (HEAT)	Heating Installations	122
26661084	South & East 2004 (GVS) Phase 3	Heating Installations	10
19661015	Lisburn Antrim Street (15 Year Old)	Heating Installations	316
17661003	Dromore Heating Replacement	Heating Installations	49
19711004	Ballymacash/Beechwood	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire	58
19711005	Rathvarna	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire	117
19781043	Lisburn Fence Painting	Fence Painting	1900
19841002	Gregg House/ Killaney Avenue	Multi Element Improvement	3

2021/22

Project No	Scheme	Work Stream	###Dwgs
19780168	Old Warren 2	External Cyclic Maintenance	192
19781021	Milltown	External Cyclic Maintenance	156
19781022	Rushmore/Knockburn	External Cyclic Maintenance	124
19781031	Hilden & Low Road	External Cyclic Maintenance	180
19661023	Lisburn Mop Up 1	Heating Installations	145
19661024	Lisburn Mop Up 2	Heating Installations	189
19710372	Knockmore/Ballinderry	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire	189
19701045	Greenwood/Moira	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire	46
19701046	Milltown Avenue	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire	82
17700211	Dromore	Bathroom Kitchen Rewire	45
14781011	Dromore Roofs	Replacement Roofs	32
19781026	Old Warren	Double Glazing scheme	169
14781012	South Area Double-glazing (Dromore)	Double Glazing scheme	21

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities why £1.1 million allocated to the Individuals Emergency Resiliency Fund in July, has not yet been released.

(AQW 8572/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The £1.1m Individuals Emergency Resilience Programme (IERP) builds upon the £575,000 Artists Emergency Programme which has provided support to 224 individuals. IERP attracted applications from a wide range of creatives and, like the first programme, was heavily oversubscribed. IERP funding has been increased by £3m and awards have announced this week.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities how she will support self-employed professional musicians from the COVID-19 £29 million package for the Arts Sector during the period of the ban on live performances.

(AQW 8594/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Music plays a very significant role in our arts and culture and in our social lives and I recognise the significant impact that current restrictions are having on those who make their living through live music performance.

On 24 September the Executive announced an allocation of £29m in response to my bid. This will provide a significant boost to our culture, language, heritage and arts sectors, including music, and will support them in the short term and provide additional support for the future.

On 19 October I made the first allocation from that package with a £3m allocation to the Individual Emergency Resilience Fund, administered on my department's behalf by the Arts Council. This will allow vital assistance to be provided to over 1,000 freelancers, musicians, actors, artists and craft workers from across the creative economy.

My officials are working in close collaboration across central and local government, as well as with arm's length bodies and sectoral representatives to develop further programmes which will be funded through the remaining £26m. These programmes will be aimed at addressing need across the range of the arts, language, culture and heritage sectors, including those working in music. Work is well advanced and I expect to be able to make further announcements before the end of the month.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the impact of the Health Protection Regulations and restrictions on the local music industry; and whether she has bid, or intends to bid, for financial resources to assist those who are adversely affected.

(AQW 8602/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have consistently made clear the value I place on the arts and culture, including the music industry. Through my engagement with representatives from across the local music industry I am acutely aware of the very significant impact the current restrictions are having on those who make their living through music.

I bid to the Executive for funding to provide support across the broad arts, language, culture and heritage sectors, including the music sector, and have welcomed the £29m that was allocated on 24 September.

I am determined that this financial support should be on the ground as quickly as possible and on 19 October was pleased to announce that the first £3m of this funding would be allocated immediately to the Individual Emergency Resilience Fund, administered on my department's behalf by the Arts Council. This will allow vital assistance to be provided to over 1,000 freelancers, musicians, actors, artists and craft workers from across the creative economy.

My officials are working in close collaboration across central and local government, as well as with arm's length bodies and sectoral representatives to develop further programmes which will be funded through the remaining £26m. These will be aimed at addressing need across the range of the arts, language, culture and heritage sectors. Work on those programmes is well advanced and I expect to be able to make further announcements before the end of the month.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Communities to detail the total cost to the public purse of (i) the Casement Park redevelopment project; (ii) the redevelopment of Windsor Park; and (iii) the redevelopment of Ravenhill.

(AQW 8633/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In March 2011, the Executive allocated a budget of £110 million, capital grant funding, to deliver the three projects within the Regional Stadia Programme.

- Windsor Park was completed and opened to the public in October 2016 at a cost of £31million public funding
- Ravenhill was completed and opened to the public in May 2014 at a cost of £16.5million public funding
- Casement Park is not yet complete so the total cost is not finalised.

To date the public funding released on Casement Park is £10,669,110

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the funding support package for the arts sector.

(AQW 8639/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 24 September the Executive agreed a £29m funding package to provide support across our culture, language, heritage and arts sectors.

On 19 October I made the first allocation from that package with £3m being directed to the Individual Emergency Resilience Fund, administered on my department's behalf by the Arts Council. This will allow immediate offers of assistance to be provided to over 1,000 people working in a wide range of roles across the creative and arts economy.

My officials are working in close collaboration across central and local government, as well as with arm's length bodies and sectoral representatives to develop further programmes which will be funded through the remaining £26m. Work is well advanced and I expect to make further announcements before the end of the October.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities (i) what his Department is doing to address the increasing high street vacancy rates; (ii) what discussions he is having with councils; and (iii) whether he will bring forward a vacancy strategy.

(AQW 8813/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) My Department continues to provide significant support to town centres through our ongoing programme of physical regeneration interventions which have been in place for many years. These include Public Realm and Environmental Improvement schemes and the Revitalisation programme which has received additional funds to provide targeted support to traders in the current Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to my Department's work to help address the increasing high street vacancy rates, the Department of Finance has confirmed that, for this financial year, to help minimise the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on our business sector and to help reduce the number of empty properties, the Executive has provided an unprecedented £300M plus in rates support packages for businesses here in the form of a 12 months rates holiday.
- (ii) My Department engages with councils on a continual basis in relation to physical regeneration schemes and this is particularly evident in the approach taken to deliver the current Covid-19 Revitalisation programme.
- (iii) Vacancies in town centres and any strategy to address them cuts across many Departments and it is likely that this will be an issue considered by the Executive Office led High Streets Task Force.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities what assessment has been made of the current levels of welfare support impact on people's mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic; and whether she plans to provide a Christmas top-up payment to welfare claimants.

(AQW 8911/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department's priority has been to ensure that social security benefits are delivered to people in need. This has included managing a significant increase in new claims to Universal Credit and the delivery of the new COVID-19 living expenses grant for people who find themselves in a crisis situation.

I have asked officials to keep options under review.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on removing historical debt from the Housing Executive.

(AQW 8985/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am committed to delivering on the pledge made in New Decade New Approach to examine options to remove the historic debt and am pursuing this.

My officials are working with Department of Finance officials to explore a range of options for the removal of this debt and to understand the best way forward.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Communities why a motorsport event at Kirkistown Race Circuit on Saturday 17 October 2020, which was closed to the public, had to be cancelled.

(AQW 9056/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Under the latest Health Regulations events, other than those involving elite athletes or sports teams, involving more than 15 participants for a common purpose are not permitted.

The event at Kirkistown on 17 October was not an elite event and had more than 15 participants, including drivers, club members and officials present. The event was therefore not permitted under Schedule 2 paragraph 5 (c) and (d) of the regulations.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities to detail the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's policy for viewing and moving homes due to the impact of COVID-19.

(AQW 9072/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive continues to work with its contractors and prospective tenants to re-let its homes as quickly as possible while at all times adhering to the Health Protection Coronavirus Restrictions and government guidance. Its aim is to ensure that applicants on the waiting list, particularly households who are statutory homeless, can commence their new tenancies and move into their new home as soon as possible. The primary consideration within these arrangements is to continue to minimise any potential risk to customers, staff and contractors.

Measures have been put in place to enable housing assessment and allocation processes to be completed online or over the telephone.

Housing Executive policy is that viewings should be facilitated as normal, whenever possible, during the Coronavirus emergency. Staff have been asked to exercise due care when organising and facilitating viewings and to adhere strictly to the applicable Public Health Agency (PHA) guidance and any local risk assessments. Where accompanied viewings are not possible, guidance has been issued to local offices allowing the discretion to find alternate solutions to ensure that customers are given an opportunity to view the property e.g. virtual viewings, opening dwellings at a pre-arranged time or providing keys to allow the customer access.

The Housing Executive's policy is that PHA guidance is followed at all times e.g. avoiding unnecessary contacts, adhering to social distancing guidelines and through the use of PPE where relevant.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the total funding allocated to COVID-19 measures by her Department; and (ii) the spend to date, broken down by measure.

(AQW 9092/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The table below details DfC 2020/21 COVID-19 Allocations and Spend-to-Date.

DfC 2020/21 COVID-19 Allocations and Spend-to-Date (£000's)

	COVID-19 Allocations	Amount Allocated £ ('000)	Spend-to-Date £ ('000)
	Resource		
1	COVID 19 - Discretionary Support Scheme	5,000	1,900
2	COVID 19 - Supporting People Scheme	8,400	4,600
3	COVID 19 - Homelessness Scheme	7,039	4,100
4	COVID 19 - Grants to Local Councils	60,300	20,300
5	COVID 19 - Shielding Package for Clinically High Risk	10,000	8,700
6	COVID 19 - Community Support Fund	6,500	3,750
7	COVID 19 – Charitable Grants	15,500	8,800
8	COVID 19 – Benefit Delivery Response	5,000	2,000
9	COVID 19 – Culture Resilience Fund	4,000	4,000
10	COVID19 – Sport Hardship Fund	2,000	2,000
11	COVID19 – NIHE Supporting People PPE	1,100	220
12	COVID19 – Community, Voluntary and Social Enterprise Sector PPE	2,500	0
13	COVID19 – Social Enterprise support	7,000	5,000
14	COVID19 – Culture Recovery	29,000	3,000
	Total	163,339	

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Communities, following the Executive announcement that those who work from home should work from home, whether all officials and staff members in her Department, who can work from home, are working from home.

(AQW 9125/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In line with Executive guidance all staff within my department that can work from home, are working from home.

Additional measures have been put in place within offices in line with PHA guidance to ensure the safety of staff working in offices.

DfC remains committed to delivering essential services to the most vulnerable in our society and our staff have demonstrated tremendous resilience throughout this pandemic in their continued commitment to provide this necessary support to the people who need it.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Communities (i) whether the Sports Ground Safety Authority, who provide stadium design advice throughout the UK and Internationally, has been consulted and followed; and (ii) whether their Guide to Safety at Sports Grounds Green Guide has been adopted in the design of the Casement Park stadium.

(AQW 9150/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Safety Technical Group (STG) is a multi-agency body, funded by my Department to provide specialist advice to the Regional Stadia Programme, on matters of sports ground safety for the stadia projects at Kingspan Stadium, Windsor Park and Casement Park. The Sports Ground Safety Authority (SGSA) is an expert body on safety at sports grounds and an Arms Length Body of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

One of the recommendations of the 2015 Project Assessment Review (PAR) on the Regional Stadia Programme, resulted in the appointment of the SGSA as independent advisors to the Safety Technical Group in March 2016. This was welcomed by my Department.

The Sports Ground Safety Authority (SGSA), has been fully engaged in the re-design process for the Casement Park project and their advice has been followed by the UCGAA and their Integrated Consultant Team (ICT) throughout the process. The stadium design fully complies with the guidance within the SGSA Guide to Safety at Sports Grounds (Green Guide) 5th Edition.

In November 2018, my Department endorsed the SGSA Guide to Safety at Sports Grounds, 6th Edition and recommended its use by all bodies involved in the safety of sports grounds.

I can assure you that there will be no compromise on public safety at the Casement Park Stadium and it will not be opened without a valid, fully compliant Safety Certificate provided by Belfast City Council as the certifying body.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities for his assessment of the support available to people at risk of losing their homes as a result of being unable to pay their mortgage.

(AQW 9171/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I would refer the member to my previous response to AQW 7907/17-22 which he tabled on 15 October 2020.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Communities whether she has any plans to bring forward a bill devolving more powers to local councils, similar to the Localism Act 2011.

(AQW 9176/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The most important aspect of the delivery of public services is to ensure these effectively meet the needs of citizens. The experience of recent months shows how essential it is for all of the public sector to work together in partnership with the community in delivering these services and the maintenance and deepening of these partnerships is vital. I have no immediate plans to bring forward a bill relating to these issues.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for Communities when she will introduce a Test and Trace Support Payment, as is in place in England.

(AQW 9177/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 25 March Minister Hargey responded swiftly to the pandemic by introducing a non-repayable Discretionary Support COVID-19 living expenses grant where a person or a member of their immediate family is diagnosed with COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate in accordance with guidance published by the Public Health Agency.

There is no limit on the number of Discretionary Support COVID-19 awards a person may receive as long as they meet the eligibility criteria. The amount payable is based on each applicant's individual circumstances and will include a specific amount for all dependent children in the household.

As we continue to respond to the impacts of the pandemic I will keep this under review.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities what support is available for DJ's whose livelihood is impacted by COVID-19.

(AQW 9192/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Arts Council NI has delivered Covid-19 related funding through two programmes for individuals to which DJ's were eligible to apply.

The Artists Emergency Programme (AEP): Grant offers were made in May and June 2020.

The Individuals Emergency Resilience Programme (IERP): Grant offers were made in October 2020.

A further funding programme of support for individuals will become available shortly and DJ's will again be eligible.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the disability sport opportunities available in each constituency.

(AQW 9195/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The details on sporting opportunities for those with a disability are not held on a constituency basis by the Department. However, I can confirm my commitment to seeing greater inclusion and participation in sport and physical activity through the opening up new opportunities and by providing support for Governing Bodies, clubs and Councils.

The Department, through SportNI, provides funding to Disability SportNI who provide a range of services and opportunities across sport for those with a disability. This year Disability SportNI will receive circa £565k funding to run its participation programmes and specifically under the Sport NI 'Sporting Clubs -Sporting Winners' Programme to support Boccia, Snowsport, Wheelchair Basketball and Athlete Awards activities.

In addition, my Department has provided funding for this financial year of £414k as part of a new four year funding cycle for Special Olympics Ulster, who provide fantastic sporting opportunities for people with learning disability.

In recent years as part of the delivery of the Active Living No Limits Disability Action Plan the Department has provided in excess of £1.7m. This investment has equipped 11 new disability hubs and installed pool pods in every District Council area. It has provided the funding to open up access to forests and trails by enabling Disability Sport NI to purchase adapted battery powered quads and trikes for the first 'All Out Trekking' Facility at Gosford Forest Park.

The funding has also delivered improved access to beaches as well as providing adapted boats for specialist Water Sports Hubs for the disabled at Carrickfergus, Craigavon Lakes, Lough Erne and the Foyle.

Other initiatives include Everybody Active 2020 Lottery Programmes which have been delivered throughout the various Council areas, work with Governing Bodies such as the IFA, GAA and Ulster Rugby to expand their provision as well as club development programmes for sports such as Boccia. Funding has also been secured to assist with the growth in wheelchair sports such as basketball and power chair football.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister for Communities whether subsistence payments provided under the National Referral Mechanism for victims of Human Trafficking identified in Northern Ireland is not considered as unearned income in relation to the operation of Universal Credit.

(AQW 9201/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The National Referral Mechanism (NRM) is a framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support. Individuals who are recognised as a potential victim of modern slavery through the NRM have access to specialist tailored support, which may include access to advice, accommodation, protection and independent emotional and practical help. Individuals here will receive support for at least 45 days while their case is considered by the Single Competent Authority in the Home Office, and Subsistence Payments under NRM are £65 per week.

Under Universal Credit rules such payments do not fall within the prescribed categories of unearned income, and are therefore disregarded when calculating entitlement to Universal Credit.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities (i) what discussions has she had with the officers of (a) Belfast City Council; and (b) Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council regarding a financial support package to attract shoppers into the cities during the Christmas season; and (ii) to confirm the awarded level of support.

(AQW 9205/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Throughout the development and delivery of the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme my officials have been working closely with their council counterparts to develop a Revitalisation Plan for each council area. These plans set out how the council will use their allocation from the programme to support town and cities as they recover from the impact of COVID-19.

Belfast City Council and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council have both included Seasonal Marketing and Lighting schemes in their Revitalisation Plans to encourage shoppers to their cities during the festive period. The amount of funding allocated to these types of schemes is a matter for each council to determine.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities to detail her COVID-19 exit strategy for each of the functional areas of responsibility within her Department.

(AQW 9206/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department and the wider Executive continue to respond to the ongoing public health emergency and doing so is at the top of my agenda across all of my functional responsibilities.

My plans for recovery will be led by medical and scientific evidence, as well as international best practice.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities when she will bring forward her strategic and costed plan to bring Northern Ireland Housing Executive homes up to an appropriate energy conservation standard.

(AQW 9207/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive currently seeks to upgrade the energy efficiency of its stock through a number of measures including modern heating systems, insulation, double glazing and – where special funding has been available – the installation of cladding and solar panels. They also comply with the relevant Building Regulations requirements regarding thermal performance whenever undertaking renovation works. Nonetheless the thermal performance of its stock is low compared to the other housing sectors, with almost two-thirds of the stock at SAP Band D.

Should any new standard be introduced it is thought likely that this would be much higher due to the necessity to respond to the climate change challenge. Meeting such a higher standard would have considerable financial implications for the Housing Executive given that they continue to project a significant shortfall in the funding required to achieve and maintain modern housing standards for its stock.

The Housing Executive is currently developing a new Energy Strategy for its stock and in the course of doing so have prepared some initial estimates of the cost of achieving the higher SAP bands; these range from £394 million for low SAP C to £1.7 billion for low SAP A. The Energy Strategy is currently in the early stages and given the current climate they are working in it is not possible to state when this will be finalised.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister for Communities whether she intends to introduce a test and trace support payment.

(AQW 9209/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 25 March Minister Hargey responded swiftly to the pandemic by introducing a non-repayable Discretionary Support COVID-19 living expenses grant where a person or a member of their immediate family is diagnosed with COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate in accordance with guidance published by the Public Health Agency.

There is no limit on the number of Discretionary Support COVID19 awards a person may receive as long as they meet the eligibility criteria. The amount payable is based on each applicant's individual circumstances and will include a specific amount for all dependent children in the household.

As we continue to respond to the impacts of the pandemic I will keep this under review.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities for an update on her legislative programme for the remainder of the current Assembly mandate.

(AQW 9217/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In addition to the Pension Schemes Bill 2020, which is currently at Committee Stage, I am also progressing the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill, which will reach its second stage on 3 November 2020.

My officials are progressing other potential legislative proposals, in line with my Department's New Decade New Approach and Programme for Government Commitments. Introduction of any new Bills to the Assembly will require Executive approval.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 8241/17-22, to detail (i) how many Housing Executive homes in the Foyle constituency are estimated to have inadequate or inefficient cavity wall insulation; (ii) whether a programme is underway to provide an accurate figure for the number of homes affected; and (iii) when all affected homes will be improved to ensure they have cavity wall insulation that is of modern standard and effective.

(AQW 9233/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín:

- (i) The Housing Executive's data is not comprehensive on the construction of all of its properties; however, it is estimated that some 4,100 cavity wall constructed properties in Foyle.
- (ii) The Housing Executive is currently undertaking an analysis of its stock in order to determine as accurately as possible the construction types of all of its stock. Such an exercise could only properly be done through a 100% on-site survey but this is not possible at this time.
- (iii) It is not currently possible to state a timescale within which all likely affected homes will be addressed. a cavity wall insulation programme is only one of a number of competing investment priorities that will have to be assessed through our review of our Asset Management Strategy and

Investment Plan. The Housing Executive is currently preparing an Action Plan to address the findings and recommendations of the BBA's report and this will be issued for consultation in the coming months.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities to detail the training that front line Universal Credit workers undergo; and how often it is refreshed.

(AQW 9269/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is committed to providing a supportive and informative service. Those delivering Universal Credit undergo a comprehensive programme of learning and development designed to equip them with the tools, skills and behaviours required to provide a high quality, responsive service to all, including the vulnerable and those with complex needs.

Following 5-weeks of classroom based training for Work Coaches and 3-weeks classroom based training for Case Managers, staff undergo a number of weeks' consolidation to assure their understanding and level of knowledge.

Each of the Jobs & Benefits office's Work Coach teams are also supported by a Work Psychologist to improve their capability to better support people with a health condition or disability.

In addition to training, those delivering the Universal Credit service have access to an electronic database of guidance, Desk aids and Spotlights on specific topics.

Universal Credit training is reviewed on an ongoing basis to ensure it is refreshed or updated to align with any changes to policy and/or processes.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities what discussions she has had with the Department for Work and Pensions on extending the £1,000 Universal Credit standard allowance uplift beyond March 2021.

(AQW 9270/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: As part of my Department's strategy of supporting people affected by Covid-19 and the dramatic effect it is having on the economy and peoples' employment, the standard allowance of Universal Credit (and working tax credit) has been increased for this financial year by £1,040 per year (£20 a week). This is in addition to the annual uprating of 1.7%.

This means that for a single Universal Credit claimant aged 25 or over, the standard allowance will increase from £317.82 to £409.89 per month. This is the first increase in benefit entitlement in 5 years.

I continue to keep this matter and other developments across Universal Credit under review.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of the number of people who have the housing benefit element of Universal Credit paid directly to their landlord, in each year from 2017.

(AQW 9271/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The member can find detailed official statistics on Universal Credit, including information on housing payments publically available on my Department's website at:

<https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/universal-credit-statistics-may-2020>

The Universal Credit statistics supplementary tables 3a to 3d contain information related to housing within households and a breakdown between social and rented sector.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities how many DJs have received COVID-19-related funding from the Arts Council of Northern Ireland through (i) the Individuals Emergency Resilience Programme; (ii) the Artists Emergency Programme; or (iii) another fund.

(AQW 9316/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Arts Council has delivered Covid-19-related funding through two programmes for individuals.

The Artists Emergency Programme (AEP): Grant offers were made in May and June 2020. Specific occupation details were not recorded separately and the number of applicants citing DJ as their occupation is not available.

Individuals Emergency Resilience Programme (IERP): Grant offers were made in October 2020. Twenty eight individuals cited "DJ" in their applications to IERP. Twenty of those have received offers of funding.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department has adopted the same approach as the Department for Work and Pensions to determine whether or not someone claiming Employment and Support Allowance can be exempt from re-assessment.

(AQW 9319/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department for Work and Pensions introduced the ESA Severe Conditions exemption criteria on 29th September 2017. The Department for Communities also introduced the ESA Severe Conditions exemption criteria on this date.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail all funding provided to the sports sector by her Department, in each of the last 3 years, broken down by fund.

(AQW 9320/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The table below shows the funding provided by my Department to the sports sector in each of the last 3 years, broken down by fund.

The figures do not include funding provided by arms-length bodies of the Department.

Fund	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20
Sports Branch resource grants	nil	£65,605	£119,000
Sports Branch capital grants	nil	£114,780	£500,096
Regional Stadia Programme	£1,200,000	£423,415	£392,192
Access and Inclusion Programme	nil	nil	£170,874
Small Capital Grants Programme	nil	£342,641	£375,948
Sport - A Home for Lifelong Volunteering	£125,532	£125,659	£175,362
Neighbourhood Renewal - Resource	£119,087	£97,858	£77,562
Neighbourhood Renewal – Capital	£6,047	£497,771	£404,285
Neighbourhood Renewal capital contribution to TEO Social Investment Fund	nil	nil	£200,000
Regional Shared Sports Facilities	nil	£387,661	£288,743

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the Inner North Belfast Masterplan development; and whether she will consider vesting land that is impacting on the redevelopment of this area.

(AQW 9321/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I have recently agreed that my Department bring the Inner North West northern cluster of sites forward for development through a joint Development Brief with Belfast City Council (the 'northern cluster' contains three sites: Kent Street, Library Street, both owned by the Department, and Little Donegall Street, owned by Belfast City Council). I am strongly of the view that the appropriate development in this area has to be housing-led. A joint Development Brief with Belfast City Council, issued exclusively to a number of Housing Associations, will help to realise the regeneration benefits of the sites and help to meet housing need in the area.

I have instructed officials to expedite this process to ensure development of these sites at the earliest opportunity. It is planned that the process will begin by the end of November 2020. This will initially involve seeking Expressions of Interest from Housing Associations followed by the issue of the Development Brief by the end of January 2021 to those housing associations who respond to the Expression of Interest call.

I have also recently instructed officials from my Department to explore the identification of sites within the Carrick Hill area for potential acquisition with a view to helping address social housing demand in this area. My Department has powers to acquire land by agreement or by vesting as necessary; acquisition by agreement is always preferable over compulsory acquisition via a vesting order.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities, in order to assist with the costs associated with renewal of their pilots licence, bringing Northern Ireland in line with the support that is available in the rest of the UK via the Low Value Provision fund, whether she will consider an extension of financial support options available to unemployed pilots in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 9343/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department for Communities currently operates a scheme called the Adviser Discretion Fund, the objective of which is to provide resources of up to £300 to eligible persons for the purchase of goods or services in order to remove a barrier to employment. The scheme may also be used as a measure to support those who are required to complete a short training course in order to progress into work. I can confirm that the scheme has recently provided assistance to pilots towards the costs of the Licence Proficiency Check and has also assisted with costs associated with medicals required for a licence renewal.

As part of the Department for Communities labour market response to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent recession, a review of the Adviser Discretion Fund is underway and will include giving consideration to the current funding limits and flexibilities in terms of support which can be provided.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for Communities how many DJs have applied to the artists emergency fund; and how many were successful.

(AQW 9361/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Arts Council NI has delivered Covid-19-related funding through two programmes for individuals.

The Artists Emergency Programme (AEP): Grant offers were made in May and June 2020. Specific occupation details were not recorded separately and the number of applicants citing DJ as their occupation is not available.

Emergency Resilience Programme (IERP): Grant offers were made in October 2020. Twenty eight individuals cited "DJ" in their applications to IERP. Twenty of those have received offers of funding.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities whether she will review the way a resident can apply for a National Insurance number in Northern Ireland and move to an online application process as per other regions in the UK.

(AQW 9373/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is currently working with the Department for Work & Pensions on a digital solution to support the process of applying for National Insurance Number.

An online application is currently being tested in two offices in Britain and is initially available to a limited number of applicants per day. The trial will continue for a number of months and, if successful, will expand incrementally to include additional geographical areas. The digital solution is expected to be in place here during 2021.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the number of DJs who have availed of financial support in relation to the impact of COVID-19; and (ii) the total amount of support claimed by these applicants.

(AQW 9377/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Arts Council has delivered through two programmes for individuals.

The Artists Emergency Programme (AEP): Grant offers were made in May and June 2020. Specific occupation details were not recorded separately and the number of applicants citing DJ as their occupation is not available.

Individuals Emergency Resilience Programme (IERP): Grant offers were made in October 2020. Twenty eight individuals cited "DJ" in their applications to IERP. Twenty of those have received offers of funding with awards totalling £64,800.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities whether he will be bringing a financial support package for local councils following the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 9381/17-22)

Ms Hargey: This question is within my remit as Minister for Communities.

On 19 May 2020, £20.3m was allocated to Department for Communities to support local councils which have delivered vital services during the Covid-19 crisis. This was for the period mid-March 2020 to 30 June 2020 and was allocated and paid to councils in June 2020 as set out in Annex 1.

On 24 September a further £40m to local councils for the period 1 July 2020 to 31 March 2021, to assist them with their financial pressures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My Department is carrying out an analysis of the figures provided by each council reflecting their projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs for the period July 2020 to September 2020 and updated estimates / actual spend for the period mid-March 2020 to June 2020.

Once my Department has carried out a due diligence exercise on the

information provided by councils, the figures will be signed off by individual Council Chief Executives. Final consultation with Association of Local Government Finance Officers and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives will also take place.

This will provide a basis for allocation that will be consistent with the original bid for support as approved by the Executive. Allocations of funding will be confirmed once the due diligence exercise has been completed.

My Department also activated the Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance (SEFA) - COVID-19 for the period 3 April 2020 to 3 October 2020 to reimburse councils with other costs due to the Covid-19 crisis. For the period 3 April 2020 to 3 July 2020 claims totalling £74,329.20 have been paid out to councils. Allocations are set out in Annex 2.

Councils have also received funding from my Department of £3.25m for a COVID-19 Community Support Fund through the existing Community Support Programme. The allocations to each council are shown in Annex 3.

My Department is investing £10m in the Capital COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Scheme which will be used in larger towns and city centres.

The funding will be allocated to councils in two tranches to deliver measures that will help provide a safe environment for visitors, shoppers and workers within town and city centres. This may include measures such as shop frontage and awnings/canopies; outdoor furniture, heaters queueing systems; PA/Tannoy and digital screens, and other signage. Allocations for tranche 1 are shown in Annex 4.

Annex 1

COVID-19 Quarter 1 Allocations

Council	Covid-19 Q1 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

Annex 2**SEFA – COVID-19 Quarter 1 Allocations**

Council	SEFA Q1 Allocation
Antrim & Newtownabbey	£4,812.63
Ards & North Down	£3,464.48
Armagh, Banbridge Craigavon	£6,037.00
Belfast	£4,892.39
Causeway Coast & Glens	£13,434.45
Derry & Strabane	£16,104.34
Fermanagh & Omagh	£3,004.77
Lisburn & Castlereagh	£6,581.69
Mid & East Antrim	£5,646.06
Mid Ulster	£6,795.84
Newry Mourne & Down	£3,555.55
Total	£74,329.20

Annex 3**COVID-19 Community Support Fund Allocations**

Council	First Allocation	Second Allocation
Antrim & Newtownabbey	£69,450.00	£95,531.46
Ards & North Down	£65,550.00	£103,106.19
Armagh, Banbridge Craigavon	£133,800.00	£149,259.30
Belfast	£485,700.00	£485,700.00
Causeway Coast & Glens	£80,700.00	£126,226.54
Derry & Strabane	£280,950.00	£280,950.00
Fermanagh & Omagh	£67,950.00	£95,238.46
Lisburn & Castlereagh	£82,500.00	£82,500.00
Mid & East Antrim	£71,850.00	£103,528.69
Mid Ulster	£63,300.00	£85,548.08
Newry Mourne & Down	£98,250.00	£143,674.86
Total	£1,500,000.00	£1,751,263.59

Annex 4**COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Scheme Allocations**

Council	Tranche 1 Allocation
Antrim & Newtownabbey	£215,000
Ards & North Down	£504,000
Armagh, Banbridge Craigavon	£545,000
Belfast	£1,336,000
Causeway Coast & Glens	£340,000
Derry & Strabane	£455,000
Fermanagh & Omagh	£221,000
Lisburn & Castlereagh	£210,000

Council	Tranche 1 Allocation
Mid & East Antrim	£350,000
Mid Ulster	£281,000
Newry Mourne & Down	£433,000
Total	£4,890,000

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Communities what financial support is available for employees forced to isolate by their employer even though they have no symptoms.

(AQW 9392/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department is committed to supporting people at this difficult time and a series of changes have been put in place to ensure that the social security system is more flexible, to relieve hardship and to ensure people most in need get the help and support they require.

Depending on a person's terms and conditions of employment they may be eligible for Statutory Sick Pay which is paid by employers to employees who are incapable of work due to sickness. It is paid at a flat rate of £95.85 for up to 28 weeks.

Statutory Sick Pay was amended in response to the coronavirus pandemic to ensure that those who have been advised, by a relevant notification, that they have had contact with a person who has symptoms of coronavirus or has been infected by coronavirus, that they should stay at home and self-isolate as a result, is deemed to be incapable of work, and therefore entitled to Statutory Sick Pay.

Anyone who sees their income reduced, is on a low income or unemployed may be able to claim Universal Credit where eligible. Details on making a claim for Universal Credit, including the eligibility criteria, can be found at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/you-claim-universal-credit.

Immediate financial support is available for anyone struggling financially through the Universal Credit Contingency Fund in the form of a non-repayable grant and Discretionary Support. To help alleviate the financial difficulties people face during the current COVID-19 crisis the Department has also introduced a new living expenses grant payment within its Discretionary Support Scheme to help people who find themselves in a crisis situation. The COVID-19 payment is available where the claimant or any member of their immediate family is diagnosed with COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate in accordance with guidance published by the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being.

Details can be found at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/extra-financial-support.

New claim advances are also available if a claimant needs financial support. These advances allow claimants to receive up to 100% of their estimated Universal Credit payment upfront. This can be done through the claimant's online account. A new claim advance is in the form of a repayable loan which is repaid over a period of 12 months. Additionally, the Department offers deferrals of advance repayments by up to 3 months in exceptional circumstances.

This applies to all claimants, including those who are required to self-isolate.

For anyone receiving Tax Credits, the Department would advise that they should refer to www.gov.uk/tax-credits-calculator if they are considering making a claim to Universal Credit.

If a person satisfies the National Insurance Contributions (NICs) criteria, they may also be able to apply for New Style Jobseeker's Allowance. An online application form for people making a claim can be found at

www.nics.intranet.nigov.net/communities/documents/uc-jsa1-jobseekers-allowance-claim-form-new-style-jsa.

A person considering making a claim for benefit can access the 'entitled to' benefit calculator to get an estimate of how much benefits including Universal Credit and Tax Credits they may be entitled to at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/benefits-adviser.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the progress of Local Development Plans.

(AQO 1014/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Department for Infrastructure has policy and legislative responsibility for Planning and so the primary central government lead for LDPs sits with DfI.

The 2011 Planning Act requires a council to prepare, and keep under review, a timetable for the preparation and adoption of the local development plan. It is a statutory requirement that a council's LDP must be prepared in accordance with the timetable.

The 11 district councils in Northern Ireland are all currently progressing their individual Local Development Plans (LDP).

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.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for Communities to outline any engagement with Ulster GAA regarding additional monies required for Casement Park.

(AQO 1015/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I welcome the recent announcement from my colleague, the Minister for Infrastructure, of her intention to approve the Casement Park planning application, with a number of Planning Conditions.

We are working closely with our Ulster Council GAA partners to develop their draft Full Business Case. My departmental officials, in conjunction with Department of Finance officials, are currently completing a review of the latest version of the documents. The project cost estimates within the business case identifies a funding gap that has arisen as a result of construction inflation and the necessary redesign of the stadium.

The cost estimate within the draft Full Business Case may be subject to change, depending on the timing of the conclusion of all matters associated with the Planning Application. My Department will continue to engage with our Ulster Council GAA partners throughout this process to work through the next steps of project delivery.

Discussions regarding the apportionment of any potential increased project costs, are ongoing between my Department and UCGAA.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Communities, in relation to labour market interventions, whether she intends to introduce a new departmental employability policy.

(AQO 1016/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Employability policy in the North is shared between Departments for Communities and Economy

Department for Communities focuses on getting people into work by assisting them find work, improving their motivation, confidence and ability to present themselves to employers as well as providing support to address short-term financial issues such as getting a short training course or a suit for an interview.

Work Coaches are the gateway to provision by providing advice, guidance, referral and signposting to provision.

Department for Economy focuses on the skills a person needs to do their job through developing vocational skills as well as helping people assess their long term work goals through the Careers Service.

My department's policy is that employability can only be properly addressed through collaboration between departments, councils, employers, the local voluntary and community sector and others. This approach forms the basis of the Employability NI programme officials are currently developing.

Our focus on Employability policy has shifted due to COVID-19 from focusing on economic inactivity to dealing with the economic shock caused by the pandemic but the underpinning approach, utilising collaborative solutions, remains the same.

Officials are developing a range of new provision, including JobStart, to address the immediate labour market impact of the pandemic. I expect development of further provision will be required as the conditions continue to change.

JobStart will provide funding for employers to create 6 month job opportunities for young people aged 16 -24 with additional support for those with disabilities, looking after children or returning citizens.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Communities to outline the types of work that will be covered by the maintenance contracts to be awarded by the Housing Executive over the next twelve months.

(AQO 1019/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that over the next 12 months it is looking to award contracts to cover the following work streams:

- External Wall Insulation
- Replacement of Bathrooms, Kitchens, Wiring, Doors & Window
- External Cyclical Maintenance
- Major Adaptations
- Multi Element Improvements
- Roofing

As regards the Carbon Neutral agenda, some of these procurements – for example, the External Wall Insulation contract - will enhance the energy efficiency of a portion of the Housing Executive's stock. However, in order to move to a position where sufficient reductions could be made in carbon emissions to contribute to the 2050 Carbon Zero target, the stock's thermal performance would have to be markedly improved. This would require significant investment beyond that which is currently projected to be available to the Housing Executive given its current funding regime.

Mr Frew asked the Minister for Communities which venues in North Antrim were used in October 2020 for Personal Independence Payment and Employment Support Allowance appeals.

(AQO 1020/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There were no venues in North Antrim used during October 2020 for Personal Independence Payment and Employment Support Allowance appeals.

The Appeals Service is undertaking a series of risk assessments for venues that have indicated that they can facilitate oral hearings whilst complying with the current government guidance on social distancing. Risk assessments will be carried out at Ballymena Business Centre and Coleraine Causeway Enterprise.

Cleaver House in Belfast has been assessed as being suitable for face to face oral hearings and has been used since 19 October for face to face hearings.

Due to the current COVID 19 situation the Department amended guidance to allow appellants to have the option of having their case heard by way of Telephony. Similarly an option of having their case heard using Video Link facilities is has also been made available.

Oral hearings using the telephony and video technology commenced on 28 September 2020.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the provision of a Test and Trace Support Payment for Northern Ireland.

(AQO 1021/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 25 March Minister Hargey responded swiftly to the pandemic by introducing a non-repayable Discretionary Support COVID-19 living expenses grant where a person or a member of their immediate family is diagnosed with COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate in accordance with guidance published by the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being. This grant is unique to the North and was made available nearly 8 months ahead of the other devolved administrations.

I have considered the detail of the self-isolation grant in England, Scotland and Wales and am content that a further package of financial support for people on a low income who have to self-isolate is not required at this time. The financial support we are providing here will not end in January unlike the support provided by the Self-Isolation Support Grant in England, Scotland and Wales.

In addition, unlike the fixed Test and Trace Support Payment, a Discretionary Support COVID-19 living expenses grant award will include a specific amount for any dependent children in the household and can be made for periods of more than 14 days regardless of circumstances. This means that it is possible for individual awards to exceed £500, making this a more supportive intervention for the lowest paid workers than the Self-Isolation Support Grant.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Communities what schemes are available to support places of worship subject to criminal behaviour.

(AQO 1022/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: While my Department is not responsible for crime and justice issues, I share the member's concerns on this issue.

My Department has policy interest in faith communities from a community development perspective and to that end we provide funding support for a Community Faith Forum.

The Forum provides a platform for engagement between the faith sector and officials from across Executive departments.

As a result my Department has previously received correspondence on this issue, which has been shared with The Department of Justice for further consideration, as well as with the Executive Office, which is the lead department for Good Relations and the implementation of the Race Equality Strategy.

We have also facilitated discussions between the Forum and the Department of Justice, most recently in December twenty nineteen, when attacks on places of worship was discussed.

A further engagement between the Department of Justice and the Faith Forum is planned for December.

Any future scheme to support places of worship subject to criminal behaviour will be a matter for Department of Justice.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Communities how much money the GAA is being asked to contribute towards the cost of a new Casement Park stadium.

(AQO 1017/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I welcome the recent announcement from my colleague, the Minister for Infrastructure, of her intention to approve the Casement Park planning application, with a number of Planning Conditions.

We are working closely with our Ulster Council GAA partners to develop draft Full Business Case. My departmental officials, in conjunction with Department of Finance officials, are currently completing a review of the latest version of the documents. The project cost estimates within the business case identifies a funding gap that has arisen as a result of construction inflation and the necessary redesign of the stadium.

The cost estimate within the draft Full Business Case may be subject to change, depending on the timing of the conclusion of all matters associated with the Planning Application. My Department will continue to engage with our Ulster Council GAA partners throughout this process to work through the next steps of project delivery.

Discussions regarding the apportionment of any potential increased project costs, are ongoing between my Department and UCGAA.

Department of Education

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Education to detail the timescale for teachers who have not received risk assessments.
(AQW 8407/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): The Education Authority have produced a series of risk assessment templates which have been designed to support schools in designing solutions to enable the safe restoration of teaching, learning and pastoral care in schools.

School Principals have been advised that Risk Assessments should be completed on an individual school basis, taking into account their own specific school settings and circumstances. They are also advised that these Risk Assessments are to form the basis of their own individual School Risk Assessment and should be personalised and distinctive to each individual school. The timescale for the completion of risk assessments would be for individual schools.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Education what action he will take to help primary school children from disadvantaged communities access free school transport to alleviate financial pressures and in circumstances where there is no public transport to avail of.
(AQW 8511/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has a statutory duty to provide transport assistance to all pupils who meet the eligibility criteria as detailed in DE Circular 1996/41. At primary level, the Education Authority has a duty to provide transport assistance to pupils if they live more than two miles away from their school, based on the shortest walkable route, and have been unsuccessful in applying for a place in all schools of the same category within two miles of their home. The responsibility for a child's journey to and from school lies with each child's parents unless the criteria for home to school transport provision are met.

The home to school transport policy is in place to facilitate the attendance of pupils at school and it does so by ensuring that each child either lives within the statutory walking distance of at least one school in their chosen school category or is eligible for home to school transport assistance. The statutory walking distance for primary aged pupils is two miles. This means all pupils will be able to access at least one school in their chosen category of school irrespective of the level of financial pressure a family may be under.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Education to detail the number of children who are home schooled in each of the last five years, broken down by constituency.
(AQW 8515/17-22)

Mr Weir: Elective Home Education (EHE) is the term used to describe the practice by which parents decide to educate their children outside of the school system. This is different to tuition provided by the EA to a child who is unwell or who attends alternative group arrangements provided by the EA. Please note that the following figures are for EHE and that the EA have provided these figures by Borough Council areas as they do not hold this information by constituency office.

	2019/2020		2018/2019	
	Primary	Post Primary	Primary	Post Primary
Antrim and Newtownabbey	14	26	16	20
Ards and North Down	16	35	15	28
Armagh, Banbridge & Craigavon	23	49	16	44
Belfast	23	26	22	25
Causeway Coast & Glens	13	20	11	21
Derry and Strabane	8	26	12	20
Fermanagh and Omagh	14	45	14	44
Lisburn and Castlereagh	7	16	5	19
Mid and East Antrim	18	30	13	31
Mid Ulster	9	17	11	13
Newry Mourne and Down	8	26	11	28
Totals	153	316	146	293

Broken down figures for 2015/16, 2016/17 and 2017/18 are unavailable. The totals are:

2015/16	266
2016/17	293
2017/18	349

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Education to detail his plans for the childcare sector in respect of protecting other jobs in the economy after the end of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to guarantee continuity of employment without a government safety net.

(AQW 8597/17-22)

Mr Weir: To date, no funding has been allocated to my Department for the childcare sector post August 2020.

My officials continue to work with sector representatives in considering what support, is required by the childcare sector going forward. In doing so, my department will take into consideration other government support schemes potentially available to the sector, including the recently announced Job Support Scheme (JSS) from 1 November and the ongoing Self-Employment Income Support Scheme.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education (i) whether students wishing to repeat exams due to cancellations in May 2020 will have the fees waived; and (ii) whether students who had paid to repeat exams in the May 2020 session will have those payments honored, and be permitted to sit those repeat exams in May 2021.

(AQW 8952/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment is currently considering the issue of examination fee charges and will prepare an options paper for submission to my Department for consideration. Specific details relating to whether or not fees will be waived or honoured can be finalised following my consideration of this paper and its recommendations.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education whether he is considering the use of libraries for remote learning for pupils who do not have access to either a tablet, laptop or wifi.

(AQW 9048/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have introduced a scheme to provide IT devices and WIFI access to our educationally disadvantaged and vulnerable learners. Over 8,500 devices have been distributed to date and 8300 WIFI vouchers have been purchased to provide disadvantaged children with free internet access.

I understand that libraries are currently open and are providing a 'Book and Collect' service and access to IT facilities. Computers have been organised in order to facilitate social distancing. I know many children and young people will use these facilities.

My Department has asked schools to have contingency plans in place to provide remote learning in the event of a school closure, or where a class or large group of pupils need to self-isolate. In circumstances where pupils are self-isolating, they will not be able to access facilities outside their home.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Education (i) how many pupils in the Upper Bann area have been deregistered from school since recommencement in September; and (ii) the reasons for deregistering.

(AQW 9077/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has advised that in the Upper Bann Constituency 92 pupils were recorded by schools as leavers between 1 September 2020 and 28 October 2020. Of these, 56 pupils left primary schools and 36 pupils left post-primary schools.

The reasons for deregistering were recorded by schools as follows:

Reason	Total
Another School	53
Elective Home Education	5
Further Education	2
Employment	2
Not Known	30

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education how specific needs of deaf children have been catered for by his Department over the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically, (i) whether subtitles have been provided for social media videos

created to explain COVID-19-related changes by his Department and other education bodies; (ii) whether specialist teachers, who support deaf children, will be available to them even over periods of lockdown should more lockdowns be necessary; (iii) whether country-wide cleaning protocols are in place to enable radio aids to go home and return to school daily; (iv) whether risk assessments, associated with using PPE, take into account the presence of a deaf child in the class or group; and (v) whether his Department or the Education Authority has a catch-up plan to mitigate against the delays there have been in diagnosing and proving early intervention strategies during lockdown.

(AQW 9163/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) Any videos produced internally by EATV and used on EA social media channels now include subtitles as standard practice. Upon request, EA social media videos can be supplied in alternative formats and a transcript can also be provided. DE aims to provide easily accessible and user friendly information on its social media channels highlighting key issues, including those relating to COVID-19, through the use of graphics and Ministerial videos. Subtitles are used where possible.
- (ii) Specialist teachers of the Deaf continued to provide support for deaf children and young people during the Covid-19 pandemic, while taking into account public health guidance, keeping staff, families and pupils safe. The EA are currently constrained as to the number of school visits which can be completed due to varying Covid 19 visitor protocols within schools. Risk assessments are in place to enable continued face to face support, where it is safe and appropriate to do so. Sensory Service staff are also working flexibly to provide a blend of face to face support, online teaching and online coaching support for parents.

My priority is for the continuation of face-to-face teaching as the best form of educational provision whilst providing a safe and welcoming environment for children and staff.

- (iii) Handling of specialist equipment and hygiene guidance is available at: <https://www.eani.org.uk/services/pupil-support-services/sensory-service>.

All deaf children and young people are able to take radio aids home. Where appropriate, school staff will be provided with a supply of radio aid lanyards for individual teachers. In post primary schools, a young person's radio aid needs to be shared with a large number of teachers. As far as possible, the EA will supply post primary schools with Roger Touchscreen.

- (iv) Guidance has been provided to schools on considering the needs of the deaf child in the classroom when face coverings are worn and the reasonable adjustments which should be taken. In addition, Teachers of the Deaf are available to provide specific advice for individual pupils on mitigating against the communication challenges caused by the wearing of face coverings.
- (v) Early diagnosis of permanent childhood deafness has been disrupted, however, Teachers of the Deaf have continued to work with colleagues in Health Trusts via remote technology to ensure that this important link is maintained. Teachers of the Deaf have been able to continue with assessments which inform Audiology, ENT and the Auditory Implant Centre on the amplification needs of the child.

The EA Sensory Service uses an Eligibility Framework to assess needs of children and young people and to guide support provided. This is a working document which is reviewed at least annually. It is anticipated that for some children, this document will be used more frequently and levels of support adjusted to allow for targeted, more intensive support.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education (i) when his Department first received the business case from the Education Authority for the new C2k contract and when it will be passing the business case to the Department of Finance; (ii) why the issuing of a new contract for the replacement of the current C2k services to schools has been delayed from 31 March 2017 to, potentially, 31 March 2023; (iii) how he has assured himself that the extensions of the existing contract provides better value for public money than the issuing of a new contract; (iv) how extensions to the existing contract will enable our children to benefit from the latest cutting edge infrastructure, hardware and software to prepare them for the 21st century better than the issuing of a new contract in 2017 or, at the latest, 2019; (v) to detail the money spent on the C2K contract in every year since its introduction; (vi) the anticipated spend on extending the contract; and (vii) the cost of implementing other IT solutions for schools to replace the C2K contract.

(AQW 9164/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The replacement service for C2k is the Education Technology Service (ETS). The first ETS OBC was issued to the Department in August 2019. Feedback was provided and there have been a number of subsequent versions with the most recent version being submitted to the Department in October 2020. The Department has now submitted the latest version to the Department of Finance for their consideration..
- (ii) The current C2k contract can be extended until March 2022 as per the current procurement advice. I am advised that the Education Authority (EA) will seek to begin procurement of replacement services in 2021, subject to business case approval. Time has been taken to ensure that the business case meets the needs of schools moving forward into the next decade, and also that it takes account of lessons learned as a result of the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic.

- (iii) The existing contract needs to remain in place until an alternative solution is procured and implemented. Value for money is the overriding consideration being assessed in the business case approval process, both for the existing contract and the replacement.
- (iv) The Internet connectivity infrastructure which is just one element of the existing service provision, is being transitioned across on to the Northern Ireland Public Sector Shared Network contract. This will result in an increase in bandwidth across the schools' estate.
- A business case supporting the provision of hardware for Primary schools has been through the approvals process and EA colleagues are currently preparing a business case for a refresh of teacher laptops. Funding has also been provided to the EA to continue to improve the services available, including a number of learning applications.
- (v) Public disclosure of the expenditure to date would be commercially prejudicial to the EA as this information could provide a supplier with valuable insight and context for any forthcoming procurement.
- (vi) Public disclosure of the anticipated spend on extending the contract is subject to the approvals process and as such could be commercially prejudicial at this time.
- (vii) The costs of implementing other IT solutions for schools to replace the C2K contract are included as options in the ETS OBC which is currently going through the approvals process, and are therefore commercially sensitive.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to detail the updated guidance for teaching staff who are deemed clinically vulnerable and are advised not to be present in school settings currently.

(AQW 9252/17-22)

Mr Weir: An updated version of the 'Coronavirus (COVID-19): Guidance for schools and educational settings in Northern Ireland' was published on 29 September 2020. Page 52 of this guidance provides detail on clinically vulnerable staff outlining that:

- Clinically vulnerable individuals who are at higher risk of severe illness have been advised to take extra care in observing social distancing and should work from home where possible. This includes pregnant women. Principals/line managers should endeavour to support this, where possible, for example by asking staff to support remote education, carry out lesson planning or other roles which can be done from home.
- If clinically vulnerable individuals cannot work from home they should take extra care in the work place observing social distancing, staying 2 metres away from others wherever possible, although the individual may choose to take on a role that does not allow for this distance if they prefer to do so. If they have to spend time within 2 metres of other people, Principals/line managers should undertake a risk assessment with the individual to assess and control measures to reduce risk. The employee can be accompanied by a trade union representative or colleague to discuss individual risk assessments. They should, if necessary, be offered the safest available onsite roles.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education why a number of children are waiting nearly two years for special needs literacy support; and how he intends to resolve the problem.

(AQW 9287/17-22)

Mr Weir: Referrals continued to be received for an Education Authority (EA) Psychology Service assessment during the period of school closure however due to Covid 19 restrictions face to face interventions with pupils were suspended from March to September this year.

EA staff are now back in schools providing direct intervention where possible, however, service capacity to deliver intervention in schools and schools ability to facilitate access for visitors is reduced at this time. The combination of these circumstances has had an unavoidable impact on waiting times for intervention as a result.

I have established a SEN Governance Group to provide strategic oversight of the EA's SEN Strategic Development Programme which incorporates a review of Pupil Support Services including the Literacy Service.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the number of schools; and (ii) percentage of schools that have their full complement of Board of Governors in (a) the Controlled sector; (b) the Maintained sector; (c) the Integrated sector; (d) Irish medium sector; and (e) Voluntary Grammar sector.

(AQW 9288/17-22)

Mr Weir: Depending on the school sector, Boards of Governors can be made up of representatives from the Department of Education (DE), the Education Authority, parent and teacher representatives and Foundation representatives. My Department holds information in respect of DE governors only and is therefore unable to detail the percentage of schools that have their full complement of Governors in any sector.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education what financial support his Department will offer external tutors of subjects such as music, who are paid via EA payroll and who cannot therefore access the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme and who are unable to continue their work in schools due to COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 9296/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Education Authority has advised school principals to honour any working engagements in place for external tutors. This will allow associated payments to continue for these individuals for the period of their engagement.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education whether he will (i) provide clarity on guidance issued under Circular 2020/10 on 2 November 2020 in relation to physical education in schools; (ii) review the number of children permitted to take part in physical education classes in schools; and (iii) ensure any guidance also makes recommendations in relation to changing facilities and showers in post-primary schools.

(AQW 9460/17-22)

Mr Weir: The circular issued by my Department on 2 November set out the legal requirements of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations introduced by the Department of Health. The Regulations prohibit organisation, operation or participation in an indoor or outdoor sporting event, with a legal exemption of an outdoor sporting if there is no contact between participations and the gathering consists of no more than 15 persons. It was essential to advise schools of the legal position in regard to PE. I had no flexibility in regard to the numbers specified by the Health legislation.

On 3 November, I secured a legal amendment to the Regulations to permit schools and other education settings to deliver indoor and outdoor PE, without a cap of 15 participants. New guidance was issued to schools. This included guidance on the use of changing rooms and a number of suggested risk mitigations for the delivery of PE.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Education to detail the enrolment for Bangor Central Integrated Primary School, broken down by local council ward.

(AQW 9542/17-22)

Mr Weir: The most recent validated data relates to the 2019/20 School Census exercise. The Department is currently in the process of collecting and verifying School Census information. Finalised figures will be available in February 2021.

Wards resided in by pupils enrolled in Bangor Central Integrated Primary School – 2019/20

Ward Name	Number of pupils resident in ward
Ballycrochan	6
Ballydugan	*
Ballygrainey	80
Ballyholme	12
Ballymagee	9
Bloomfield	44
Broadway	36
Bryansburn	13
Carrowdore	*
Carrowreagh	*
Castle	111
Clandeboye	30
Donaghadee	*
Glen	*
Groomsport	6
Harbour	81
Helen's Bay	*
Kilcooley	26
Loughries	*
Movilla	*
Rathgael	50
Rathmore	*
Silverbirch	19
Silverstream	34

Ward Name	Number of pupils resident in ward
Warren	5
Total	576

Source: NI school census

** denotes figure less than 5 suppressed to avoid identification of individual pupils

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Education, given that over 200 pupils and over 25 staff were off school in St Bridget's College, Derry, during September and October, how he will ensure that these pupils will have equity with others when sitting GCSE/A-level exams.

(AQW 9552/17-22)

Mr Weir: On 9 October, after consultation with stakeholders, I announced changes to the delivery of GCSE, AS and A level qualifications in 2020/21. I wrote to all school leaders, parents and young people to provide clarity on these changes. CCEA have also now issued detailed advice on the adaptations to all specifications.

These measures to reduce the burden of assessment take account of previous and future disruption for all schools in Northern Ireland.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education what specific advice his Department has sought and received from the Public Health Agency and the Health and Safety Executive regarding post-primary test day arrangements for the upcoming Post-Primary Transfer Consortium.

(AQW 9580/17-22)

Mr Weir: The conduct of the tests, including any specific health and safety arrangements in relation to the tests, are the responsibility of the test providers and host schools rather than my Department.

I do however consider the health and safety of pupils taking the tests to be of paramount importance and I have written to both test providers asking to be kept informed of all of the appropriate safety measures being put in place to reduce the risk of COVID 19 in line with guidance from my Department and the wider medical and public health requirements. I have also highlighted the importance of providing timely and clear guidance to parents and children in advance of the tests.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what consideration is being given to a distinct code to mark absence of pupils self-isolating, to ensure that data around numbers doing so can be maintained accurately and published efficiently.

(AQW 9614/17-22)

Mr Weir: To meet immediate needs DE officials decided in consultation with EA to re-purpose existing attendance codes to help identify COVID-19 related absences. Work is currently underway to establish if new attendance codes can be implemented to facilitate more detailed reporting on pupil self-isolation and COVID-19 related illness.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Education what resources he has allocated to the promotion of the use of the StopCOVID app among post-primary school children.

(AQW 9615/17-22)

Mr Weir: The launch on 1 October of the new version of the 'StopCOVID NI' app, inclusive of under 18s, has been welcomed by the Department.

A letter has been sent to school leaders to encourage and support the use of the app whilst acknowledging that successful uptake may require changes to schools' existing mobile device policies.

The cooperation of school leaders will be required to allow use of the app, the policy remains that mobile devices should not be used for other purposes in schools other than use of the 'StopCOVID NI' app."

Promotion of the use of the 'StopCOVID NI' app for post primary school children did not require any financial commitment from the Department.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of (i) COVID-19 rule compliance; and (ii) the effectiveness of these mitigation strategies.

(AQW 9696/17-22)

Mr Weir: An assessment of (i) COVID-19 rule compliance; and (ii) the effectiveness of the mitigation strategies has not formally been undertaken by the Department.

The Education Authority has Education Link Officers who regularly engage with schools to support them as they implement DE guidance in many areas.

The Department continues to work closely with the Education Authority, the Department of Health and the Public Health Agency during the ongoing pandemic. Guidance is constantly under review and as and will be updated as needed and driven by health advice provided by CMO and CSA.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education why mask wearing is not mandatory in classrooms, given that aerosol transmission in confined spaces is recognised as a significant cause of the spread of infection.
(AQW 9736/17-22)

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.

To make sure that schools remain safe for our children, young people and staff, a number of measures will be put in place. These include, but are not limited to;

- **Keeping Covid-19 out of schools.** Anyone displaying any Covid-19 symptoms, or covid-like symptoms **must not** attend school. Stay at home and get a test. PHA guidance regarding self-isolation and testing should be followed.
- **Enhanced hygiene and cleaning measures** will be in place. All cleaning will be carried out in accordance with PHA Guidance. Regular cleaning of door handles, desk tops etc. will take place throughout the day.
- Children will **wash their hands** as soon as they arrive at school and regularly throughout the school day.
- Public health guidance with respect to **social distancing of 2 metres (2m) will remain in place between adults** and as far as possible between adults and pupils.
- Whilst the stringent application of social distancing requirements between pupils will be relaxed, as far as is practicable, **social distancing should be maximised for both children and adults who are not from the same household.**
- **Protective bubbles will be used as a key mitigating action where possible.** The protective bubble arrangements will be used to segment pupils into a consistent group or groups that arrive together, learn together, play together and eat together, reducing contact throughout the school with other children.
- **Classroom space will be maximised** as far as possible with unnecessary items removed and schools will make use of all space including outdoor space.
- **Children will not sit facing each other where possible and seating plans can be used to aid contact tracing** in the event of a positive Covid-19 case.
- PHA guidance under the **Test and Trace and Protect programme** will be applied for all staff or pupils in contact with someone who tests positive for Covid-19
- **Lunch and break times may be staggered** with more sittings, take away services and / or delivery to classrooms.
- **Staggered arrival and pick up times** may be introduced to limit interactions and avoid gatherings at the school gates.

In regards to face coverings we have taken advice from our colleagues in the Public Health Agency and these are recommended for use in the following scenarios.

- **The wearing of face coverings on both dedicated school transport and public transport is now mandatory for all post-primary children.**
- Face coverings must be worn in staff rooms and during adult to adult meetings lasting more than 15 minutes and by adults visiting the school site.
- Face coverings are strongly encouraged for activities that entail large numbers of staff or pupils within an enclosed space where social distancing is not possible.
- It is recommended that pupils and teachers wear a face covering in corridors and other communal areas of post-primary schools.

Principals and school staff have been working tirelessly implementing these measures to keep schools safe for pupils and, their efforts have ensured the level of transmission in schools remains low.

Given the risk mitigations in place in schools to limit and contain the spread of COVID-19, face coverings are therefore not generally recommended for routine use in schools. Staff and pupils may wish to use them during the routine school day and this is acceptable. Schools should also be aware that some persons (including children) are exempt from wearing face coverings.

As always my Department will continue to be led by the public health guidance and guidance / processes will be kept under review to ensure they remain in line with the wider health position.

Department of Finance

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the expansion of agency staff working in the Civil Service since the Fresh Start Agreement in 2015 and its impact on workers' rights.
(AQW 8891/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The number of agency workers (by headcount) is set out in the table below. This reflects the numbers working in the NI Civil Service on the various 'point in time' dates which is when the information is gathered / collated centrally for reporting purposes.

Number of Recruitment Agency Workers	01/03/15	01/01/16	01/04/17	01/04/18	01/04/19	01/04/20
Total excluding those undertaking work for DWP* 15	**	**	623	826	1,153	1,505
Total including those undertaking work for DWP*	380	534	1,068	1,588	2,132	2,581

* Figures exclude recruitment agency workers engaged by DfC to undertake work for Department of Working Pensions (DWP) contracts – these costs are met by DWP.

** Separate figures not available

Individual departments are responsible for determining and prioritising their resourcing needs. This includes any decision to engage agency workers. Reasons for the increase in the number of agency workers since 2015, include:

- an increase in work undertaken for DWP
- difficulty recruiting certain grades (including professional and technical grades)
- short-term increase in workloads

While there is likely to always be a requirement to have temporary colleagues, the Civil Service is committed to changing the pattern of current usage by engaging agency workers for short term or temporary assignments only and recruiting to permanent posts instead of using agency staff, where possible.

The vast majority of agency workers are undertaking Administrative Officer (AO) roles and consequently we launched an open recruitment exercise to fill a range of AO posts on a permanent basis. This gave anyone, including those agency workers currently engaged in the Civil Service the chance to apply for a permanent position. We anticipate around 500 offers of permanent employment will be made in the coming weeks, with the facility to make further offers depending on the needs of departments.

A replacement agency workers contract is currently being tendered and this new contract will entitle agency workers to parity with permanent Civil Service colleagues in terms of pay, annual leave and paid time off for medical/dental appointments from day one of their assignment. The replacement contract will also use the Buy Social initiative to include a number of social clauses.

The recruitment of permanent staff and enhanced arrangements in the replacement agency workers contract is in line with the NICS commitment to Workers' Rights.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance what percentage of the 3,000 permanent Civil Service jobs that went via the Voluntary Exit Scheme have since been refilled by agency workers; and at what cost to the public purse.
(AQW 8893/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Information regarding vacancies, specifically as a result of the Voluntary Exit Scheme, that have been filled by agency workers is not held. Decisions as to whether and how vacancies are filled, and any associated financial costs, fall to individual Departments.

Agency workers can be hired for a variety of business reasons, such as covering maternity leave, short term increases in workload, special exercises.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he intends to review the current cap on full pay equivalent to occupational sick pay for agency workers.
(AQW 8971/17-22)

Mr Murphy: This matter is under review and I am awaiting advice on whether agency workers could be offered full pay equivalent to Occupational Sick Pay to agency workers on assignment to NICS departments during the Covid pandemic.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance how much money the Civil Service Voluntary Exit Scheme in 2016 saved the public purse.
(AQW 8972/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The estimated paybill savings resulting from the 2015/16 NICS Voluntary Exit Scheme are £24m in 2015/16 and £87m annually thereafter.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Finance what steps his Department has taken to ensure that those registered as having died from COVID-19 have actually died as a result of COVID-19.
(AQW 9017/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) analyses and produces statistics on death registrations based on the information recorded during the death registration process on the Northern Ireland General Register Office's Registration System (NIROS)

The legislative requirement to certify a death falls under the Births and Death Registration Order (Northern Ireland) 1976 and requires all medical practitioners to complete a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD) to the best of their knowledge and belief. The Department of Health 'Guidance on death certification during the Covid-19 pandemic' provides instructions to medical practitioners on how to accurately complete the MCCD in Covid-19 related cases. In part I of the MCCD form a medical practitioner will record all conditions, with the last being that which caused the death. In part II of the form details of any associated conditions that contributed to the death but which were not part of the causal sequence are recorded.

During the registration of a death, the MCCD information is recorded verbatim on NIROS by the local registrar. NISRA forwards cause of death information to the Office of National Statistics (ONS) which adds cause of death coding based on the International Classification of Diseases (ICD10) in line with the World Health Organisation's Coding Rules. NISRA then publishes the data in the Registrar General Quarterly Tables.

The most recent data up to June 2020 show that 90.8% (754 out of 830) of those who had COVID-19 mentioned on their death certificate were subsequently coded by ONS as having died from it.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance whether she will consider producing a digital inclusion strategy for Northern Ireland.

(AQW 9062/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Digital Transformation Service (DTS) set out an ambitious Strategy for Digital Transformation of Public Services in 2017 to continue its digital transformation journey and the delivery of a range of new and improved digital services. Digital Inclusion forms an important part of that Strategy.

The "Making Lives Better" document (<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/digital-transformation-strategy-2017-2021>) describes how the Digital Transformation Programme is providing better public services and enabling collaborative design of public sector digital services.

The Strategy supports the delivery of Programme for Government (PfG) outcomes through the increased use of online channels to access public services and bringing with it new opportunities to improve how we engage with citizens and stakeholders to develop better policies, deliver better services and to overhaul business processes.

Progress on the delivery of the Strategy has been significant - ensuring a "digital first" approach. A mid-term review of the Strategy is currently underway which will provide an opportunity to take stock of progress in the support of PfG outcomes.

My Department's overarching aim for Digital Inclusion is to give citizens access, skills, motivation and trust to use digital services.

A Digital Resilience Foundation Report was initially undertaken to:

- Develop indicators to measure success;
- Formalise strategic partnerships to enable the delivery of priority targeted interventions to support specific difficult to reach groups such as rural communities and the economically disadvantaged;
- Encourage Departments to embed digital inclusion in the policies and work programmes of all transformation programmes across Government;
- Provide support and assistance to innovative projects which have the potential to make a positive difference to priority groups by addressing issues in respect of access, skills, motivation and trust; and
- Increase the number of publicly available and free internet access points through access 'hotspots' at facilities such as local libraries and public sector offices.

It is widely recognised that Digital technologies impact on almost every aspect of modern society, creating huge social benefits. They can improve how we work and communicate with each other, the healthcare available to us, and how information and knowledge can be shared for our benefit.

The downside of our increasing reliance on ICT in public, economic and social life is that the digitally excluded can also become excluded from engaging with public services, modern working life and society itself.

Unfortunately, a number of individuals still don't have the necessary digital skills required to take advantage of the benefits the internet offers. Statistics indicate that locally 1 in 7 adults do not use the Internet (rising to 1 in 3 of those with a disability and half of those aged 65+); 1 in 4 do not have access to a computer with Internet access.

The Department's Digital Inclusion Team has been addressing this issue with the introduction of the Go ON NI programme which identifies user needs and ensures those individual needs come first.

I am pleased to note that recent pointers suggest that overall 86% of all adults now use the web compared to 67% when the Go ON NI programme commenced.

As a result of the current COVID-19 situation the GO ON NI programme is providing training sessions remotely whereby anyone can join in. A new Digital Help text and phone service has just been launched to provide one-to-one free digital assistance to the public and this is being supported by BITC volunteers.

A soon to be announced "Connected" pilot project will provide free training as well as a loan of an internet enabled device for a minimum of 6 months to a limited number of elderly or vulnerable citizens. This project will be looking to specifically target the digitally excluded with a specific focus on rural areas through liaison with DAERA and the Rural Community Network.

The Digital Inclusion Team are also pro-active members of the Digital Assist Steering Group, a cross-sectoral body chaired by Business In The Community which helps ensure that government services are not delivered in isolation through appropriate interaction with organisations from across the private, voluntary and community sectors.

For more information on all current and future Go ON NI activities, please visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/go-on-ni or contact the Digital Inclusion team directly at future@finance-ni.gov.uk

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he will instruct Civil Service management within each Department to survey the anonymous views of agency staff with regards to their employment status and report the findings to the Assembly.
(AQW 9146/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The 2018 and 2019 NICS People (staff) Surveys included the views of agency workers and they will continue to be included in subsequent surveys. The Survey principally seeks out the views of staff on such things as inclusion and fair treatment, resourcing and workload etc. It is anonymous and its findings, including scores from responses provided by temporary and agency workers, can be found on the Department's website at <https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/nics-people-survey-results>

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he will commit to meeting with NIPSA to discuss its demand that agency workers are offered permanent positions as a matter of urgency.
(AQW 9147/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I am always open to engagement with NIPSA however I have not received a request for a meeting.

I must also advise that agency workers in the Civil Service can only be made permanent, direct employees of the Civil Service if they are successfully appointed as candidates through open recruitment.

While there is likely to always be a requirement for agency workers, the Civil Service is committed to changing the pattern of current usage by engaging agency workers for short term or temporary assignments only and recruiting to permanent posts instead of using agency staff, where possible.

The vast majority of agency workers are undertaking Administrative Officer (AO) roles. An open recruitment exercise to fill a range of AO posts on a permanent basis launched in December 2019. This gave anyone, including those agency workers currently working in the NICS, the chance to apply for a permanent position. We anticipate around 500 offers of permanent employment will be made in the coming weeks, with the facility to make further offers depending on the needs of departments.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Finance whether premises operated by a single business can qualify separately for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.
(AQW 9162/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Regulations that provide details of the scheme, initially in the Derry City and Strabane Council area, and then across all council areas are The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. A second No 2 Regulation of the same name, now covers all council areas. The occupier of a restricted commercial property or the occupier of part of a restricted commercial property may apply for assistance to the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme where the business is required to close or severely limit its operations by the Health Protection Regulations. Applications may be made and more details found at:

www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-localised-restrictions-support-scheme

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the engagement which occurred with affected businesses to understand the real economic impact prior to commencement of consultation concerning amendment of the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 and update to technical guidance.
(AQW 9219/17-22)

Mr Murphy: During 2019/20 officials from my Department's Building Standards Branch (BSB) attended a number of meetings of the local Construction Industry Forum (CIFNI) to brief members on progress with re-establishing the local Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC) and proposals for the Building Regulations Work Programme. The views on proposals for consultation on Fire Safety requirements in local Building regulations were taken into account in developing the policy. Officials also consulted with NIBRAC and its relevant Technical Sub-Committee in scoping draft consultation proposals. To date, no issues have been raised in relation to economic impacts by CIFNI members.

A draft Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) was prepared for the consultation proposals and provided as part of the documents issued. The analysis of consultation responses, which include submissions from affected business, when complete and following scrutiny by NIBRAC and the Departmental Committee will inform any revisions in finalising proposals and the RIA.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail the assessed economic impact specific to Northern Ireland concerning proposed amendment of the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 and update to technical guidance including the collateral impact of a ban on non-relevant buildings.

(AQW 9220/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The draft Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) issued for consultation relates to 'relevant buildings', that is, to those buildings directly affected by the proposed amendment.

The draft RIA indicates that, based on analysis of planning statistics over the three year period from 2016 to 2019, three buildings per year will be affected. It is envisaged that there would be costs of approximately £7k as familiarisation for District Council Building Control enforcement bodies (for the first year after implementation only) and approximately £60k as familiarisation for industry (for the first year after implementation only). Yearly costs to industry after that are anticipated at £127k, giving a total cost for the first year of £194k.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether the option of BS8414 large scale testing is still a possible alternative option for meeting the required safety standards concerning proposed amendment of the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 and update to technical guidance.

(AQW 9221/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department's Building Standards Officials advise that the alternative option of a BS8414 large scale test has been recognised and accepted by industry as a satisfactory way to demonstrate compliance with existing external fire spread requirements in external walls. The proposed amendments to the guidance in Technical Booklet E (Fire safety), would introduce this option into the guidance for the first time as an acceptable route to compliance for 'non-relevant' buildings.

Under the proposed new requirement, BS8414 large scale tests would not be included as a route to compliance for 'relevant' buildings. These are seen as higher risk and the priority would be to provide clarity and certainty for designers, installers and enforcement bodies to understand precisely what materials can and cannot be used on these buildings. The new regulation is aimed at providing that certainty.

The analysis of consultation responses will indicate any views on BS8414 large scale tests as an alternative route to compliance for relevant buildings. This would be referred along with other consultation feedback to the local Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC) for its advice to inform final proposals.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance for his assessment of the impact of the ban on combustible materials in England, particularly in consideration of the ongoing review of changes there, in relation to the proposals contained in the consultation on the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 and the update to technical guidance.

(AQW 9222/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The effective ban on combustible materials in England's Building Regulations was introduced in December 2018. Analysis of the effect on industry in England due to the ban is too early to evaluate. A survey of stakeholders in relation to the ban was commissioned by the Ministry for Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) and conducted by consultants Adroit Economics Ltd. The survey results were published in August 2019.

There was a commitment to review the effectiveness of the ban in England after one year and a further consultation was carried out in January 2020. That consultation closed on 25 May 2020 and the responses are still being analysed by MHCLG. Officials from my Department's Building Standards Branch maintain ongoing contact with MHCLG colleagues and are awaiting any proposals for change. Any changes will be considered in the local context with the local Building Advisory Committee (NIBRAC) in advance of finalising proposals here.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 7863/17-22, (i) whether the Financial Transactions Capital facility for Ulster University is conditional on a commitment to deliver an agreed level of expansion of the Magee campus; (ii) what that level of expansion is; and (iii) the timetable for its delivery.

(AQW 9232/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The conditions attached to the Financial Transactions Capital facility for Ulster University seek to assess and improve the organisation's financial sustainability and its capacity to deliver large capital builds. This should in turn help UU deliver the expansion of the Magee campus.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance to detail the criteria in which an agency worker's assignment is recorded as complete.

(AQW 9262/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The duration of each agency worker's assignment is a matter for each department and relevant business area. The agency will be notified when an agency worker is no longer required and it is their responsibility to notify the agency worker of the termination of the placement.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether his Department has carried out any work in relation to a connection between agency work and poor mental health.

(AQW 9263/17-22)

Mr Murphy: I refer you to my response to AQW 9146/17 – 22 and the findings of the 2018 and 2019 NICS people surveys, which included the views of agency workers.

The relevant recruitment agency has responsibility for agency workers health and sickness absence records as well as dealing with any well-being issues relating to these workers. However, a replacement agency workers contract is currently being tendered and this new contract will entitle agency workers to parity with permanent Civil Service colleagues in terms of pay, annual leave and paid time off for medical/dental appointments from day one of their assignment.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Finance when his Department will produce the technical documents on the requirement for new buildings being erected to be nearly zero-energy buildings.

(AQW 9399/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Officials continue to consult on this matter with the local Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC), its specialist sub-committee, the British Government's Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government, and other administrations, with a view to issuing information on technical compliance as soon as possible.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance why an owner of a wind turbine would qualify for a reduction of rates payments under the Small Business Rates Relief Scheme.

(AQW 9468/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The criteria for award of Small Business Rate Relief are set out in The Rates (Small Business Hereditament Relief) Regulations (2012).

Under these regulations, a non-domestic hereditament with a NAV that does not exceed £15,000 is entitled to a percentage reduction in rates. Persons occupying more than three hereditaments are excluded from the relief as are hereditaments in receipt of another relief such as charitable exemption, sport and recreation relief or industrial derating.

There are no exceptions in the regulations that would specifically exclude a hereditament rated as a wind turbine.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance how many owners of wind turbines qualify for a rates reduction under the Small Business Rates Relief Scheme.

(AQW 9469/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As at 1st November 2020, there are a total of 682 wind turbines on which rates are payable, 508 of which are in receipt of Small Business Rate Relief (SBRR).

There are also a total of 73 wind farms, 8 of which are in receipt of SBRR. A wind farm consists of two or more wind turbines.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance whether anaerobic digesters are subject to non-domestic rates.

(AQW 9506/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Anaerobic digesters are rateable hereditaments and are subject to non-domestic rates. They are valued on the basis of Schedule 12 of the Rates (Northern Ireland) Order 1977.

Anaerobic digesters with an installed capacity of 50 kilowatts or less are not rateable under the Rates (Microgeneration) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012.

The legislative background and method of valuation adopted are detailed in the Land & Property Services Practice Note, available online at:

<https://www.financeni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dfp/Renewable%20energy%20Practice%20Note.pdf>

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Finance in respect of the named ratepayer Mr Maoliosa McHugh MLA, whether there is a third party authorisation from Mr McHugh enabling West Tyrone Sinn Féin or any other person or body to deal with matters pertaining to the rates for which Mr McHugh is the named ratepayer; and when was such authorisation signed.

(AQW 9507/17-22)

Mr Murphy: To avoid any perception of a conflict of interest in respect of payments made to Sinn Féin, the Finance Minister has asked me to respond to your AQW.

"To ask the Minister of Finance in respect of the named ratepayer Mr Maoliosa McHugh MLA, whether there is a third party authorisation from Mr McHugh enabling West Tyrone Sinn Féin or any other person or body to deal with matters pertaining to the rates for which Mr McHugh is the named ratepayer; and when was such authorisation signed".

I have checked the details of the rate account with officials in Land & Property Services (LPS). The full ratepayer name on the rate account for Unit 3, 1a Melvin Road, Strabane is 'Mr Maoliosa McHugh MLA – Strabane Sinn Féin Office', which would

authorise Mr McHugh or a Strabane Sinn Féin Office official to deal with matters pertaining to the rate account. LPS has no record of a request for third party authorisation in respect of this rate account.

Department of Health

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health, following reports that the waiting list for a referral to the Gender Identity Clinic at Brackenburn has not changed in four years, to detail what is causing the delay at the facility, and what steps are being taken to address the issue.

(AQW 5811/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): In recent years, similar to other Gender Identity Services provided across the UK, Northern Ireland has witnessed a significant growth in demand. To date, efforts to recruit replacements for key staff who have left the service in Northern Ireland have had limited success. Consequently, the service have been unable to progress the waiting list for individuals newly referred to the service.

My Department is working collaboratively with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and the Health and Social Care Board in undertaking a review of the Gender Identity Service, including how best to address the issue of waiting times.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to confirm the average daily capacity for each COVID-19 primary care centre, broken down by centre and week, since July 2020.

(AQW 6269/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the daily average number of GP sessions available per week at each COVID-19 primary care centre from July 2020 provided by the Health & Social Care Board, is detailed overleaf.

Average Daily GP sessions for each COVID-19 Primary Care Centre, by Centre and Week since July 2020

Week Commencing	Ards	B'bridge	South Tyrone	Belfast	B'mena	Causeway	Derry / L'Derry	South West Acute	Lisburn	Down
W/C 29th June	6	2 ^{*2}	1.5 ^{*3}	13 ^{*4}	9	0.7 ^{*7}	2	2 ^{*8}	2 ^{*11}	2 ^{*12}
W/C 6th July	6	2 ^{*2}	1.5 ^{*3}	7 ^{*5}	9	0.7 ^{*7}	2	1 ^{*9}	2 ^{*11}	2 ^{*12}
W/C 13th July	6	2 ^{*2}	1.5 ^{*3}	7 ^{*5}	9	0.7 ^{*7}	2	1 ^{*9}	2 ^{*11}	2 ^{*12}
W/C 20th July	6	2 ^{*2}	1.5 ^{*3}	7 ^{*5}	9	0.7 ^{*7}	2	1 ^{*9}	2 ^{*11}	2 ^{*12}
W/C 27th July	6	2 ^{*2}	1.5 ^{*3}	7 ^{*5}	9	0.7 ^{*7}	2	1 ^{*9}	2 ^{*11}	2 ^{*12}
W/C 3rd Aug	6	2 ^{*2}	1.5 ^{*3}	7 ^{*5}	9	0.7 ^{*7}	2	0 ^{*10}	2 ^{*11}	2 ^{*12}
W/C 10th Aug	6	2 ^{*2}	1.5 ^{*3}	7 ^{*5}	9	0.7 ^{*7}	2	0 ^{*10}	2 ^{*11}	2 ^{*12}
W/C 17th Aug	6	2 ^{*2}	1.5 ^{*3}	7 ^{*5}	9	0.7 ^{*7}	2	0 ^{*10}	2 ^{*11}	2 ^{*12}
W/C 24th Aug	6	2 ^{*2}	1.5 ^{*3}	7 ^{*5}	9	0.7 ^{*7}	2	0 ^{*10}	2 ^{*11}	2 ^{*12}
W/C 31st Aug	6	2 ^{*2}	1.5 ^{*3}	7 ^{*5}	8	0.7 ^{*7}	2	0 ^{*10}	2 ^{*11}	2 ^{*12}
W/C 7th Sept	6	2 ^{*2}	1.5 ^{*3}	8 ^{*6}	9	0.7 ^{*7}	2	0 ^{*10}	2 ^{*11}	2 ^{*12}
W/C 14th Sept	6	2 ^{*2}	1.5 ^{*3}	8 ^{*6}	11	0.7 ^{*7}	2	0 ^{*10}	2 ^{*11}	2 ^{*12}
W/C 21st Sept	6 ^{*1}	2 ^{*2}	1.5 ^{*3}	8 ^{*6}	11	0.7 ^{*7}	2	0 ^{*10}	2 ^{*11}	2 ^{*12}

Footnotes

- *1 Ards - 6 is the daily average over a 7 day period. To note there is 1 standby on rota for each day of week and 2 at weekends from week commencing 21st September
- *2 Banbridge - 2 is the daily average over a 7 day period. Actual rota is 3 (Monday - Thursday), 2 (Friday), 0 (Saturday - Sunday)
- *3 South Tyrone - 1.5 is the daily average over a 7 day period. Actual rota is 2 (Monday - Thursday), 3 (Friday - Sunday)
- *4 Belfast - 13 is the daily average over a 7 day period week commencing 29th June. To note there is 1 standby on rota for each day of the week.
- *5 Belfast - 7 is the daily average over a 7 day period week commencing 6th July to week commencing 31st August. To note there is 1 standby on rota for each day of the week.

- *6 Belfast - 8 is the daily average over a 7 day period for September. To note there is 1 standby on rota for each day of the week.
- *7 Causeway - centre only open 1 shift per day Mon - Fri
- *8 SWAH - 2 is the daily average over a 7 day period from week commencing 29th June to week commencing 6th July. These are standby shifts.
- *9 SWAH - 1 is the daily average over a 7 day period from week commencing 6th July to week commencing 27th July. This is a standby shift.
- *10 SWAH - 0 is the daily average over a 7 day period from week commencing 3rd August. This is 100% Nurse led Triage.
- *11 Lisburn - 2 is the daily average over a 7 day period. To note there is 4 standby's on rota for each day of the week.
- *12 Down - 2 is the daily average over a 7 day period. To note there is 1 standby on rota for each day of the week and 2 standby's daily from 6pm-10pm from week commencing 21st September

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what is the estimated false positive rate in tests for COVID-19.
(AQW 7541/17-22)

Mr Swann: Given the different testing platforms and kits that are in use for SARS-CoV2 testing, it is not possible to ascertain an overall false positive rate.

To prevent the reporting of false positives, the laboratory will assess all positives using criteria that may indicate a false positive may be occurring. This criteria includes:

- If only 1 gene target out of 2 or 3 gene targets are positive
- Weak Ct values (viral load) close to the limit of detection

When these indicators occur repeat testing or testing the sample on a different platform with a different specificity profile is undertaken. This confirmatory testing clarifies the result in most cases.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health how he is addressing the shortfall in domiciliary care staff within the Mid-Ulster area.
(AQW 7653/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Power to the People report published by my Department sets out the case for change across adult social care and I am committed to taking forward measures which will address the key challenges identified by that report. On the 13th May 2020 I announced my intentions to make improvements with regards to pay, terms and conditions, training and career pathways for the social care workforce.

I have asked my officials to develop options for my consideration, which is underway. However I have been advised that all such options would likely create a significant recurrent financial impact and are currently unaffordable within Departmental budgets. I will therefore require Executive support to progress.

My department has also taken specific measures in response to covid-19, such as offering providers the ability to provide enhanced sick pay for their workers. In addition, on 12 October, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust introduced a rapid response service in the Mid-Ulster area, which provides up to 150 hours of rapid response domiciliary care to help facilitate timely discharge from hospital. The Trust continues to focus on using both in-house and independent sector provision to meet the assessed needs for domiciliary care across the geographical areas for which it is responsible.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health whether he has considered having a permanent COVID-19 testing centre in Strabane town.
(AQW 7805/17-22)

Mr Swann: The location of testing facilities across Northern Ireland, including fixed test sites, is kept under constant review.

Mobile Testing Units (MTUs) are deployed in response to local need. A MTU was located at Melvin Sports Complex, Melvin Road, Strabane, BT82 9PP from 26 September to 16 October inclusive.

Further information is available at:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) the process of assessment of a property for accessibility measures and adaptations; and (ii) whether such items may be removed following a further assessment.
(AQW 8056/17-22)

Mr Swann: An Occupational Therapist (OT) will visit the home. They will discuss the different options available, for example, adaptations to the bedrooms, showers, or ground floor toilets. The OT will then complete an assessment of need and make the necessary recommendations, based on regional standards, to the NIHE grants office.

A NIHE grants officer will then visit the home to view the property to make sure the adaptations fit the house. They will then explain the type and level of grant that the service user will need.

Responsibility for removing adaptations when these are no longer required is dependent on the owner-occupier status of the service-user's property, the type of adaptation in place/provided, and the feasibility of removing the adaptation. This is addressed through close collaboration with a range of key organisations including OT services.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown of positive COVID-19 tests in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area, broken down by postcode.

(AQW 8078/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has recently published information on individuals with a positive COVID-19 test by Postal District on the COVID Dashboard at the link below.

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates>

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health how it is established that a false positive result has occurred in a COVID-19 test. **(AQW 8119/17-22)**

Mr Swann: The laboratory will assess all positives using criteria that may indicate a false positive may be occurring.

This criteria includes:

- If only 1 gene target out of 2 or 3 gene targets are positive
- Weak Ct values (viral load) close to the limit of detection

When these indicators occur, repeat testing or testing the sample on a different platform with a different specificity profile is undertaken.

This confirmatory testing clarifies the result in most cases.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister of Health how many cancer referral appointments were carried out between 1 September and 30 September (i) 2019; and (ii) 2020.

(AQW 8122/17-22)

Mr Swann: During September 2020, 5,379 cancer referral appointments were carried out. This is compared with 5,998 cancer referral appointments carried out in September 2019. Figures for September 2020 include virtual appointments.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many people have been contacted by phonecall via the contact tracing scheme. **(AQW 8125/17-22)**

Mr Swann: The PHA publish weekly information relating to COVID-19 at:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/contact-tracing-service-management-information>

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health whether he intends to review the present fallow time guidance for dental practices. **(AQW 8146/17-22)**

Mr Swann: The Scottish Dental Clinical Effectiveness Programme (SDCEP) Rapid Review of Aerosol Generated Procedure's (AGPs) has now been completed and consequently a revised version of the Northern Ireland Operational Dental Guidance was issued on 21 October 2020 to all Northern Ireland General Dental Practitioners.

The revised Guidance moves from the previous position of 60 minutes fallow period with standard surgery ventilation and 20 minutes fallow period with high level surgery ventilation to 20 minutes fallow period with standard surgery ventilation and 15 minutes fallow period with high level surgery ventilation.

It is possible to reduce these times further using additional mitigations but 10 minutes is the lowest acceptable fallow period.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Health what provisions are being made to enable the full return of routine Health Service dental care.

(AQW 8283/17-22)

Mr Swann: Routine dental care resumed on 20 July 2020 however, enhanced infection prevention control measures including additional Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) requirements, fallow time and cleaning after Aerosol Generating Procedures (AGPs) limit the number of patients that can be seen each day.

Updated operational guidance was issued to General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) on 21 October 2020 and included details on reduction of fallow times. While the new guidelines should allow for an increased number of appointments per day, overall patient throughput is expected to remain below normal levels for the foreseeable future.

To support the sustainability of practices through this difficult time the Department established the General Dental Services Financial Support Scheme (FSS). In the first six months of 2020/21 the combined level of FSS and net Item of Service (IoS) payments made to GDMPs was approximately £32 million. This compares with the £24 million worth of net IoS payments made in the same period in 2019-20.

A further £5m in funding has been approved to address the reduction in revenue from patients, resulting in an additional total investment of £13m. The financial support has been, and will continue to be, conditional on dentists providing care to registered Health Service patients on the basis of need.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how many dental nurses have (i) applied for; and (ii) received, the Hepatitis B vaccination in the last twelve months.

(AQW 8404/17-22)

Mr Swann: Data is not available for those that have applied for the Hepatitis B vaccination. In the last twelve months 85 dental nurses have received the Hepatitis B vaccination.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health how many community care packages are requested but were never put in place until after the service user had died, broken down by Health and Social Care Trust, for each of the last four years.

(AQW 8451/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on domiciliary care packages which were requested but not put in place due to the death of the service user, is not collected by the Department or by HSC Trusts. The exact information might only be obtained through a manual trawl requiring extensive and disproportionate labour at significant cost.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to reimplement free parking for staff on hospital sites.

(AQW 8601/17-22)

Mr Swann: Yes. I have secured additional funding from the Department of Finance for the immediate reintroduction of free car parking for Health and Social Care staff until 31 March 2021.

I hope this provides a small amount of welcome news to our valued staff as they enter into a potentially even more challenging second Covid-19 surge.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many people are currently residents in nursing homes.

(AQW 8726/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department does not hold this information centrally and was requested from Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts.

Please find information detailed below.

Table 1. Number of nursing care packages in effect as at 30th September 2020, by HSC Trust.

HSC Trust	Nursing care packages in effect
Belfast	1,820
Northern	2,157
South Eastern	1,667
Southern*	-
Western	1,322
Northern Ireland	6,966*

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

* Southern HSC Trust was unable to respond to the request for information by the AQW deadline, therefore the Northern Ireland figure represents residents in nursing homes in the other four HSC Trusts.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 7092/17-22, to detail the number of occasions the interim arrangement with Alder Hey Hospital for paediatric pathology services was used in each year since it was established.

(AQW 8730/17-22)

Mr Swann: The interim paediatric pathology arrangements between Belfast Trust and Alder Hey Hospital, Liverpool came into effect in January 2019. From January to December 2019, some 163 hospital consented paediatric post mortems were undertaken in Alder Hey. From January to the end of September 2020, 123 hospital consented paediatric post mortems were carried out.

Information on the number of occasions that families decline to access the paediatric pathology services is not collected. Every family who has lost a baby or a child in circumstances where a hospital-consented post mortem is appropriate will be offered the opportunity. Families will always have a choice whether or not to proceed with a hospital based post-mortem.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 7092/17-22, to detail the number of occasions that families declined to access paediatric pathology services within Alder Hey Hospital, in each year since the regional service was discontinued. (AQW 8731/17-22)

Mr Swann: The interim paediatric pathology arrangements between Belfast Trust and Alder Hey Hospital, Liverpool came into effect in January 2019. From January to December 2019, some 163 hospital consented paediatric post mortems were undertaken in Alder Hey. From January to the end of September 2020, 123 hospital consented paediatric post mortems were carried out.

Information on the number of occasions that families decline to access the paediatric pathology services is not collected. Every family who has lost a baby or a child in circumstances where a hospital-consented post mortem is appropriate will be offered the opportunity. Families will always have a choice whether or not to proceed with a hospital based post-mortem.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health what percentage of those who died following a positive diagnosis with COVID-19 were admitted to an intensive care unit. (AQW 8750/17-22)

Mr Swann: As of 21st October 2020, 409 deaths which occurred in hospital have been reported to the PHA by HSC Trusts. Of those deaths, 42 (10.3%) were recorded as having been in ICU during the hospital admission in which they died. There may have been deaths occurring after discharge from hospital where in their most recent admission, that patient had been in ICU. As HSC Trusts do not have access to those patients' death details, they cannot determine their outcome following discharge from hospital.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health for a breakdown by disease of the present occupancy of intensive care units. (AQW 8751/17-22)

Mr Swann: A breakdown by disease of the present occupancy of Intensive Care Units is not available given that patients can be admitted to Intensive Care for a variety of reasons rather than operating on a disease-level basis. Table 1 to follow outlines the primary reason for admission of ICU patients as at 17th October 2020 across most Intensive Care Units; unfortunately the Intensive Care Unit within South West Acute Hospital, which accounts for 6 steady ICU beds, were unable to provide a response within the timeframe required for answering this AQ. It is important to note that individual patients can be admitted for a number of reasons, however the data presented provides the primary reason for their admission to ICU on a specific day.

Table 1: Primary Reason for Admission of ICU patients, 17th October 2020

Primary Reason for Admission	Number of Patients
COVID-19, confirmed	27
Pneumonia, no organism isolated	6
Other*	42
Total with Primary Reason for Admission	75

* Please note that in the interests of maintaining patient confidentiality, primary reasons for admission which had less than 5 patients admitted for that reason have been grouped into an 'Other' category.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health how many people described as "individuals with positive lab completed test" are currently active cases; and how many have recovered. (AQW 8752/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is not currently possible to accurately report the number of active cases or the number who have recovered from the disease. However information is published on a daily basis on the DoH Dashboard at the link below, on the number of individuals with a positive laboratory completed test during the last 7 days and the previous 7 days.

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates>

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many paediatric day surgery theatre sessions have been carried out at Causeway Hospital in each week of the last six months. (AQW 8844/17-22)

Mr Swann: The tabulated information overleaf details the number of paediatric day surgery theatre sessions carried out each week at Causeway Hospital between April 2020 and September 2020. (Table A).

Table A: Number of paediatric day surgery theatre sessions carried out at Causeway Hospital per week from April 2020 to September 2020

Week Commencing	Number of Day Surgery Theatre Sessions
24/04/2020	1
01/05/2020	1
15/05/2020	1
22/05/2020	1
05/06/2020	1
12/06/2020	1
19/06/2020	1
26/06/2020	2
03/07/2020	2
10/07/2020	2
17/07/2020	3
24/07/2020	4
31/07/2020	4
07/08/2020	3
14/08/2020	3
21/08/2020	3
28/08/2020	3
04/09/2020	2
11/09/2020	4
18/09/2020	2
25/09/2020	2
Total	46

Source: Northern Health and Social Care Trust, NI.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health how his Department will ensure that school children receive the flu vaccination in a timely fashion.

(AQW 8880/17-22)

Mr Swann: The school flu vaccination programme is organised annually by Trust School Nursing Services. Schools work in conjunction with Trust school nursing teams to facilitate this. The programme has been running in primary schools since 2013/14 and for this year is offered to Year 8 pupils as well. The programme runs from October to January each year.

Schools were closed for an extended Halloween break from the 19th to the 30th of October to assist in slowing the spread of Coronavirus. The majority of school vaccinations arranged for the week 19th to the 23rd of October were relocated to alternative venues such as leisure centres or church halls for that week and the early part of the following week. Where it was not possible to provide an alternative venue, the relevant school clinics have been rescheduled to later in November.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health whether he has taken steps to stop or restrict the use of Graded Exercise Therapy for people with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, given surveys show more than half of patients find it detrimental and it is currently subject to review by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence.

(AQW 8921/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current guideline issued by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), Chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis (or encephalopathy): diagnosis and management (CG53), endorsed by my Department in 2008 for implementation in Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland, continues to apply.

As you are aware, CG53 is currently under review by NICE, with an expected publication date of 21 April 2021. When the updated guidance is issued by NICE, my Department will consider it under the usual process for NICE Clinical Guidelines as per circular HSC (SQSD) 3/13.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to review the current arrangements that prevent partners attending maternity and neonatal appointments.

(AQW 8969/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department published updated visiting guidance for maternity services (available here: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>), which took effect from 23 September 2020.

The decision to permit visitors into a facility on a day to day basis remains with the person in charge, and will be based on a risk assessment of the ability to ensure safety of patients, staff and the visitor. However, the expectation as set out in the current visiting restrictions is that:

“Birth partners will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to dating scan, early pregnancy clinic, anomaly scan, in the event of pregnancy loss and bereavement, Fetal Medicine Department, when admitted to individual room for active labour (to be determined by midwife) and birth and, to visit in antenatal and postnatal wards for up to one hour once a week.”

Further, in Neonatal units:

“One of two nominated parents/caregivers can be accommodated at any given time”.

The visiting guidance is structured to take account of variances in the ongoing rate of infection transmission across Northern Ireland, and will remain in place for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. This guidance is written in such a way as to require different levels of restriction based on the regional position in terms of surge assessment, and while my officials keep the guidance under review, no significant changes are currently anticipated. However, the guidance also highlights the possibility of local guidance being introduced to address particular clusters of cases in a particular geographical area or facility.

This is not the experience I would hope for expectant mothers and their partners. However, these restrictions are not in place simply to protect patients and their visitors, but are necessary due to the need to maintain safety for all others, including other families, all our HSC staff and therefore the wider population, through social distancing and ensuring appropriate Infection Control Procedures are followed across all healthcare settings.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health to detail any care plan programs currently in place for children impacted by parental alienation.

(AQW 8990/17-22)

Mr Swann: A care plan is unique to the looked after child to whom it relates and is intended to ensure that the child’s needs relating to health, safety and wellbeing are identified and measures put in place to respond to those needs are subject to review. This could include needs arising as a result of parental alienation.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what assurances he can give that the quantities required for winter flu vaccinations will meet the increased demand and program of delivery.

(AQW 8996/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccine orders for the seasonal flu programme need to be placed with manufacturers early in the year. Order volumes are based on uptake in the previous year and the uptake targets set for the current year. In 2019/20 less than 700,000 vaccines were administered. The initial orders for 2020/21 amounted to 733,000 vaccines. In light of Covid-19, a further 317,300 vaccines were procured bringing the total to 1,050,300.

This year there has been a very high early demand for vaccines through the public seasonal flu vaccination programme. Uptake of vaccine by the eligible groups is being monitored and if indications are that projected demand is likely to exceed supplies, efforts will be made to secure further vaccine stocks.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health what consideration he has given to assigning Causeway Hospital as an elective care centre.

(AQO 941/17-22)

Mr Swann: The benefits of elective care centres have been emphasised by the impact of the pandemic. For elective care centres to realise their full potential, services must be entirely separated from urgent and emergency pressures, with fully ring fenced staff and beds. No single hospital site currently has sufficient capacity to meet the requirements for the full caseload of daycase activity. Therefore a network of sites will be required.

On 28 July I published the Regional Service Delivery Model for Daycase Elective Procedures and a report setting out the evidence for this approach and an analysis of the suitability of the different hospital sites across Northern Ireland. These reports are available on the Department’s website.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many people have currently been vaccinated for the flu.

(AQW 9051/17-22)

Mr Swann: Early indications are that uptake of the flu vaccine is running at a much higher rate this year compared to previous years. The first official report on the number of people vaccinated from the start of the 2020/21 public flu vaccination programme will be submitted to the Department around the 7th of November.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many flu vaccinations were (i) ordered; and (ii) delivered for this year's programme.
(AQW 9052/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) A total of 1,050,300 vaccine doses have been ordered to date for use in the public seasonal influenza vaccination programme.
- (ii) Of this total, 779,000 vaccine doses have been delivered into Northern Ireland to date.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to suspend staff car parking charges at hospitals during the pandemic.
(AQW 9054/17-22)

Mr Swann: Yes. I have secured additional funding from the Department of Finance for the immediate reintroduction of free car parking for Health and Social Care staff until 31 March 2021.

I hope this provides a small amount of welcome news to our valued staff as they enter into a potentially even more challenging second Covid-19 surge.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health how the backlog of flu vaccinations will be dealt with when stocks are replenished in November 2020.
(AQW 9055/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are a number of elements to the adult seasonal flu vaccination programme. Health and Social Care Trusts and community pharmacies provide vaccination for health and social care workers, while GP practices lead on vaccinating those aged 65 and over, and those in clinical at risk categories.

Due to very high levels of early demand for vaccine this year amongst the eligible groups, centrally held stocks of adult vaccine are almost depleted as well over half a million doses of vaccine have been distributed to GPs, Trusts and community pharmacies. Not all of this stock has been administered and therefore some people in the eligible groups are continuing to receive the vaccine. Unfortunately, however, some GPs have had to postpone mass vaccination clinics planned for late October and the first half of November.

I fully appreciate that re-arranging these clinics will be a challenge for GPs who have done an excellent job to date in delivering a high throughput of vaccination within the context of Covid-19 enhanced infection control requirements. I am confident that GPs will be able to re-arrange these clinics when they are again able to place orders for vaccine supplies from central stores.

Additional funds of £1m have been allocated to support GPs in delivering the programme this year in recognition of the anticipated increase in demand and the need for alternative programme delivery arrangements. This support should assist with the rearranging of mass vaccination clinics to help ensure that people receive the vaccine well in time before flu will be circulating widely in the community.

For health and social care workers, the Trusts will extend their vaccination clinics into November and December, and the participating community pharmacies will continue to offer the vaccine to frontline health care workers.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health whether he will review the guidance and restrictions on maternity services, including allowing both parents to attend antenatal scans and appointments and for both parents to be in attendance throughout the entire labour and birthing process.
(AQW 9068/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department published updated visiting guidance for maternity services (available here: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>), which took effect from 23 September 2020.

The decision to permit visitors into a facility on a day to day basis remains with the midwife in charge, and will be based on a risk assessment of the ability to ensure safety of patients, staff and the visitor. However, the expectation as set out in the current visiting restrictions is that:

"Birth partners will be facilitated to accompany the pregnant woman to dating scan, early pregnancy clinic, anomaly scan, in the event of pregnancy loss and bereavement, Fetal Medicine Department, when admitted to individual room for active labour (to be determined by midwife) and birth and, to visit in antenatal and postnatal wards for up to one hour once a week."

The visiting guidance is structured to take account of variances in the ongoing rate of infection transmission across Northern Ireland, and will remain in place for the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic. This guidance is written in such a way as to require different levels of restriction based on the regional position in terms of surge assessment, and while my officials keep the guidance under review, no significant changes are currently anticipated. However, the guidance also highlights

the possibility of local guidance being introduced to address particular clusters of cases in a particular geographical area or facility.

This is not the experience I would hope for expectant mothers and their partners. However, these restrictions are not in place simply to protect patients and their visitors, but are necessary due to the need to maintain safety for all others, including other families, all our HSC staff and therefore the wider population, through social distancing and ensuring appropriate Infection Control Procedures are followed across all healthcare settings.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Health what directions have been issued to those charged with administering flu vaccinations to ensure remaining and future stock of the vaccine is distributed to the most vulnerable first.
(AQW 9071/17-22)

Mr Swann: There has been a very high early demand for vaccines through the public seasonal flu vaccination programme this year. To meet this demand, virtually all centrally held stock of adult flu vaccine has been distributed to GPs, Trusts and community pharmacies. This amounts to over half a million doses of vaccine, an unprecedented number at this stage of a seasonal flu vaccination programme.

The Public Health Agency and the Health and Social Care Board have asked that those administering vaccines to health and social care workers prioritise vaccinating frontline staff from both the statutory and independent sectors.

GPs have been asked to continue to use their existing stock to vaccinate those in the eligible groups. Where they have unused vaccine, and do not have immediate plans to use this, they have been asked to advise the PHA or Regional Procurement Pharmacy to enable redistribution to other practices that may require it.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Health when AQW 5811/17-22 will be answered.
(AQW 9106/17-22)

Mr Swann: In recent years, similar to other Gender Identity Services provided across the UK, Northern Ireland has witnessed a significant growth in demand. To date, efforts to recruit replacements for key staff who have left the service in Northern Ireland have had limited success. Consequently, the service have been unable to progress the waiting list for individuals newly referred to the service.

My Department is working collaboratively with the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and the Health and Social Care Board in undertaking a review of the Gender Identity Service, including how best to address the issue of waiting times.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health whether the official business case for the Hollywell Mental Health Unit has been approved; and at what stage the design work is for this project.
(AQW 9128/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Outline Business Case for a new Acute Mental Health Hospital to replace Holywell Mental Health Unit was approved on 28th August 2020. Approval was given for the project to move forward with Stage 1 of the £80m facility, at a cost just over £4m.

Stage 1 covers the design team procurement and the design of the new building and will take 25 months to complete. Work has commenced to collate the supporting information for the Pre-Qualification Questionnaire for potential tenderers which will ultimately result in the procurement of a design team.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health how many missed, or late cancelled, bookings of COVID-19 tests there have been at each testing centre.
(AQW 9172/17-22)

Mr Swann: Covid-19 testing sites across Northern Ireland operate as part of the National Testing Programme (NTP) managed by the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) in London known as Pillar 2.

There is currently no mechanism for cancelling a test at any of the NTP sites. Information on numbers who book a test and do not attend has not been made available by DHSC.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health to detail the latest guidance and advice for people who were on the original shielding lists.
(AQW 9173/17-22)

Mr Swann: Shielding for clinically extremely vulnerable people was paused in Northern Ireland on 31st July 2020.

In light of the increased numbers of cases of Coronavirus in Northern Ireland, the Chief Medical Officer and his team have looked at this position again. Their assessment is that its resumption is not necessary at this stage. The Chief Medical Officer's statement can be found here: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/shielding-remain-paused>

This decision reflects the context of our greater understanding of Covid-19, how to prevent its transmission, and appreciation of the impact of shielding on many people's physical and mental well-being. A number of important changes have taken place in our approach to managing Covid-19 and reducing its transmission since shielding was originally advised. This includes a

greater awareness of the importance of social distancing, the requirement to use face coverings, Covid secure workplaces and greater adherence to respiratory and hand hygiene.

The decision to retain the pause in shielding will, however, be kept under review and we will not hesitate to update our advice if this is necessary.

It is important to emphasise that everyone who was previously shielding continues to need to take strenuous precautions in their day to day lives and should scrupulously follow the guidance we set out when shielding was paused. This includes, good hand hygiene; staying at home as much as possible; maintaining social distancing; working from home where possible, or ensuring social distancing when going to and from work; and limiting social contacts.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health to detail the availability of supplies for the flu vaccine for people of working age, who are clinically vulnerable to the Coronavirus, and their carers, as well as those with other underlying conditions.
(AQW 9180/17-22)

Mr Swann: A total of 265,000 doses of flu vaccine, of the type used in adults aged under 65, were ordered prior to the Covid-19 pandemic for use in the public seasonal influenza vaccination programme. These vaccines have all been distributed to GPs, Trusts and community pharmacies for administering to eligible groups. There are no vaccine supplies of this type remaining at central stores.

In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, a further 192,800 vaccine doses were procured over the summer. These supplies are expected to be received in Northern Ireland in mid-November.

The groups eligible for vaccination under the flu programme within the 18 to 64 year old age cohort include: people who are risk of serious adverse health outcomes from influenza infection due to underlying health conditions; carers; health and social care workers; pregnant women; and household contacts of those who received shielding letters earlier in the Covid-19 pandemic.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Health whether COVID-19 shielding advice is to change.
(AQW 9196/17-22)

Mr Swann: Shielding for clinically extremely vulnerable people was paused in Northern Ireland on 31st July 2020.

In light of the increased numbers of cases of Coronavirus in Northern Ireland, the Chief Medical Officer and his team have looked at this position again. Their assessment is that its resumption is not necessary at this stage. The Chief Medical Officer's statement can be found here: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/shielding-remain-paused>

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Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail each service his Department (i) currently provides alongside the Department of Justice; and (ii) is developing alongside the Department of Justice.
(AQW 9240/17-22)

Mr Swann:

(i) The Services my Department currently provide alongside the Department of Justice are:

- 1 Prison Healthcare;
- 2 Multi Agency Triage Team (MATT);
- 3 Towards Zero Suicide Mental Health Collaborative Programme;
- 4 Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Helpline; and
- 5 Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences (MARAC).

(ii) The Services my Department are developing alongside the Department of Justice are:

- 1 Healthcare in Musgrave Street Custody Suite collaborative pathfinder approach; and
- 2 The establishment of a Regional Care and Justice Campus for children and young people in Northern Ireland.

Officials in my Department routinely work collaboratively with colleagues in the Department of Justice on a range of issues including currently on coronavirus regulations.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what support services Health and Social Care Trusts provide for people with eating disorders.

(AQW 9242/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Eating Disorders Service based in Woodstock Lodge, Belfast serves the populations of Belfast Trust and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (SEHSCT) and provides a fully functioning Tertiary Service which includes an Intensive Support Programme.

The SEHSCT also support people experiencing mild to moderate problems associated with an Eating Disorder through its Community Mental Health Services.

The Northern Health and Social Care Trust Adult Eating Disorder Service provides a specialist community based outpatient service based at Holywell Hospital in Antrim. Satellite clinics are provided in the Mid Ulster area, Coleraine, Whiteabbey and Ballymena.

The Southern Health and Social Care Trust Adult Eating Disorder Service is a community outpatient service based in Ashleigh House, St Luke's Hospital, Armagh with 5 additional locally accessible clinics across the Trust.

The Western Health and Social Care Trust Adult Eating Disorder Service provides specialist community based outpatient services based in Old Bridge House, Londonderry and Rivendell Omagh. Outreach clinics are provided in Limavady, Strabane and Enniskillen.

Each Trust Eating Disorder Service will provide an in-reach service to medical and mental health wards when required.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health what steps his Department has taken to support temporary measures, including partitioning, to allow care home visiting to continue during any second surge of COVID-19.

(AQW 9255/17-22)

Mr Swann: As a result of the Northern Ireland Executive's decision to invoke additional restrictions across Northern Ireland in response to increasing COVID-19 transmissions, updated visiting guidance for all care settings has been published and is available here: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/Covid-19-visiting-guidance>

Each care home has also been asked to undertake a risk assessment to determine how visiting can be safely accommodated, to work in collaboration with residents and family/friend carers and to ensure that the detail of the visiting policy is communicated widely. This approach is underpinned by the recent additional funding to care homes.

The further funding announced on 21 October amounts to an additional £27m. Part of this will go to support changes to the physical environment in care homes such as partitioning, visitor pods (to support safe visiting) and meet other additional costs, such as increased cleaning as a result of the installation of these facilities.

Funding was previously made available to care homes to invest in technology such as tablets to support connections with family and friends.

In addition, I have asked each care home to work to introduce and support "care partner" roles. This recommendation was made following consideration of the shared experiences of residents, families and staff which informed the Rapid Learning Initiative, to which the sector contributed. While some homes already have these arrangements in place, I recognise that many are finding this challenging. Trusts have been asked to support care homes with this process. Care partners are defined as individuals who will have previously played a role in supporting and attending to their relative's physical and mental health, and/or provided specific support and assistance to ensure that communication or other health and social care needs are met due to a pre-existing condition.

The current guidance also makes allowance for end of life visiting, for instance, and is clear that visits from Ministers of Faith should be accommodated and should not count towards the one indoor visit per week which I have asked homes to apply.

I recognise that in the current circumstances it is impossible to facilitate the level of visiting contact that would be allowed in normal circumstances. However I hope that these measures reassure you of my commitment to strike the right balance between protecting life and quality of life.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health how much the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has spent on funding, directly or indirectly, to independent care homes in the last 5 years.

(AQW 9264/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below identifies total gross expenditure which is the amount paid to independent care homes in the last 5 years (including in-year expenditure up to September 2020). The Trust is only funded for the net cost (after client contribution) as detailed below. These are all direct costs and do not include any indirect costs.

	2015-16 (£)	2016-17 (£)	2017-18 (£)	2018-19 (£)	2019-20 (£)	2020-21* (£)
Total Gross Expense	91,237,238	95,095,547	99,171,943	106,173,404	113,019,459	58,437,649
Total client contribution	31,762,162	33,638,427	34,137,636	35,779,078	38,433,954	18,137,332
Nett	59,475,076	61,457,120	65,034,307	70,394,326	74,585,505	40,300,317

* To date

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health what action he is taking to ensure that patients are able to contact their GP for advice and care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 9267/17-22)

Mr Swann: 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 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.

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.

The telephone first triage system also allows GPs to identify those patients who may be infected with coronavirus. These patients can then be referred for face to face assessment to one of the Primary Care COVID-19 centres. This ensures that these patients do not attend the GP Practice or community pharmacy and are seen in an appropriate environment as well as ensuring that GP services are maintained with minimal disruption.

GPs are still expected to clinically assess for risk of serious illness and refer as clinically appropriate for diagnostic tests and to specialist services, such as an outpatient clinic, as they have always done.

The Health and Social Care Board wrote to GP practices in Northern Ireland on 30 July asking that, if this had not been done recently, practices undertake a review of arrangements for patients accessing their services in order to ensure that they are continuing to provide services at times that are appropriate to meet the needs of patients. Practices were advised to communicate to patients about the practice services that are available and how to access them with the recommendation that these communications make clear that GP practices are open.

On 7 September, GP leaders from the Health and Social Care Board, the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Association issued a statement to reassure patients that, whilst patients may be seen in a different way, by phone or video-link, GP practices are still open to treat patients, provide advice and issue prescriptions. GPs want anyone who has a health concern to feel reassured that they will be able to get an appointment and see a GP if necessary. If people have symptoms or an unexplained illness or have any reason to be concerned, they should in the first instance contact their GP who will be able to provide advice.

A letter was also issued to MLAs and other local political representatives providing an update on the current arrangements and asking that they share the key message with constituents that GP practices are open, but working differently.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed unprecedented challenges for the planning and delivery of health and social care services in Northern Ireland. General practice has rapidly changed its working patterns in order to cope with the current national emergency. Some of the measures taken are to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread by providing advice by telephone or video where appropriate. Other decisions are based on the potential impact of COVID-19 on conditions, or on the potential impact of treatments on the risk of COVID-19.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Health what steps he is taking to harness external space and staff skills in order to expand health and social care capacity for a second surge of COVID-19.

(AQW 9274/17-22)

Mr Swann: To offset the reduction in the number of services that Trusts are currently able to provide, the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) has regular and ongoing engagement with the three main Independent Sector providers for access to theatre sessions, including increased access to weekend General Anaesthetic lists. The HSCB is also regularly engaging with other Independent Sector providers to secure additional capacity.

In addition to the Independent Sector provision, the HSCB has increased cross Trust collaboration to maximise the utilisation of theatres in COVID-light sites.

In anticipation of a second surge my Department re-opened the Workforce Appeal in September in an effort to try and build capacity again. Yet again the response has been exceptional with over 4,800 applications already made. I would encourage anyone with the relevant skills and experience who is interested in joining or returning to the health service to consider applying.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Health for an update on provision of regional support staff at the recommissioned acute services block on the Ulster Hospital site.

(AQW 9276/17-22)

Mr Swann: Currently the South Eastern Trust is working to commission the Acute Services Block, Ulster Hospital, earlier than the previously agreed timescale of Autumn 2021.

The Trust has been asked to consider a workforce model should the building be required to support regional services in the response to the second Covid-19 surge.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) how many COVID-19 beds are currently operational throughout Health and Social Care Trusts, including in Nightingale facilities; and (ii) how much this number has increased in each of the last six months.

(AQW 9298/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Information on the number of beds occupied by COVID-19 patients is published daily on the Department's COVID-19 dashboard; this data is available to view at the link below.
- (ii) Excel data for the previous 6 months can be downloaded to show how this number has fluctuated over the course of the pandemic:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/covid-19-daily-dashboard-updates>

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health (i) what capital allocations his Department has received from the Executive for COVID-19 purposes; (ii) how this has been spent; and (iii) what proportion has been directed toward increasing inpatient bed capacity.

(AQW 9299/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) My Department has received the following capital allocations for Covid-19 purposes:
 - £33.8m in the June 2020 monitoring round;
 - £1.6m in September 2020 for the Test, Trace and Protect project; and
 - £32.4m in October 2020 monitoring.
- (ii) This capital has been spent on:
 - a wide range of medical equipment including ventilators, monitors and other essential equipment required to provide care for increased numbers of patients requiring respiratory and multiple organ support;
 - PPE storage and transport;
 - hospital estates works to facilitate the provision of medical oxygen;
 - ICT including the Test, Trace and Protect project; and
 - a second Nightingale Hospital at Whiteabbey.
- (iii) £4.5m has been allocated to deliver up to 100 additional beds at the second Nightingale Hospital at Whiteabbey. A further £9.7m invested in respiratory and critical care equipment will enable critical care capacity to be increased by up to 100 beds across the region if required. Overall bed capacity across the hospital system is managed dynamically as the total number of beds may fluctuate in line with demand and staff availability.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health how many COVID-19 inpatient beds cannot currently be operationalised due to a lack of sustainable staff rotas.

(AQW 9300/17-22)

Mr Swann: 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.

Staffing pressures is a constraint in all HSC Trusts and the allocation of staff and services provided are managed on a daily basis by each Trust in line with their Surge Plans.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what steps his Department has taken to increase the number of ventilators since the onset of the first wave of COVID-19.

(AQW 9301/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since the onset of the first wave of COVID-19 my Department has purchased 180 Mechanical Ventilators and 24 Portable Ventilators (primarily for use during patient transportation). To date 187 have been received with the remaining 17 due imminently.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health what steps he has taken to increase the number of mobile scanners available for cancer diagnostics; and whether this has increased since the onset of the first wave of COVID-19.

(AQW 9314/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have taken several steps to ensure cancer diagnostic capacity continues and remains resilient in preparation for further COVID-19 waves. Northern Ireland has benefited from a share of NHS England COVID-19 supplies including a mobile CT unit and additional ultrasound machines. In addition work is underway to secure a number of existing mobile scanners where contracts are due to expire. I am also considering requirements for additional MRI and CT mobile capacity from the independent sector.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health for an update of progress toward the launch of two new dedicated orthopaedic surgery hubs at Musgrave Park Hospital and Altnagelvin Area Hospital.

(AQW 9326/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have established a Regional Orthopaedic Network which is working to rebuild and transform elective orthopaedic services across Health and Social Care Trusts. The Orthopaedic Network is exploring options to sustain elective activity where possible during this surge period, and it continues to focus on the longer term objective to introduce a regional orthopaedic service with equity of access for all patients in Northern Ireland.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health how many GP appointments were conducted in (i) 2019; and (ii) 2020 to date.

(AQW 9328/17-22)

Mr Swann: As independent contractors, GPs are responsible for the day to day management of their practice, including patient appointment arrangements. Information on the number of GP appointments and the number of direct in-person GP appointments is not collated centrally and is consequently not available.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health what percentage of the recently postponed cancer procedures relate to people living in the West Belfast constituency.

(AQW 9364/17-22)

Mr Swann: Data indicates that 17% of the 106 patients who had recently reported postponed suspect cancer/cancer procedures in the Belfast HSC Trust live in the West Belfast constituency. Of the 106 patients reported as cancelled, 51 patients have had their procedure, 12 no longer require treatment and the remaining 43 have treatment dates confirmed.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health for an update on a planned mental health centre for Omagh.

(AQW 9383/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Western Health and Social Care Trust submitted a proposal for a new Mental Health unit in Omagh as part of a capital planning review exercise in 2018. Given my Department's existing capital commitments, the ability to take forward new capital projects, including this new mental health unit, will only be possible if significant additional capital resources are made available to me.

A bid for the funding to commence the new unit was submitted to the Department of Finance as part of a recent four year capital budget information gathering exercise. Since then, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has announced the November Spending Review will cover the 2021/22 year only and therefore my ability to take this project forward is subject to the confirmation of future budget allocations.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health to detail the location and number of intensive care unit beds for each of the last five years.

(AQW 9400/17-22)

Mr Swann: As outlined in table 1 below, the critical care resource has remained static since 2015, with the exception of 2 additional L3 beds in the Intensive Care Unit of the Royal Victoria Hospital in July 2017. There was a total of 104 ICU beds from 2015 to June 2017 and 106 ICU beds from July 2017 to October 2020.

Table 1: The number and location of critical care beds available from 2015 - 2020

Intensive Care Unit	2015- June 2017		July 2017 – October 2020	
	Total Bed Spaces	L3 Acuity* Bed Spaces	Total Bed Spaces	L3 Acuity* Bed Spaces
Altnagelvin	10	8.5	10	8.5
Antrim	8	7	8	7
Belfast City	9	7	9	7
Causeway	4	3	4	3
Craigavon	8	7	8	7
Mater	6	4.5	6	4.5
Royal Victoria	25	21	27	23
South West Acute	6	4	6	4
Ulster	10	8	10	8
General Adult Total	86	70	88	72
Cardiac ICU	18	14	18	14
Adult Totals	104	84	106	86

Source: Critical Care Network Northern Ireland

* L3 Acuity- This is reflective of patient who requires 1:1 nursing care to meet their clinical need and is a subset of the total.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health whether care home residents are required to contribute financially towards COVID -19 testing.

(AQW 9401/17-22)

Mr Swann: At no stage has / will any Care Home resident be required to contribute financially towards COVID-19 testing.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Health what provision exists for people to access bariatric surgery (i) locally via the Health Service; and (ii) for referrals to other parts of UK and Ireland.

(AQW 9409/17-22)

Mr Swann: Bariatric surgery is not currently commissioned locally in the Health & Social Care (HSC) service in Northern Ireland. In March 2020, my department announced plans to explore options to develop a regional bariatric service. This work has been temporarily suspended due to the need to respond to the ongoing pandemic and will be resumed when possible.

Transfer for treatment by the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) is known as an Extra Contractual Referral (ECR) and occurs when the HSCB approves a consultant's request to transfer a patient to a provider outside Northern Ireland for assessment or treatment which the consultant considers necessary but which is not available through HSC facilities locally. This is normally to a provider elsewhere in the United Kingdom but may also be to a provider outside the UK where this is clinically justified. Further information on the ECR process is available on the HSCB website.

Department for Infrastructure

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for Infrastructure for her assessment of the water services and the risks to (i) homes being flooded; and (ii) raw sewage spilling into an estuary.

(AQW 8934/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): I am advised by NI Water that, unfortunately, over 120 households are already affected by, or are at risk of, internal flooding whereby sewage escapes from the sewer network and enters homes.

Sewer networks contain Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) which act as safety valves for sewage to escape to water courses and water bodies (including estuaries) in extreme or high wet weather, and are designed to help prevent homes from being affected by sewage, should a sewer network reach capacity in high wet weather. However, where sewer networks are at, or very close to, their capacity, the CSOs may operate more frequently than they should, including during dry weather, and exceed the discharge consent set by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA). These CSOs are then classified by the NIEA and NI Water as "Unsatisfactory Intermittent Discharges" and present a risk to the receiving environment until the sewer system can be upgraded.

NI Water's wastewater system performance is vitally important. If it is not adequately funded, risks will increase in relation to raw sewerage escaping from NI Water's infrastructure. This, in turn, is likely to result in negative impacts on levels of service to existing customers and to lead to inadequate environmental protection as a result of increases in out of sewer flooding and pollution.

NI Water has extensive plans to upgrade its wastewater systems during PC21 (2021-2027). It has advised that this investment will help reduce the risk of raw sewage escaping from NI Water's infrastructure and affecting households and the receiving environment. However, NI Water's plans are dependent on adequate funding being made available through PC21.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 7857/17-22, and taking account of legislation in respect of the Review of Old Minerals Permissions, for her assessment of Derry City and Strabane District Council's ability to enforce against sand extraction at Kildoag Road, Goshaden, Derry.

(AQW 8946/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The provisions for a review of old mineral permissions are contained in the Planning Act (NI) 2011 but are not yet commenced. I understand that Derry City and Strabane District Council are actively considering this case at Kildoag Road, Goshaden, Derry.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 8306/17-22, to detail the amount paid out on personal injury claims in the Lisburn and Castlereagh Section Office area, in each of the last three years.

(AQW 8963/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Pursuant to AQW 8306/17-22 the table below provides a breakdown of the total amount paid out on personal injury claims received by my Department for the Lisburn and Castlereagh Section Office area in each of the last three financial years:

Payment type	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
Compensation	£126,740.00	£98,443.09	£111,678.03
Department's legal costs	£56,547.90	£50,815.92	£41,134.43
Plaintiff's legal costs	£83,670.17	£92,618.81	£91,231.70
Payments to DfC *	£12,598.50	£14,464.73	£29,982.35
Witness costs	£0.00	£0.00	£188.63
Medical reports	£308.75	£50.00	£0.00
Total	£279,865.32	£256,392.55	£274,215.14

* Under the Compensation Recovery Scheme

Ms Dolan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 8661/17-22, whether she has included funding to address sewerage issues in Galliagh Shore within her Departmental funding bids.

(AQW 8980/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Galliagh Shore development is privately owned and, therefore, neither my Department nor NI Water has any legal remit to resolve the issue. However, I am keen to work with Executive colleagues to assist the residents of Galliagh Shore, and the many other developments that are in a similar position with unadopted and inadequate sewerage infrastructure.

As previously advised, NI Water is not sufficiently funded to meet the regulatory outputs required of it by the Utility Regulator. In view of this, I had written to the Minister of Finance on the 16 September 2020, seeking an urgent meeting regarding NI Water's future funding, to enable the company to fulfil its statutory responsibilities, and to raise the matter of inadequate private sewerage infrastructure sites, such as Galliagh Shore, in the hope that a solution can be found. Minister Murphy replied to me indicating that he planned to host a series of bilateral meetings in the coming weeks to discuss the pressures identified by departments. It is my intention to include the issue of funding for unadopted developments as part of the agenda for these meetings.

Mr Middleton asked the Minister for Infrastructure what plans her Department has to improve the rail network to Londonderry.

(AQW 9025/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since coming into office, I have been clear that my priority is addressing regional imbalance, better connecting communities and, importantly, ensuring that we shape our places around our people, for our people and with our people.

I have committed to a new feasibility study to get phase 3 of the Derry to Coleraine rail line back on track, and I have ring-fenced funding for that work to be done at pace. I have also commissioned a separate study to explore improving existing services and the options of new halts and associated park-and-ride facilities at Strathfoyle, Eglinton/City of Derry Airport and Ballykelly.

The New Decade, New Approach commitment did not extend to the North-West, and that was simply not acceptable to me or my counterparts in the Irish Government. I was delighted that Minister Ryan and I confirmed at the recent North/South Ministerial Council meeting that we would develop a feasibility study of a potential high-speed rail connection between Derry, Belfast, Dublin, Limerick and Cork as we seek to create a spine of connectivity on the island and work collaboratively to tackle regional imbalance.

All-Island connectivity should excite us all, not least because it better connects our communities in a more sustainable, cleaner and greener way, but also because it opens up huge potential for our economy. The new regional strategic transport network transport plan being prepared for consultation will also set out the priorities for future development of the main road and rail networks up to 2035.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 7698/17-22, why no bond was secured by NI Water for the necessary sewerage works before the construction of Hunters Lodge commenced.
(AQW 9073/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised that the developer responsible for Hunters Lodge has entered into an Article 161 agreement for the adoption of the sewers that have been laid within the development, and a bond is in place to address any issues with the construction of the sewers within the site. However, NI Water will not proceed to adopt the site, if it is not connected via an offsite outfall sewer to the main sewer network.

NI Water has advised that there is no storm sewer available to serve the Hunters Mill development, and the adjacent foul sewer is not deep enough. Therefore, the developer asked NI Water to provide a dedicated offsite foul and storm sewer to serve the site's 130 houses. In August 2018, NI Water wrote to the developer advising that, in order for it to lay the required sewers, the developer would need to pay just under £29k of a contribution towards the cost of the works and to take out a further bond of £218.7k for the offsite sewers. NI Water also advised the developer that the bond would be returned when the developer had constructed all the houses. To date, the required contribution and bond have not been paid to NI Water and the site is currently not connected to the public sewer network. Given this current position, the developer remains responsible for dealing with the foul and storm sewage.

In addition, NI Water has had to revise its original design of the outfall sewers to accommodate a new development adjacent to Hunters Lodge, where another developer has also requisitioned NI Water to provide outfall sewers. The revised scheme has been designed and is currently being priced by NI Water contractors. Once the cost estimates have been finalised, NI Water will write to both developers, advising them of the financial conditions that they need to meet. Until the necessary financial conditions have been met, NI Water will not be in a position to proceed to lay the required offsite outfall sewers to connect Hunters Lodge and the adjacent development to the sewer network.

Where a developer has obtained planning permission, NI Water has no authority to stop that developer constructing and selling houses. As with all development proposals, NI Water advises developers to contact it at an early stage, to ensure that the necessary services are in place to serve the development.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 8175/17-22, whether she will publish the Planning Forum's review of resourcing for statutory consultations within DfI Rivers.
(AQW 9117/17-22)

Ms Mallon: One key action of the Planning Forum relates to statutory consultees reviewing resourcing requirements associated with their statutory consultee role against their workloads, to ensure efficient and timely responses to planning consultations.

I can confirm that an internal review of staff resources within my Department's Rivers Planning Advisory and Modelling Unit has been completed by officials. The review noted the increased workload in the unit, in terms of consultation numbers and their complexity. It also recommended that 3 new Professional and Technical posts and one new Administrative post be added to the staff structure, to deal with this workload and ensure that future planning consultations could be dealt with in a timely manner. The recommended posts have now been created. As the report was internal and dealt with staffing issues, it is not intended for publication however a summary of the key findings are outlined above.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an indicative date as to when construction will commence on the Narrow Water bridge.
(AQW 9134/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Narrow Water Bridge is currently at options analysis stage and therefore it is not currently possible to provide a date when construction will commence. My officials are working to update an economic appraisal of options considered in respect of future development of Narrow Water, in collaboration with colleagues in the Department for Transport. Given developments since options were last considered jointly by Ministers, specialist analysis in a number of technical areas is required to fully inform the economic appraisal.

Work has included significant stakeholder engagement and most recently, in September, I met with representatives from the Narrow Water Bridge Community Network and local political representatives to discuss the local support for a bridge to link the communities on both sides of the lough and how to take full advantage of the tourism potential of this cross-border region.

I have recently engaged with Minister Ryan to discuss how best to facilitate unlocking the potential of cross-border regions such as this in the Newry/Carlingford area. This was discussed at the North South Ministerial Council on 7th October. I want to ensure that the people of South Down and Carlingford are able to maximise the benefits that will flow from investment in the area while ensuring value for money spent.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many European Conference of Ministers of Transport permits are readily available in the outcome of a no-deal Brexit.

(AQW 9135/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) issue European Conference of Ministers of Transport (ECMT) permits for GB and NI. DVSA have announced that the application period for 2021 Permits will open on the 2 November 2020 and run until the 20 November 2020. There are up to 1,668 annual permits and 5,040 short-term permits for 2021 for GB and NI.

DfT have advised that it is not the Government's intention to rely solely on ECMT permits for market access. In the event that an agreement is not reached with the EU, the European Commission may grant a 'temporary connectivity' regulation to allow continued access to the EU for UK operators – similar to what was proposed in the event of a no deal in 2019.

DfT have also advised that Northern Ireland operators will not need to apply for an ECMT permit to undertake journeys to the south.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether she will bring forward a scheme to support taxi drivers; and (ii) when will she give financial support to (a) taxi drivers; and (b) coach drivers.

(AQW 9197/17-22)

Ms Mallon: On 29 October the Executive approved a financial support scheme costing £14m for taxi drivers and a scheme costing £5m for private bus and coach operators, which will be set up by my Department using the new legal powers transferred by the First Minister and deputy First Minister under the Financial Assistance Act (Northern Ireland) 2009.

I anticipate that the scheme for the taxi industry will launch week commencing 9 November and the scheme for the private bus and coach sector will follow in mid November.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given the increasing volume of traffic and the number of road traffic accidents in Willowfield Street, whether she will review the street's road safety with a view to increasing safety for residents, pedestrians and road users.

(AQW 9208/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I fully recognise the importance of implementing road safety measures and I am committed to exploring solutions that deliver better for communities and improve lives across Northern Ireland. My officials receive many requests for safety improvements and very much would like to be in a position to meet all valid requests.

However, particularly in the context of severe and challenging budget cuts, those areas requiring most urgent attention must be prioritised. For consistency and fairness the current criteria through which this is assessed includes factors such as speed and volume of traffic, the most up to date three years personal injury collision statistics and environmental factors such as the proximity of public buildings and the nature of the road.

The latest assessment carried out in October 2020 indicates that a scheme at Willowfield Street would not be currently considered as high a priority as other schemes competing for what is limited Local Transport and Safety Measures (LTSM) funding allocated to Roads Eastern Division.

If your constituents consider there are persistent issues with speeding or persons driving inappropriately in this area they may wish to report such incidents to the PSNI on their non-emergency number 101.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has any plans to address the historical sewage issue at Killeavey Road, Newry.

(AQW 9227/17-22)

Ms Mallon: NI Water has advised that it has developed a Newry Drainage Area Plan (DAP) Model to examine potential capacity issues in the Killeavey Road area. The model has involved studies and CCTV surveys in order to assess sewer dimensions, flows and structural conditions. The DAP Model process has now been completed, and NI Water has been analysing the initial outputs in order to inform further detailed options.

Any infrastructure investment in the Killeavey Road area of Newry is subject to the recommendations of the modelling work and the availability of funding. NI Water's capital investment projects form part of the Price Control (PC21) Business Plan, and are approved by the Utility Regulator. The Killeavey Road area is not presently included in NI Water's planned programme of investment in PC21.

However, subject to funding being provided to meet the PC21 Business Plan, NI Water is proposing to undertake significant investment in the wastewater network in the Newry area. This will involve upgrading both the Newry Wastewater Treatment

Works with an investment of approximately £28M and the Newport Greenbank Terminal Pumping Station with an investment of approximately £4M.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Ulster Canal project.
(AQW 9246/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Ulster Canal Restoration Project has been taken forward to two phases. In phase one (Upper Lough Erne to Castle Saunderson), a short length of new lateral canal, together with a new navigation arch beside Derrykerrib Bridge on the River Finn, were completed in the autumn of 2018. Works relating to the installation of a new floating mooring facility at Castle Saunderson were completed in October 2019 and the navigation channel from Upper Lough Erne to Castle Saunderson (circa 2.5 km) is now open for boating.

In relation to phase two (Clones to Clonfad), a commission to investigate a source of a sustainable water supply for the marina has been completed with final testing ongoing to inform a detailed report due early next month. Waterways Ireland is satisfied that a suitable supply has been sourced in order to facilitate the development. Creative design is also ongoing to develop a vision for the canal within Clones. Work relating to land requirements and purchase arrangements for this section of the restoration has also commenced.

Work will commence on phase 3 (Castle Saunderson to Clonfad) when phase 2 is complete.

All three phases of the project have been funded by the Irish Government.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail all road safety projects her Department will carry out in the Newry and Armagh area during the current mandate.
(AQW 9248/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Details of works programmes being undertaken by each of four Roads Divisions are compiled on a yearly basis and listed in the Reports to the respective district councils. Southern Division's Reports to Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council, which are due to issue shortly, include details of the planned road safety projects for the Newry and Armagh area for the 2020-21 financial year.

After the reports have been presented to both Councils and meetings with my officials have taken place, they will be published on the Department's website and are available to view online through the following link:

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications>

Ms Flynn asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider granting a designated temporary safe cycle lane on Blacks Road, similar to that recently installed on Grosvenor Road, pending the implementation of the Colin cycle plan.
(AQW 9348/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am keen to see progress on better walking and cycling infrastructure throughout Northern Ireland and I have made a commitment to deliver sustainable infrastructure that will transform our communities and lives. With the ongoing COVID-19 emergency, we are having to adapt to a new way of living, and as part of that, we need to create more opportunities for active travel and make our roads safer for those who want to walk and cycle.

I believe long term positive change is best achieved when government works in partnership with local communities. I am keen to consider proposals for better walking and cycling infrastructure that are put forward by Councils, particularly those for which there is strong community and stakeholder support. Pop-up cycle lanes give an opportunity to trial better ways to use our road space and my officials are continuing to work with local councils across the north to develop future proposals for them. Alongside that, my officials are progressing the development of the Colin Active Travel Network with the other stakeholders.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure what engagement she has had with the Minister of Education regarding face coverings on school transport.
(AQW 9356/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have worked closely with the Minister of Education throughout the coronavirus pandemic on issues regarding face coverings on school transport.

While home-to-school transport falls within the remit of the Minister of Education, many school children rely on public transport for all or part of their journey to and from school, including up to 90% of pupils in the Belfast area.

Following our most recent discussions, Minister Weir and I agreed to adopt a uniform approach to the mandatory use of face coverings on school and public transport and to apply the requirement to all post-primary school age children. As you will be aware, these proposals were subsequently agreed by the Executive on 29 October, and the wearing of face coverings on all dedicated school buses and public transport is now mandatory for all post-primary children.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many additional driver testing slots have been allocated for this year.
(AQW 9357/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close over the next four weeks to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. Motorcycle lessons and tests are not affected by these new restrictions. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

To create additional capacity the DVA is planning to open up the booking system for February for these impacted customers only. Further appointments will also be made available in November, December and January as the DVA increases capacity by recruiting additional examiners. These slots, when they are released, will also only be available to these impacted customers.

When testing resumes the DVA also intends to offer driving tests on a Saturday and following consultation with key stakeholders is planning to offer driving tests for Heavy Goods Vehicles on Sundays, where it is suitable to do so without compromising the integrity of the test. The DVA will also use overtime to rota off-shift dual role driving examiners to provide additional capacity and to provide cover for scheduled driving tests, where due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, driving examiners are unable to attend work.

The number of driving test slots that are available for any given period is not collated by the Driving and Vehicle Agency (DVA) as these figures can vary significantly depending on a range of factors including the demand for tests and the availability of staff. However, the number of driving test applications and driving tests conducted are National Statistics and as such are released in accordance with the UK Official Statistics Code of Practice.

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 has recently introduced a new publication providing provisional monthly statistics on vehicle, driving and theory tests conducted. DVA statisticians published the first edition on 15 October, relating to September 2020, which is available on the Department's website. Application statistics will be added to the November publication and will include figures for the October period.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the north/south services currently undertaken by Translink. (AQW 9358/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The list of Cross Border Services that are undertaken by Translink are listed as follows:

- 1 **Enterprise Train Service**
- 2 X1 Belfast - Dublin Airport - Dublin
- 3 X2 Belfast - Dublin Airport - Dublin
- 4 X3 Derry - Monaghan - Dublin Airport - Dublin
- 5 X4 Derry - Armagh - Dublin Airport - Dublin
- 6 X5 Newry - Dublin Airport - Dublin
- 7 Service 194 Enniskillen - Pettigo
- 8 Service 194a Enniskillen - Pettigo via Irvinestown & Kesh
- 9 Service 194b Enniskillen - Bundoran via Irvinestown, Kesh & Pettigo
10. Service 194d Enniskillen - Pettigo via Irvinestown & Kesh
11. Service 195 Castlecaldwell - Bundoran
12. Service 95 & 95a Enniskillen - Clones
13. Service 70 Armagh - Monaghan
14. Service 58 Enniskillen - Belturbet
15. Service 278 Portrush - Monaghan
16. Service 192 Enniskillen - Swanlinbar
17. Service 69 & 69c Armagh - Castleblaney
18. Service 270 & 271 Belfast - Monaghan & Cavan
19. Service 1a Derry - Muff

I am firmly committed to ensuring our public transport services continue to operate, and I continue to make bids for support to the Finance Minister and the Executive to ensure that

Translink has the budget it requires to deliver all of its existing services across our island, as well as seeking to enhance the public transport network where possible.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) why funding for street light column replacements was reduced this year; and (ii) where this funding was allocated to.

(AQW 9360/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am pleased to be able to confirm that I have allocated £14m for street lighting column replacements in the current financial year. When compared to funding provided in recent years, this represents a significant increase and will allow for the replacement this year of approximately 6500 street lighting columns spread across all 4 of the Roads Divisions.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that it has recently come to light that £700 million was wasted by delays and budget overruns within her Department, how she intends to ensure that delays caused by lengthy public inquiries and judicial reviews are addressed while also maintaining the right to object.

(AQW 9415/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The £700 million of delays and cost overruns identified by the NIAO related to eleven capital projects across five NICS Departments. Of the 4 DfI projects set out in the NIAO Report, the overrun on the A6, Belfast Rapid Transit and Belfast Transport Hub projects taken together is £2.9m, equating to 0.4% of the estimated cost of these schemes. With regard to the A5, where the projected cost overrun is more significant at £301m, the cost overrun, compared to the 2010 business case estimated costs, is largely due to the inflationary effect of delays due to legal challenges that were outwith the Department's control.

In its recent report on Major Capital Projects, the Public Accounts Committee recognised that the public and organisations with an interest must be allowed the opportunity to contest projects on environmental or other issues.

There is duty on the Department, as the promoter of major roads projects, to consult on the making of draft orders and ensure that it is fair to all of those who may wish to express objections or representations about schemes. Whilst the Department endeavours to deal with objections through correspondence and meetings, an Independent Inquiry is often required to deal with unresolved objections. The scope of any Public Inquiry is always focused and, where necessary, guided by legal advice.

The Department for Infrastructure has no input into the protocol in relation to judicial reviews. The PAC Committee has recommended that the NICS works with the Judiciary to consider the Judicial Review process. My officials will be considering this recommendation carefully, along with officials in other Departments.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that the eleven month extension provided to operators and drivers will not be recognised in the south of Ireland or other EU countries, what arrangements her Department has made for drivers whose licences expired between 1 February and 31 December 2020.

(AQW 9418/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware of the risk that, if there is not a negotiated outcome that allows for mutual recognition of driving licences, other EU member states may decide not to recognise extended UK-issued licences from 1 January 2021. My officials are engaging with counterparts in the Department for Transport in London and the Road Safety Authority in the south to ensure that the impact of any such decisions on drivers here is fully understood and to press for a way forward to be found as a matter of urgency.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) her assessment of the impact the pandemic has had upon the road haulage sector; (ii) the amount of funding; and (iii) the nature of financial assistance she is seeking for the road haulage sector under the Financial Assistance (Northern Ireland) Act 2009 as a result of the pandemic.

(AQW 9544/17-22)

Ms Mallon: At the request of the First and Deputy First Ministers my officials carried out an evidence gathering exercise to see if 'exceptional circumstances' applied to the road haulage sector, requiring a financial support scheme, as set out in the Financial Assistance (Northern Ireland) Act 2009. Information was received from representatives from the haulage industry, the Logistics UK Tracker, the NI Haulage Industry Critical Goods Supply Analysis Group (NIHCA), and the Department for Transport. I also contacted the Departments of Finance and Economy.

Based on the evidence received and engagement with the sector there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate 'exceptional circumstances' which would justify bespoke financial support for the haulage industry. I will however continue to keep this matter under review and consider the position, if evidence shows that there are exceptional circumstances which would justify bespoke financial support for the haulage industry.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) whether the financial measure announced for taxi drivers and coach operators applies to wedding car businesses; and (ii) what financial assistance she is planning for the wedding car industry due to the COVID-19 impact on this sector, which requires licencing similar to taxi vehicles and operators.

(AQW 9627/17-22)

Ms Mallon: You will be aware that I secured funding of £14m for taxi drivers last week from the Executive. This package, taken together with the £1.2m that I have already put in place to waive fees for the renewal of taxi vehicle licences, will help taxi drivers to be able to continue in the trade and therefore be available for recovery, post-Covid.

The financial assistance scheme is open to all self-employed licensed drivers, including wedding car drivers, who were available to work from 22nd March to 30th September 2020 and who meet the eligibility criteria. The criteria for the scheme is being finalised and details will be made available when it launches next week. The support offered will be via a one off payment of £1500. This one off payment will be a contribution to their yearly overhead costs including PPE and recognises the financial pressures sustained by eligible drivers due to Covid-19.

Department of Justice

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Justice what steps are being taken to protect prisoners and staff following an outbreak of COVID-19 in Magilligan Prison
(AQW 8560/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): On Wednesday 7 October the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (SEHSCT) advised the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) that a member of the Healthcare Team at Magilligan Prison had tested positive for Covid-19. As a result 17 other Healthcare staff were required to self-isolate.

Subsequently seven members of staff from the Trust and one member of staff from the Prison Service tested positive. When the SEHSCT informed NIPS about the positive cases, the Prison Service track and trace arrangements were activated and a deep clean of the Healthcare Unit was completed.

Five prisoners were placed in isolation as a precaution. To date no prisoners have tested positive.

As a precautionary measure the prison has been closed to all non-essential personnel and in-person visits to the prison have been temporarily suspended. These measures will remain in place for a period of two weeks, i.e. until Monday 26 October. Virtual visits and virtual learning will continue as we recognise the importance of family contact, and those in our care preparing for academic and vocational qualifications, particularly at this challenging time.

Older/more vulnerable prisoners in Magilligan are housed in H2 which has been our shielding unit. It has strict operating procedures and protocols in place. When shielding was paused we had allowed a limited relaxation of these stringent measures: those strict procedures that previously applied have now been reintroduced.

Members will be aware that the responsibility of prison healthcare falls to the SEHSCT. They have redeployed medical staff to Magilligan and have assured NIPS that they have sufficient healthcare staff at Magilligan to provide an appropriate level of cover. They continue to work closely with the Governor.

I am content that appropriate and timely action was taken by the Prison Service in association with our healthcare partners. The situation has stabilised and the Prison is operating normally within the restrictions that have been implemented.

The last few days at Magilligan have highlighted the challenges ahead for NIPS. I am assured that the senior management team review developments daily and will not hesitate to act in the interest of staff and prisoner safety when required to do so.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice to detail (i) the measures she is taking to address the severe levels of harm inflicted on children due to parental alienation; and (ii) whether she will ensure early intervention programmes such as My Family Matters by La Dolce Vita Project are used to inform any future strategy.
(AQW 8905/17-22)

Mrs Long: Whilst not aware of the specific project, I am aware of the work being undertaken by a number of organisations including La Dolce Vita Project to tackle parental alienation and family breakdown. I am also conscious that domestic abuse, in its many forms, affects people of all ages within our society and children are the most vulnerable. My Department already funds a number of behavioural change programmes 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 and my Department will continue to evaluate these programmes to inform next steps.

My Department has also been working with the Department of Health to develop an action plan focused on early resolution of parental disputes to ensure the best outcomes for children and their families. It is recognised that there are a number of partners across the justice system, health and social care, and the community and voluntary sector who perform an important role in advising and supporting families experiencing conflict and relationship breakdown who can play an equally critical role in informing and delivering potential supports and interventions. Wherever possible the Departments will utilise existing knowledge and experience in the co-design and the evaluation of actions.

Support services for those suffering harm as a consequence of serious parental acrimony or alienation more generally would fall to the Department of Health. My officials have been in contact with the Department of Health 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.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the breaches of public health regulations at a protest in the grounds of Stormont estate on 18 October.
(AQW 8983/17-22)

Mrs Long: I was very concerned to see breaches of the public health regulations on 18 October.

In a democracy there is a right to assembly and to peaceful protest; however, these are not normal times and the Executive has taken the difficult decision to curtail some individual liberties in the interests of saving lives and protecting public health. It was, therefore, very worrying to see crowds gathering in such numbers, in breach of the regulations, and in the absence of social distancing.

Everyone needs to play their part to bring the levels of infection down and protect both lives and livelihoods. It is a matter of both personal and collective responsibility.

The management of the estate is a matter for the Department of Finance and the policing of protests is an operational matter for the Chief Constable: I, therefore, brought the planned protest to the attention of both in advance of October 18.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Justice why Northern Ireland legislation does not make provision for time remanded on bail counting towards time served, in the cases of an imposed curfew and the use of electronic monitoring.

(AQW 8989/17-22)

Mrs Long: The introduction of credit for periods on bail with an electronic monitoring condition in England and Wales was facilitated by provisions in the Criminal Justice & Immigration Act 2008 ("the 2008 Act") that were brought forward in response to a recommendation in Lord Carter's Review on the efficient and sustainable use of custody (essentially to curb prison overcrowding).

The provisions were implemented alongside another accepted Carter recommendation to reserve custody for the most serious offenders for which provision was also made in the 2008 Act.

This was achieved by means of an amendment to the Bail Act 1976 (Section 3AB) to provide a pre-condition that electronic monitoring can only be imposed as a condition of bail where the judge would otherwise have remanded an individual into custody.

Neither the provisions of the 2008 Act referred to above nor the Bail Act 1976 extend to Northern Ireland. Here, electronic monitoring is available as a condition of court bail without pre-condition as to its application, not just to those who might otherwise have been remanded into custody.

In this sense it is no different to court bail with a curfew condition (without an electronic monitoring requirement) where freedom of movement is also restricted by the court during curfew hours.

In neither scenario does the time spent on bail count as time served for sentence calculation purposes under the Treatment of Offenders Act (Northern Ireland) 1968, which does not involve a court hearing.

Any proposals to replicate the different arrangements in England and Wales for time remanded on bail to count towards time served would require significant reforms to both electronic monitoring and sentencing arrangements in Northern Ireland.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Justice whether those involved in decision making on the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, will receive training on parental alienation and the impact on children prior to the completion of the bill.

(AQW 8992/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department will be bringing forward guidance on the new domestic abuse offence, associated domestic abuse and child aggravations and what is deemed to be abusive behaviour. A multi-agency Task and Finish Group, including representatives from criminal justice partners, has been set up to help shape this guidance and work is ongoing to agree its content. There will also be a crucial period of operational awareness raising and training in advance of the legislation being enacted.

While the Department of Health has policy responsibility for parental alienation I am clear that one parent should not be able to use a child to abuse another parent. I consider it appropriate that patterns of this type of behaviour could be deemed to be abusive behaviour and potentially be captured by the domestic abuse offence, depending on the particular circumstances of the case and subject to a reasonable person test. I am keen that the guidance relating to the new legislation clearly explains this.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Justice (i) for an update on the ownership of the strip of land between the Department of Justice security fence at Old Throne Park and Hazelwood Primary School on Whitewell Road; (ii) whether there are any plans to shift or remove the high security fence; and (iii) who is responsible for maintaining the area between the school fence and the security fence.

(AQW 9008/17-22)

Mrs Long:

- (i) Hazelwood Integrated Primary School (IPS) owns the strip of land which lies between the Department of Justice security fence, which runs along the northern boundary of the School, and the rear boundaries of domestic properties at Old Throne Park (Numbers 2-22).
- (ii) The Department of Justice (DoJ) Interfaces Team has held meetings with the key stakeholders to assess attitudinal change towards the potential for interface reduction or removal at this location. Departmental officials hope to revisit this conversation using visuals to aid further discussion with nearby residents in the New Year.

- (iii) The area between the school fence and the security fence is owned by Hazelwood IPS but the Department has cleared this space of household litter annually since 2016 at the request of the school. Overgrowth is also cut and treated.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the possible opening of the gate on Flax Street in Ardoyne, where it meets the Crumlin Road, to allow access to residents and relieve traffic in the district caused by the permanent closure of the gate.

(AQW 9009/17-22)

Mrs Long: I am committed to working towards the reduction and removal of interface security structures, wherever they exist, across Northern Ireland. Barriers erected over 30 years ago such as those on Flax Street cause a significant impediment to local people going about their daily business.

The Department consulted residents of the nearby Woodvale area about the opening of a newly installed gate in the existing Woodvale interface wall, and sought views about the re-opening of Flax Street. We will also seek up-to-date views from residents of the Ardoyne area.

It is the Department's intention to replace the existing double barriers on Flax Street with automated and remotely-operated vehicular and pedestrian access gates.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Justice how Northern Ireland could adopt the relevant section of legislation from within the Criminal Justice Act 2003 to allow for time served to be considered in relation to those who, whilst on bail, were given a curfew and monitored using electronic tagging.

(AQW 9081/17-22)

Mrs Long: The introduction of credit for periods on bail with an electronic monitoring condition in England and Wales was facilitated by provisions in the Criminal Justice & Immigration Act 2008 ("the 2008 Act") that were brought forward in response to a recommendation in Lord Carter's Review on the efficient and sustainable use of custody (essentially to curb prison overcrowding).

The provisions were implemented alongside another accepted Carter recommendation to reserve custody for the most serious offenders for which provision was also made in the 2008 Act.

This was achieved by means of an amendment to the Bail Act 1976 (Section 3AB) to provide a pre-condition that electronic monitoring can only be imposed as a condition of bail where the judge would otherwise have remanded an individual into custody.

Neither the provisions of the 2008 Act referred to above nor the Bail Act 1976 extend to Northern Ireland. Here, electronic monitoring is available as a condition of court bail without pre-condition as to its application, not just to those who might otherwise have been remanded into custody.

In this sense it is no different to court bail with a curfew condition (without an electronic monitoring requirement) where freedom of movement is also restricted by the court during curfew hours.

In neither scenario does the time spent on bail count as time served for sentence calculation purposes under the Treatment of Offenders Act (Northern Ireland) 1968, which does not involve a court hearing.

Any proposals to replicate the different arrangements in England and Wales for time remanded on bail to count towards time served would require significant reforms to both electronic monitoring and sentencing arrangements in Northern Ireland.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the low conviction rate resulting from the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.

(AQW 9142/17-22)

Mrs Long: Cases taken under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 are extremely complex, and securing a conviction is challenging. The nine prosecutions and four convictions under the Human Trafficking legislation over the last three years underlines this. In cases where it is not possible to secure prosecutions for trafficking, other offences are considered.

A number of investigations each year relate to potential victims who are declaring historic modern slavery or human trafficking which occurred in other countries. While these investigations are taken forward as far as possible, they may be less likely to lead to prosecutions and convictions due to the length of time which has elapsed, the challenges of investigations relating to conflict zones, or through the lack of evidence, such as a named offender.

The PSNI has over recent years enhanced its capacity to tackle these crimes and will, along with other law enforcement agencies, continue to pursue offenders using all available tools.

I am currently consulting on a Modern Slavery Strategy for 2021/22, which reaffirms my commitment to help equip Northern Ireland to eradicate modern slavery.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice under what circumstances staff in her Department cannot work from home.

(AQW 9144/17-22)

Mrs Long: Staff in the Department of Justice are unable to work from home if their role cannot be performed remotely. That comprises a range of Departmental functions including care of individuals in custody, operation of courts and other support services such as premises functions. Risk assessments have been carried out across all Departmental premises to ensure that where staff need to attend the workplace, it is safe to do so.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Justice whether she plans to introduce legislation making pet theft a specific offence in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 9165/17-22)

Mrs Long: The theft of domestic pets is not specifically legislated for but such thefts can be prosecuted under the Theft Act (NI) 1969, in which it is an offence to appropriate property belonging to another with the intention of permanently depriving the other of it.

The offence carries a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment and / or an unlimited fine on indictment for the most serious offences (sentencing for theft of property reflects the value of the property stolen); or 12 months imprisonment or a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum (£5000) on summary conviction (the offence is triable summarily at the option of the prosecutor if the defendant agrees).

It is also an offence to sell stolen goods under the Act, which would apply to the sale of stolen pets online, the maximum penalty for which is a sentence of 14 years imprisonment and / or an unlimited fine on indictment; or 12 months imprisonment or a fine not exceeding the statutory maximum (£5000) on summary conviction.

I am aware that Dogs Trust and other pet welfare groups have been lobbying for dog theft to be recognised as a more serious category offence within England and Wales. The Trust has sought the inclusion of dog theft within animal welfare law (the Animal Welfare Act 2006) as current sentencing makes no allowance for the sentient nature of the animal and or distress/harm caused to the pet or its owner.

Any proposal for a similar change to the equivalent Northern Ireland legislation – the Welfare of Animals (Northern Ireland) Act 2011 - which carries a penalty of 5 years imprisonment and / or an unlimited fine on indictment; or 12 months imprisonment and / or a fine of £20,000 on summary conviction for causing unnecessary suffering of an animal – would be a matter for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to consider, given its ownership of the legislation and policy responsibility for animal welfare matters.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice why funding for the delivery of Hate and Signal Crime advocacy services in Northern Ireland is not subject to a public procurement competition.

(AQW 9186/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Hate Crime Advocacy Service aims to provide victims of hate crime with access to specialist support which is tailored to their needs by supporting them throughout the investigative process and signposting them to other services such as legal advice, housing issues, and health and psychological support. The Service also aims to increase awareness and reporting of hate crimes.

Currently, the PSNI and DOJ jointly fund the Hate Crime Advocacy Service with four advocates based in host organisations to support victims of hate crime - Rainbow Project (LGBT), Leonard Cheshire (Disability) and the Migrant Centre (race/religion). PSNI provides funding for these Advocates with DOJ providing funding, since 2014, to Victim Support NI to co-ordinate the service.

In 2017, Community Evaluation NI (CENI) was commissioned to carry out an evaluation of the service and concluded that a new procured model should be developed to provide greater coherency in terms of joined up strategy, planning, management and delivery. PSNI, with DOJ's assistance, are currently working on a tender specification to publicly procure this service through the Department of Finance Central Procurement Directorate.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice how many complaints have been received by the Community Safety Division of her Department in relation to the administration of Hate and Signal Crime advocacy services in Northern Ireland, including with regard to each service level agreement operated since 2004.

(AQW 9187/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department has not received any complaints in relation to the administration of the Hate Crime Advocacy Service.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Justice how delivery partners included in existing service level agreement on Hate and Signal Crime advocacy services were identified and accredited; and who else was considered.

(AQW 9188/17-22)

Mrs Long: Currently, the PSNI and DOJ jointly fund the Hate Crime Advocacy Service with four advocates based in host organisations to support victims of hate crime - Rainbow Project (LGBT), Leonard Cheshire (Disability) and the Migrant Centre (race/religion). PSNI provides funding for these Advocates with DOJ providing funding, since 2014, to Victim Support NI to co-ordinate the service.

The current Service Level Agreement is between the Department of Justice and PSNI, as funders of the service, and Leonard Cheshire, The Migrant Centre, The Rainbow Project and Victim Support NI, as service providers.

DOJ identified the need for a Hate Crime Co-ordinator in 2014 to fulfil commitments in the Community Safety Strategy and a commitment by the then Minister of Justice to consider investment in the advocacy services.

DOJ currently funds the Advocacy co-ordination role through Victim Support NI. Victim Support Northern Ireland is funded by my Department to provide a range of services to victims and witnesses to ensure that all victims and witnesses of crime have access to emotional support, practical help, advocacy, assistance with claiming Criminal Injuries Compensation, court support and help to make a victim personal statement.

I am unable to provide information on the appointment of the Hate Crime Advocates in host organisations funded by the PSNI as that is an operational issue for the Chief Constable and I wish to respect the operational independence of the PSNI.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice how many companies operating in Northern Ireland are required to produce modern slavery statements under section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

(AQW 9198/17-22)

Mrs Long: Section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which was extended to Northern Ireland requires any commercial organisation carrying out business in the UK and with a total turnover of £36M or more, to produce an annual statement on the steps they are taking to prevent modern slavery in their supply chains and own organisation.

According to NISRA, there are 345 commercial organisations operating in Northern Ireland that fall within the section 54 definition.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice (i) whether she can give further details of the scoping exercise her Department will be undertaking regarding the possibility of extending support to victims of human trafficking beyond the point at which they exit the National Referral Mechanism; (ii) which stakeholders will be consulted in this process; and (iii) when she expects to publish the results of that exercise.

(AQW 9199/17-22)

Mrs Long: In responding to the Modern Slavery motion in the Assembly on 8th October I advised that the draft 2021/22 Modern Slavery Strategy signals my intention to scope extended support arrangements within Northern Ireland. The 12 week public consultation on this draft strategy was launched on 16 October. Subject to the outcome of that consultation, the Strategy will be formally launched before the end of March 2021 and work to scope extended support arrangements will commence in April 2021. The scoping exercise is likely to consider any relevant recent research on the issue, developments and best practice here and in other jurisdictions.

While the work has yet to be scoped I would anticipate that, as a minimum, the current support providers, Belfast and Lisburn Women's Aid and Migrant Help will be engaged, as well as the various statutory, community and voluntary sector organisations represented on the department's Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking Stakeholder Group.

It is not possible at this point to provide a definitive timescale for completing the scoping exercise. An update on progress will be provided as part of the annual progress reports on the delivery of the Modern Slavery Strategy.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice whether the Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking National Targeting Centre will consider Northern Ireland in its remit; and how it will do so.

(AQW 9200/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking National Targeting Centre will consider Northern Ireland in its remit.

The Targeting Centre will draw on intelligence, data and information 'upstream' to identify opportunities for intelligence development and tasking; coordinating cross force collaboration. This will involve engagement with all 43 National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) forces in England and Wales, PSNI and Police Scotland through the Regional Organised Crime Unit (ROCU) network, along with key national law enforcement agencies that conduct Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking investigations.

The PSNI has enhanced its capacity to tackle Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking over recent years. It has established a dedicated team with a high level of specialism and is also continuing to enhance capability across the service. The PSNI will, along with other law enforcement agencies, continue to pursue offenders, using all the tools available to them.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Justice, following the Executive announcement that those who work from home should work from home, whether all officials and staff members in her Department, who can work from home, are working from home.

(AQW 9235/17-22)

Mrs Long: All staff within the Department of Justice have been advised that they should work from home where that is possible. Risk assessments have been carried out across all Departmental premises to ensure that where staff need to attend the workplace, it is safe to do so.

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Justice (i) when the recommendations of the Review of Civil and Family Justice in Northern Ireland will be implemented; and (ii) when the independent chair of the Family Justice Board will be appointed.
(AQW 9251/17-22)

Mrs Long:

i) The key recommendations from the Review of Civil and Family Justice are being considered as part of an evolving programme of civil and family modernisation.

Responding to the large number of wide-ranging recommendations from the Review is not for the Department of Justice alone. Many are matters for the judiciary, the legal profession and other Departments. Others have significant financial, operational or cross-cutting implications.

Good progress has been made in a number of areas, including the additional protections for vulnerable court users being introduced through the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, the development of a pilot to help address unnecessary delay in public family law proceedings by allowing the appointment of experts in without prior approval and work on a joint action plan with the Department of Health to improve outcomes for parties to private family proceedings.

ii) I intend to continue to build on this good start including considering recommendations on the establishment of the Family Justice Board. In making decisions, I will want to consider all options and learn from the experience of other jurisdictions. I have noted, for example, that the independent Chair of the Family Justice Board in England and Wales has been replaced by joint Ministerial Chairs from the Department of Education and Ministry of Justice. I will wish to learn from the experience that has driven that change in approach before reaching any decisions.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice what risk assessments have been undertaken in respect of moves from prisons to Larne House short-term holding facility.
(AQW 9260/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service plays no part in the movement of individuals to Larne House so therefore does not undertake risk assessments on those who are moved there. Such assessments are a matter for the Home Office.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Justice where prisoners will be relocated in the event of a COVID-19 outbreak at Larne House short-term holding facility.
(AQW 9261/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Northern Ireland Prison Service plays no part in the movement of individuals to or from Larne House nor has it any responsibility for that facility. The relocation of prisoners in the event of a COVID-19 would be a matter for the Home Office and its contracted service provider.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department will produce a modern slavery statement, following the publication of the UK Government Modern Slavery Statement.
(AQW 9322/17-22)

Mrs Long: I welcome the publication of the UK Government Modern Slavery Statement which covers ministerial departments, HMRC, non-ministerial public bodies and executive agencies where spend is reported centrally. It does not cover devolved authorities in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

You will be aware that I secured Executive approval earlier this month to work with other relevant departments, to scope the impact for businesses in Northern Ireland following the UK Government's response to its 2019 consultation on potential options for strengthening section 54 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015. This includes engagement with Northern Ireland businesses to ensure they are aware of the changes and that we remain in step with this important development.

In terms of ongoing good practice, my Department has been working with Department of Finance procurement specialists to promote and embed due diligence and best practice in public procurement. This has included the incorporation of Human Rights, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking clauses in many new and existing contracts, initially for NI Prisons, Justice and PSNI, regardless of the budget.

Over the past 18 months, officials have sourced and delivered bespoke training for public sector procurement specialists, both to raise awareness of the risks in the supply chain and to engage and educate them in due diligence in terms of transparency.

I want to ensure that we continue to build on the good practice that is already in place, it is my priority to conduct the scoping work signalled in relation to engaging with businesses and public sector bodies. You will also be aware that my department is also consulting on the draft Modern Slavery Strategy for 2021/22, and this includes a report on the progress made to implement the previous year's objectives.

My officials will continue to work closely with their UK Government counterparts to remain in step on this very important area of work, which when completed, will place us in a better position to develop and publish a Modern Slavery Statement for the Department of Justice.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Justice to detail a timeline for the conclusion of the review into strangulation offences.
(AQW 9371/17-22)

Mrs Long: My officials are currently carrying out a review of the legislation around strangulation, including a strand which I have prioritised on the issue of consent to serious harm for sexual gratification not being a defence. I plan to launch a focussed consultation on that issue shortly with a view to early recommendations. The wider review of strangulation legislation is due to conclude early in the New Year with a further public consultation to follow.

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Justice how much funding her Department has spent on the development and running of problem-solving justice initiatives in each of the last 3 financial years, including spend to date and total projected spend for the 2020/21 financial year.

(AQW 9372/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department of Justice (DoJ), in partnership other government departments and agencies and the voluntary and community sector, has developed a portfolio of Problem Solving Justice pilot initiatives, each at a different stage of development and implementation.

The funding my Department has spent on developing and running problem-solving justice initiatives in each of the last 3 financial years, including spend to date and total projected spend for the 2020/21 financial year, are shown below.

Initiative	2018-19 £k	2019-20 £k	2020-21	
			Spend to date £k	Total projected spend £k
Support Hubs	11	22	6	30
Motorcycle Awareness Programme	0	33	2	40
Enhanced Combination Orders	288	979	536	1,214
Substance Misuse Court	364	464	221	416
Domestic Abuse Behavioural Change Programme (Health Trust based)	197	261	188	376
Domestic Abuse Behavioural Change Programme (Court based)	112	0	0	0
Family Drug and Alcohol Court	17	0	0	0
Mental Health Court	8	0	20	40
Total	997	1,759	973	2,116

Notes:

- 1 Total projected spend for 2020-21 represents the most up to date forecast spend. This will continue to be monitored as the financial year progresses.
- 2 Some Substance Misuse Court costs were incurred by the Public Prosecution Service, a Non Ministerial Department.
- 3 The above costs for the Family Drug and Alcohol Court represent funding provided by the Department of Justice. The Family Drug and Alcohol Court was funded in the main by the Department of Health.
- 4 The Motorcycle Awareness Programme also received funding from other sources.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice how many operations the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority has conducted in Northern Ireland in each of the last five years.

(AQW 9397/17-22)

Mrs Long: In Northern Ireland the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) can investigate organisations or employers using vulnerable or exploited workers, investigate reports of mistreatment of workers, labour providers operating without a licence or a business using an unlicensed Gangmaster. The GLAA has powers to establish whether the agencies required to hold a licence are compliant, and the criminal investigation of any agency that does not hold a licence.

The table below identifies the number of cases the GLAA has undertaken each type, by year.

Year	Enforcement	Compliance
2016	4	1
2017	3	4
2018	9	10
2019	3	4
2020 (up to 27/10/20)	0	2

The figures for the number of enforcement or compliance cases undertaken each year do not reflect the length of time each case takes to conclude. The statistics provided are focused on those investigations/inspections led by the GLAA and therefore do not include cases where the PSNI undertakes an investigation into forced labour and GLAA assistance was provided.

The GLAA is frequently involved in campaigns with other enforcement bodies e.g. in proactive visits to target particular activities. This includes an annual cross-UK exercise with the police and other bodies, as part of the EU-wide Europol led intensification week of action each year on forced labour. This year this covered 5 days of action, and visits to 15 separate companies.

In Northern Ireland the GLAA is also involved in a the Driver & Vehicle Agency NI / GLAA / customs multi-agency operation, which is led by the each organisation in rotation, and involves proactive inspection of illegal taxis and busy transport routes in food production areas. The GLAA leads three to four of these exercises each year.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Justice to outline how the average timeframe of a case entering the Northern Ireland Criminal Justice System to a prosecution compares with other regions of the United Kingdom.
(AQO 985/17-22)

Mrs Long: In Northern Ireland, in 2019/20, the median time taken for a case to be dealt with, at all courts, was 149 days. This is a decrease of 10.8% from the previous year (167 days) and is the second lowest figure recorded in the last five years.

Directly comparable figures are not available for England and Wales, or Scotland. However, figures published by the Ministry of Justice indicate that the median time taken for a case to be dealt with in England and Wales in 2019 was 164 days, up from 161 days in 2018, albeit that these are based on slightly different parameters than the figures measured in relation to similar figures for Northern Ireland.

The Scottish Government publishes data on the percentage of cases that had completed in 26 weeks. The most recent published annual figures relate to 2018, when 68% of cases were recorded as having completed within 26 weeks.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister of Justice to outline the implications for Northern Ireland should the Counter Terrorism and Sentencing Bill not be adopted.
(AQO 991/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Counter Terrorism and Sentencing Bill proposes to introduce retrospective amendments to the release arrangements for currently serving prisoners where the sentencing court has determined there is a terrorist connection. This will remove the automatic requirement to release at the end of a specified custodial period for a small number of existing prisoners; introduce a minimum two-thirds of time served in custody; and introduce a requirement for Parole Board consideration before release.

In addition, the Bill will also introduce prospective amendments to sentencing and release arrangements for individuals convicted of terrorist related offences committed after the date of commencement of the Bill into law and amendments to provisions aimed at preventative action and investigation of terrorist offending.

Following discussions with myself, the Lord Chancellor has agreed the proposed introduction of mandatory polygraph testing as a licence condition for all terrorist related offenders is not required as the current legislative framework in Northern Ireland provides discretion for additional licence conditions to be imposed on any cadre of offender.

Legislation on terrorism is an excepted matter for which the UK Government has responsibility. However for some of the provisions within this legislation to take effect it would be necessary for amendments to be made to legislation for which the Northern Ireland Assembly has responsibility.

Following extensive engagement with the UK Government at both Ministerial and official level, and separately with Executive colleagues, I have recently written to the Lord Chancellor confirming that there is not sufficient consensus within the Executive to table either a limited or full legislative consent motion to enable the relevant provisions to become operational in this jurisdiction. In accordance with Assembly Standing Order 42A, I have also laid a memorandum to the Assembly explaining why I unable to table a legislative consent motion in this matter.

It is now a matter for the UK Government to determine if it will proceed in the absence of legislative consent and impose all the provisions on this jurisdiction, or remove those requiring consent from applying to Northern Ireland.

Should the provisions not be applied, I am confident that the current sentencing and release framework in Northern Ireland provides a robust and appropriate platform to manage the risk posed by terrorist offenders. The current sentencing framework is predicated on risk assessment and public protection. The parole commissioners are responsible for determining if dangerous offenders may be released early on licence, and if applicable, to recommend appropriate licence conditions. And finally, all individuals sentenced to 12 months or more are subject to a period of mandatory post release supervision, and may be recalled to prison custody at any time should their risk of harm to the public increase.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Justice how she will resolve the delay on prisoners applying for parole due to not being able to complete Accompanied and Unaccompanied Temporary Release due to COVID-19 restrictions.

(AQW 9545/17-22)

Mrs Long: Ensuring the safe operation of custodial environments is a top priority for my Department. In response to COVID-19 the Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) implemented an extensive range of precautionary measures in March of this year. This included the suspension of all forms of temporary release.

Whilst the suspension of Pre Release Testing does not delay an application for consideration by the Parole Commissioners, nonetheless NIPS are mindful of the impact it will have on the extent of evidence that can be placed before the Parole Commissioners for consideration. As a consequence NIPS recognise the need to consider ways to facilitate the introduction of phased Pre Release Testing for those prisoners who are eligible.

At the end of July plans for NIPS to commence the reintroduction of phased Pre Release Testing were announced. Plans have initially focused on the reopening of two Working Out Units for some prisoners on the latter stages of the Pre Release Testing Scheme. On this basis Murray House was reopened on 31 August and Burren House on 10 September.

Like other areas of society NIPS is vigilant to the changes in how the virus is being transmitted in society.

NIPS will continue to keep its approach to operational recovery planning, including Accompanied and Unaccompanied Temporary Release, under review. This has been the case throughout the COVID-19 period when NIPS has regularly reviewed the measures in place to ensure that they remain necessary and proportionate. In doing this, NIPS must continue to protect the health and wellbeing of both the prison population and prison staff.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Justice to outline the work being carried out with youth services, particularly Include Youth, around Looked After children to prevent them entering the criminal justice system.

(AQO 986/17-22)

Mrs Long: As Minister of Justice, I have often stated my express desire to prevent children, whether looked after or not, coming into the criminal justice system. Where this is not possible I am keen that those young people on the cusp of the criminal justice system are exited at the earliest possible stage with the best possible support. That is why I encourage the many innovative initiatives that have been developed across the Department of Justice, working as it does, with a range of stakeholders, including organisations such as Include Youth.

My Department has been particularly focused on providing earlier community support for children and their families to prevent offending. We have also sought to make greater use of diversion to reduce the need for formal prosecution through court, while improving communication to enable better informed decision making. The success of this approach has seen a fall of over 50% in the number of young people, including Looked After Children, reaching the formal court setting – a success that we will want to build upon going forward!

Through the Youth Champions Forum, the Police Service has also invited representatives from a range of external organisations engaged in the interests of children and young people, especially those who are on the periphery of the Criminal Justice System, as well as Looked After Children (LAC), to discuss policing with children and young people.

PSNI also signposts Looked After Children to courses, programmes, therapies which will assist with a variety of issues including addiction, mental health concerns, learning for life and work.

I appreciate that primary responsibility for Looked After Children rests with the Minister of Health whose Department is working to finalise a draft Strategy specific to Looked After Children and care-experienced young people.

One of the actions identified within that draft Strategy, however, is a commitment for the Departments of Justice and Health to work together to establish the new Regional Joint Care and Justice Campus; this will be supported by wider reform in children's residential care, foster care, community youth justice and enhanced family support.

Finally, in order to underpin interventions with young people both in the community and in care the Youth Justice Agency has developed a Model of Practice that places "Children First", advocating a Trauma Informed approach and taking cognisance of the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences. Include Youth has assisted the Agency with this process, helping and advising on how to involve young people in the design of the model. This approach will serve to further prevent Looked after Children entering the criminal justice system.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister of Justice what action her Department is taking to address the issue of rural crime.

(AQO 987/17-22)

Mrs Long: Rural crime is a cross-cutting issue which requires partnership working in the areas of prevention, protection and enforcement. This work is taken forward at a strategic level through the Rural Crime Partnership (RCP).

Chaired by the Department of Justice, the RCP consists of representatives from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI); Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs; the Ulster Farmers' Union; NFU Mutual; Federation of Small Businesses; Young Farmers' Club of Ulster and the Policing and Community Safety Partnerships (PCSPs).

The primary focus of the RCP is to develop a collaborative response to crime which is specific to rural areas i.e. agricultural crime. Its aims are to promote effective techniques for successfully engaging rural communities to enable them to become more self-resilient in preventing and deterring crime and, through the RCP network of organisations, assist in reducing crime in rural communities.

At a local level, PCSPs, which are funded by my Department, play a key role in building confidence locally, through engagement and consultation with communities, including rural areas, on the issues that matter to them.

The work of the RCP and PCSPs include a range of initiatives, for example encouraging trailer and farm machinery marking and fitting of tracker security devices for quad bikes; promotion of the Farm Watch Scheme which aims to reduce crime and the fear of crime in farming and rural communities; No Cold Calling; Neighbourhood Watch; and Text Alert schemes providing up-to-date information on suspicious behaviours to be aware of.

In the absence of events due to COVID-19, the Partnership has focussed its efforts on the promotion of key crime prevention messages using a variety of media platforms including delivery of social media campaigns to raise awareness of general farm security, vehicle, machinery and livestock theft, and to encourage the reporting of crime or suspicious activity to the PSNI or Crimestoppers.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister of Justice to outline any plans she has to allocate additional funding to the Police Ombudsman's Office to address the backlog of legacy cases.
(AQO 989/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland has submitted a business case for additional funding for historical investigations. The Department is currently engaging with OPONI on this business case.

Legacy continues to put pressures on the justice system which it is not resourced to meet. I am committed to working with my Executive Colleagues to secure adequate resources to deal with outstanding historical investigations. In the interim, funding for OPONI legacy cases will continue to be considered as part of the normal budget process.

Members will be aware there is currently a lack of detail available on the UK Government's proposed future arrangements for dealing with legacy investigations or the timescale within which any new arrangements might be put in place. The absence of clarity on what the landscape for dealing with the legacy of the past will look like makes it challenging for my Department to provide a proper assessment of what would represent good value for money in terms of resourcing existing bodies within the justice system, including OPONI, to deal with outstanding investigations and whether it is, indeed, practical to expect these bodies to be able to meet the needs of families and deliver Article 2 compliant investigations.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the planned provisions in the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill relating to human trafficking and modern slavery.
(AQO 990/17-22)

Mrs Long: I plan to make two minor amendments to the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, through the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

The first amendment will remove the statutory requirement to publish an annual strategy, moving instead to a three year strategy; and the second will extend the provision of assistance and support to potential victims of slavery, servitude, and forced or compulsory labour.

The consultation on the proposed amendments closed on 1 September, with respondents supportive of both.

The Justice Committee noted the results of the consultation on 8 October, and on 23 October I wrote to advise Executive colleagues that I plan to include both amendments in the forthcoming Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

Mr Lynch asked the Minister of Justice for her assessment of the current procedures for the remand of children into custody.
(AQO 992/17-22)

Mrs Long: The application of current procedures relating to the remand of children into custody at Woodlands Juvenile Justice Centre is a matter for the Judiciary who, as you know, are an independent body. The Youth Justice Agency – an Executive Agency of the Department of Justice – has no control over how, or how many, children are admitted to Woodlands on remand.

I am aware, however, that issues have previously been raised and recommendations made by a number of reporting bodies to try and address the significant number of children who are admitted to custody on remand but who do not, ultimately, serve a custodial sentence. Work is therefore underway to introduce a number of proposed changes to bail and remand legislation for children which will be included in the Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, which I plan to introduce in the New Year.

These proposals aim to strengthen the right to bail for children, and introduce specific conditions which must be met before a child can be remanded into custody, with a view to ensuring that custody is used as a last resort, in line with our international obligations.

Department for the Economy

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the total cost to Northern Ireland of the establishment of the South Eastern Regional College Professional Skills Centre in Dublin; and (ii) how much of the cost has been paid by the Dublin government.

(AQW 4569/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy):

- (i) South Eastern Regional College (SERC) incurred approximately £30k of set-up costs in the establishment of the Dublin Professional Skills Centre.
- (ii) No costs were paid by the Dublin government.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy when (i) AQW 7329/17-22; and (ii) AQW 7074/17-22 will be answered.
(AQW 8388/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: AQW 7074 was responded to on 14/10/2020 and AQW 7329 was responded to on 16/10/2020.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of (i) the need for support to travel agents; and (ii) the contribution that the travel sector makes to maintaining key air routes to Northern Ireland.

(AQW 8412/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Support for Travel Agents

I refer to my response to AQW 8411/17-22, raised by Mr Dickson on behalf of this industry.

Contribution of the Travel Agency sector to maintaining key air routes to Northern Ireland

There is no available statistical data to determine the contribution that business and travel, generated through local travel agencies, makes to maintaining key routes to Northern Ireland, or indeed to the local economy.

However, it is widely accepted that the travel agency business model in Northern Ireland is based on marketing and selling travel packages and services to destinations throughout the world.

Indeed, as stated in my previous response, (AQW 8411/17-22), the local travel industry has been impacted particularly hard as a result of the restrictions and reduction in foreign travel.

This is due to the fact that we have been and are still very much in the midst of a public health crisis, and all of the decisions that have been made in relation to foreign travel for Northern Ireland residents have been deemed necessary by the NI Executive, based on the very latest health advice and scientific evidence.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the number of requests sent by her Department to HMRC or the Treasury, seeking access to tax data in order to assist those excluded from business support schemes.

(AQW 8649/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department of Finance would normally be the lead department in any engagement with HM Treasury. That said, my Department has had many previous interactions with HMRC on accessing the data they hold, including liaison over many years in the case of the devolution of Corporation Tax, Trade Data associated with EU Exit and, more recently, my Department has had interactions with HMRC to help operationalise the Micro Business Hardship Scheme. However, we have been unable to gain permission to access taxpayer data, which is guarded zealously and for good reason.

I recognise that not all businesses and individuals have been able to avail of UK-wide support schemes. While my Department is currently working on schemes to assist these groups, I have previously raised with the Executive that there would be challenges in establishing a local scheme for those excluded as access to the national database would be required by HMRC.

It is also worth noting that many of those making representations about being excluded from business support schemes are the newly self-employed, a group that were, according to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, outside the SEISS Scheme because of a lack of tax data held by HMRC on those not yet within the self-assessment system.

To this end, HMRC has recently confirmed that it does not have any short term means to verify individuals who are newly self-employed.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what actions she will take in response to the Northern Ireland Audit Office report into the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation scheme, which identifies a significant risk that some investors may be achieving a higher financial return than was required to encourage the adoption of the various supported technologies.

(AQW 8651/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Of the six recommendations in the report, three are specifically for my Department, including a recommendation to carry out a review of the levels of support available and rates of return for renewable electricity generators. The Department has accepted these recommendations and will ensure they are addressed going forward.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the scope of her Department's post-project evaluation exercise of the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation scheme; (ii) when the evaluation will be published; and (iii) whether it will include any independent scrutiny or evaluation of her Department's role in certain issues that have been identified with the scheme.

(AQW 8762/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: An evaluation of the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO) is being completed by independent consultants. It will report on issues including the achievement of scheme objectives; cost to consumers; benefits to consumers and citizens, and benefits to generators.

I cannot provide a precise publication date at this stage as the work is still ongoing.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will recommend that soft play areas are added to the list of businesses to be closed during the circuit breaker lockdown.

(AQW 8981/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: This is not within the remit of My Department.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of how the new Job Support Scheme will impact (i) the hospitality industry; and (ii) all other sectors affected by the recently announced Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations.

(AQW 9112/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Member will be aware that since this question was tabled the UK Government has extended the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to pay 80% of wages until December and has enhanced the Self Employment Income Support Scheme grant to cover 80% of average trading profits for the month of November. These are welcome developments and much more in tune with what the NI Executive, and many others, have been calling for.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy what process or mechanism exists within her Department whereby a written record is kept of any lobbying of the Minister or special adviser in relation to departmental functions, policies or proposals.

(AQW 9183/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Information relating to all Ministerial correspondence and invitations are retained in the formal NICS electronic records management system known as HPRM, in line with NICS Records Management policy and GDPR obligations.

Details of all of the Minister's meetings, including those also attended by the Special Advisor, with external organisations and individuals are also collated and provided to the Department of Finance for publication quarterly. The Department also holds a record of meetings attended solely by the Special Adviser.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the review for potential renewed viable air routes, referred to within New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 9247/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The New Decade New Approach document, published in January 2020, stated the following under Annex B: Irish Government Commitments;

"The Irish Government...intends to take forward a review of the potential for Government support to renewed viable air routes from Cork to Belfast and Dublin to Derry, working with the UK Government and Northern Ireland Executive to deliver improved connections as a priority."

This review is being led by officials in the Department of Transport in Dublin. My Department have had some initial discussions with them on these potential routes.

Whilst I would welcome the re-establishment of these air routes, civil aviation remains a reserved matter with the Department for Transport in London. My officials will, however, continue to engage with colleagues as appropriate, to help facilitate their development.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what action her Department is taking to ensure that the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland is adequately resourced to undertake its enforcement role in regards to COVID-19 mitigation measures.

(AQW 9265/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Myself and my officials have been in close contact with HSENI since the onset of COVID-19. HSENI continues to play a very important role in ensuring appropriate COVID-19 mitigations have been implemented in the businesses it has enforcement responsibility for. Their staff work closely with colleagues from the Public Health Agency who are the lead organisation when dealing with a community transmissible viral pandemic such as Coronavirus.

However, HSENI is facing resourcing challenges but have assured me, that despite these pressures, they are prioritising COVID-19 work and are responding to concerns and complaints that have been raised with them.

I will of course carefully consider any proposals HSENI bring forward for additional resourcing. It is essential that everyone in the workplace plays their part, whether as a manager or employee, to adhere to the public health guidelines and in doing so prevent the spread of this disease in their place of work. If this is not happening, then I would ask employees to raise any concerns directly with HSENI or their local district councils if their concerns relate to office, retail or leisure activities.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy how her Department is assisting students studying remotely, specifically in terms of broadband connection.

(AQW 9292/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department provides a non-repayable maintenance grant to students from lower income households, which can be used to purchase the necessary IT equipment to participate in, and complete, their course remotely.

Northern Ireland has the highest fibre coverage of any region within the UK. Many students are currently able to access superfast broadband services. I recognise, however, that the Covid-19 crisis has emphasised the greater challenges faced by those with poor broadband coverage.

My Department has developed Project Stratum, a major telecoms project which 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. The project's target intervention area consists of just under 79,000 premises and some 97% are rural, defined as NISRA Band H – settlements of fewer than 1,000 and open countryside. Contract award for Project Stratum is anticipated by mid-November, with initial deployment activities expected to commence shortly thereafter.

There are a number of other UK Government broadband schemes operating in Northern Ireland and available to citizens and businesses including: Universal Service Obligation; and Rural Gigabit Connectivity Scheme.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the financial support available to cross border workers who are resident in Northern Ireland and working in the Republic of Ireland; and (ii) the discussions she has had with the Irish Government on supporting these workers during level 5 restrictions in the Republic of Ireland.

(AQW 9293/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Financial Support for cross border workers

For those people who are resident in Northern Ireland but who are actively employed in the Republic of Ireland, a need has not been identified for any additional financial support at this time.

Discussions with the Irish Government

Under level 5 restrictions in the Republic of Ireland, residents of Northern Ireland are still permitted to travel to work if their place of employment is in the Republic of Ireland.

For those employees whose workforces have been closed as a consequence of the level 5 restrictions, the Irish Government has a range of support options available.

Information on support for employers and employees can be found on the following websites:

<https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/Government-supports-to-COVID-19-impacted-businesses.html>

<http://www.eurescrossborder.eu/covid-19-cross-border-workers>

For cross border workers who are temporarily laid off (furloughed workers) during this period they will remain on their employer's payroll and be paid during this time. The employer can then claim the appropriate rate from the Government Department.

If the employee has been made wholly unemployed then 'normal rules' apply i.e the claimant must claim benefit from the country where they are resident. Therefore a cross border worker from Northern Ireland who had been working in the Republic of Ireland should, as with other residents in this jurisdiction, make a claim to Universal Credit - www.universal-credit.service.gov.uk

Finally, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, InterTradelreland, the cross-border body, has introduced an Emergency Business Solutions programme. Employers are using this programme to assess their level of risk and get support in areas such as, accessing Covid-19 government supports and finance.

In addition, firms are requesting Covid-19 related support for Health and Safety and Human Resource matters, including advice on managing furloughed staff.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will commit to including dental laboratories in any further financial support schemes she is creating for businesses who did not qualify for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme. **(AQW 9355/17-22)**

Mrs Dodds: On 22nd October 2020, I announced the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS).

The CRBSS will support businesses which meet the following criteria:

Part A

- The business is restricted within the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 but is not eligible for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme;

Or

Part B

- The business is within the supply chain of businesses restricted by the Regulations and as a result has been significantly impacted.

The new CRBSS will apply for the four week period of current restrictions.

Applications for Part A of this scheme opened on Wednesday 28th October, and details on Part B covering the supply chains will be published soon.

Further support for businesses was also announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer which includes improved terms for the Job Support Scheme (JSS), additional grants for the Self-Employment Scheme and improved repayment terms for the various coronavirus loan schemes. The new JSS applies to businesses who have been required to close and those facing decreased demand, such as supply chain operators.

Executive Ministers have been asked to bring forward options for additional support for those who may not qualify for these latest schemes, or who may not have been able to avail of previous opportunities.

All of the latest information on the support available can be found on the NI Business Info and UK Government Coronavirus Business Support websites.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what support she is providing to supply chain operators for airport-based retail, considering the ongoing impact of COVID-19 restrictions on travel. **(AQW 9367/17-22)**

Mrs Dodds: On 22nd October I announced the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS).

The CRBSS will support businesses which meet the following criteria:

Part A

- The business is restricted within the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 but is not eligible for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS);

Or

Part B

- The business is within the supply chain of businesses restricted by the Regulations and as a result has been significantly impacted.

The new CRBSS will apply for the four week period of current restrictions.

Applications for Part A of this scheme opened on Wednesday 28th October, and details on Part B covering the supply chains will be published soon.

Further support for businesses and individuals have also been announced by the Chancellor for the Exchequer on 22nd October. This included improving the terms of the Job Support Scheme which was introduced to help employers retain their employees. It applies to businesses who have been required to close and those facing decreased demand, such as supply chain operators. Improved terms for the repayment of the various coronavirus loan schemes have also been introduced.

Executive Ministers have been asked to bring forward options for additional support for those who may not qualify for these latest schemes, or who may not have been able to avail of previous opportunities.

All of the latest information on the support available can be found on the NI Business Info and UK Government Coronavirus Business Support websites.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy whether she intends to bring forward a grant scheme to assist Company Directors in Personal Service Contracts experiencing a downturn in trade as a result of COVID-19 public health restrictions. **(AQW 9410/17-22)**

Mrs Dodds: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme has been introduced to provide financial support to businesses which have been required to close or severely limit operations at their premises under the recent Health Protection Regulations that have been put in place by the NI Executive.

On 22nd October, I announced the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS).

The CRBSS will support businesses which meet the following criteria:

Part A

- The business is restricted within the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 but is not eligible for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme;

Or

Part B

- The business is within the supply chain of businesses restricted by the Regulations and as a result has been significantly impacted.

The new CRBSS will apply for the four week period of current restrictions.

Applications for Part A of this scheme opened on Wednesday 28th October, and details on Part B covering the supply chains will be published soon.

In addition, businesses who do not occupy a commercial premises and experiencing a significant decline in turnover can apply for a grant of £300 per week.

The Chancellor for the Exchequer has also announced a number of additional support measures, to help businesses and individuals during a time when it is likely that we will still be dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

These measures include improved terms for the Job Support Scheme, additional grants for the Self-Employment Scheme and improved repayment terms for the various coronavirus loan schemes.

Executive Ministers have been asked to bring forward options for additional support for those who may not qualify for these latest schemes, or who may not have been able to avail of previous opportunities.

All of the latest information on the support available can be found on the NI Business Info and UK Government Coronavirus Business Support websites.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will investigate temporary changes to employment law to allow those made redundant on the basis of the expected end of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme on 31 October to take advantage of the extension of the scheme as announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 31 October. **(AQW 9455/17-22)**

Mrs Dodds: My officials are actively engaging with their counterparts in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) to ascertain what, if any, legal changes are immediately required to employment law in Northern Ireland following the extension to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) and introduction of the Job Support Scheme.

The CJRS was introduced by HMRC, which also sets the eligibility criteria. It is my understanding that, to be eligible under the extension to the scheme, employees must have been on an employer's PAYE payroll by 23:59 on 30th October 2020. Any employer making redundancies must follow the legal framework in Northern Ireland. HMRC guidance, as I understand it, advises that an employer can continue to claim for a furloughed employee who is serving a statutory notice period.

Any employer which requires information on the extension should contact HMRC directly. Details are available on its website, with further guidance from it expected to follow imminently.

I firmly believe that employers who have been able to take advantage of the Government's Job Retention Scheme, which has brought benefit to employers and employees alike, should treat staff fairly and respect employee rights. Specifically, in this situation, those relating to redundancy consultation, notice period and redundancy pay.

Individuals who believe their employment rights or terms and conditions of employment have been breached (including any potential unlawful deduction of wages) should consider contacting the Labour Relations Agency Workplace Information Service on 03300 555 300 for confidential and impartial information.

Finally, the Law Centre NI continues to provide free, independent, specialist legal advice (subject to capacity) on employment rights. Its advice line can be contacted on 028 9024 4401, or by email: employmentadvice@lawcentreni.org.

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Mr Allister asked the Assembly Commission, pursuant to AQW 7540/17-22, once the change of policy indicated in that reply was decided upon, why a revised answer to AQW 2293/17-22 was not issued.

(AQW 9310/17-22)

Mr Butler (The Representative of the Assembly Commission): Written Questions are answered on the basis of an assessment of the relevant information in existence at the time. It is not possible or practical to continuously monitor questions and update answers for changes in the available information or to reflect future developments.

Northern Ireland Assembly

Friday 13 November 2020

Written Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Ms Anderson asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail the funding contributions from the Executive Office to COVID-19 Community Response in each of the Urban Village Areas.
(AQW 4286/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill (The First Minister and deputy First Minister): Towards the end of the 2019/20 financial year, just over £34,000 was reallocated by Urban Village projects to address immediate community needs arising from the Covid-19 public health emergency. This was in response to requests from community organisations. Groups and organisations in Urban Village areas adapted with energy and speed to reach out to help and protect the most vulnerable in communities, while continuing to fulfil Urban Village project aims.

Details of Covid-19 immediate response reallocations by Urban Village projects in 2019/20, by Urban Village area, are as follows:

Urban Village Area	COVID-19 immediate response reallocations in 2019/20 (£)
Colin	1,172
Derry / Londonderry	8,378
EastSide	5,405
North Belfast	12,698
South Belfast	6,400
Total	34,053

These resources helped support a range of activities, including, educational projects and those relating to health and well-being, shifting to online resources for those isolating or cut off from school and community activities; provision of PPE for volunteers and staff to continue community outreach and support; provision of meals, food parcels and other essential supplies for the most vulnerable across these areas.

The Executive's Urban Villages Initiative will continue to work with groups to help support their delivery of community-led activity within the Covid-19 context and also help communities across these areas to tackle longer term social, economic and health and wellbeing issues exacerbated by Covid-19. Funding of c£1.25m has been allocated across the five Urban Village areas in 2020/21 for community led projects. In addition, the Urban Villages Initiative in partnership with Business in the Community, are providing a further £50,000 to bring forward a new cross-cutting project "Keeping Healthy, Staying Safe" which builds on the success of the Healthy Summers 2019 initiative and will run from October 2020 to March 2021. These resources will help address the impact of social isolation; support children; young people and older residents; and deliver innovative approaches to improving and sustaining community cohesion.

Mr Blair asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline (i) when the Strategic Investment Board last completed an analysis of residual waste infrastructure requirements; (ii) the timeframe which such a review covered; and (iii) whether the Strategic Investment Board has any plans to review these assessments in light of (a) the passage of time; and (ii) the advancement in recycling rates and relevant technology since any reports were authored.
(AQW 4372/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The last analysis of Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) waste arisings / infrastructure requirements was carried out over the period Oct 18 – Dec 19.

The last Review covered a timeframe 2019 – 2035, in line with the timescales in the EU Circular Economy Package, which sets a range of targets for MSW out to 2035, including specific recycling targets for 2025, 2030 and 2035 and a cap on waste to landfill of 10% by 2035.

In recognition of the global Corona virus pandemic SIB have already had discussions with DAERA officials about updating the Report to factor in the impacts of the Pandemic. SIB have agreed with DAERA officials that we will not undertake any further analysis until early to mid 2021. There would be low confidence limits in any analysis produced before this time due to economic uncertainties associated with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

The 2019 SIB review of MSW waste arisings factored in the most recent recycling rates for NI with verified recycling rates for NI at that time (2017/18 figures) with data taken from waste returns by all of the NI Councils. SIB recognises that there have been advancements in technology and continues to assess what role they could play in dealing with Northern Ireland's waste.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister (i) by what process and legal authority can Ms Brenda King exercise the functions of the Attorney General; (ii) who bestowed such functions and authority on her; and (ii) by what powers were such functions and authority bestowed on her.
(AQW 4967/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Section 22 of the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002 (as amended) provides the First Minister and deputy First Minister (acting jointly) with the power to appoint an Attorney General for Northern Ireland and with the power to make arrangements for the discharge of the functions of the Attorney General for Northern Ireland during any vacancy in that office.

Mr O'Toole asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will update the Assembly on Brexit-related legislation that the Assembly will need to pass ahead of the end of 2020.
(AQW 5201/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The Executive Office has scoped the anticipated EU Exit legislative requirements from NI departments up to the end of the Transition Period. From the most recent returns, Departments have confirmed the need for 3 Assembly Bills, 8 Westminster Bills, 43 pieces of subordinate legislation to be brought before the Assembly, with a further 116 pieces of subordinate legislation that cut across devolved matters to be laid at Westminster. The volume of legislation is however fluid and likely to change following any agreements reached in negotiations and clarity of the implementation of the Protocol. The Executive will be monitoring progress of this legislative programme on a regular basis.

Individual departments will be engaging with their Assembly Committees to discuss the volume of legislation and to agree scrutiny and liaison arrangements depending on the timescale, priority and importance of the legislative change being brought forward.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the (i) effectiveness; and (ii) value for money of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition.
(AQW 5463/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: In line with DoF guidance a business case to identify the preferred option and assess its value for money was undertaken prior to the launch of the Commission. A post project evaluation will be completed within six months of the Commission completing its work, including an analysis of expenditure and realisation of benefits detailed in the business case.

Mr Muir asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, pursuant to AQW 6085/17-22, for their assessment of the response from the Minister for Infrastructure concerning the Executive Committee (Functions) Bill.
(AQW 6137/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: We have noted the response of the Minister for Infrastructure.

Mr Allister asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for a breakdown of costs (i) already known; and (ii) anticipated, arising from the recent judicial review of the failure to introduce a victims' pension.
(AQW 6855/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill:

(i) Costs already known:

To date, costs known in relation to legal advice regarding the recent Judicial Reviews amounts to £22,288.92

(ii) Anticipated cost:

No estimate is available at this point as the applicants have not yet submitted their bill of costs. Counsel fees are also awaited.

Mr McGrath asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they became aware that they were not going to meet the date to have a Head of Civil Service in place for the leaving of Mr Sterling.
(AQW 7720/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Significant preparatory work on the recruitment competition for Head of the Civil Service (HOCS) was undertaken during the period from January to mid-March 2020. The intention was to launch the recruitment process in April to ensure completion of this before the end of August (when the then HOCS was due to retire). The timeline was impacted by the unprecedented situation in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. In reactivating the recruitment process at the start of June 2020, we were aware it was unlikely that we would be in a position to have David Sterling's successor appointed prior to his last day of service, but the plan was to hold final interviews on 16th September; this date had to be postponed by a week due to unforeseen circumstances.

Ms Armstrong asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the High Streets Taskforce; and when the membership of that group will be confirmed.

(AQW 8812/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: An inter-departmental group of officials is currently examining best practice in other jurisdictions, and engaging with stakeholders.

It is clear that our town and city centres face a range of economic and social challenges. Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly exacerbated the situation, many of the challenges are long-standing; stemming from the financial crisis of 2009, prolonged underinvestment in infrastructure, and changing patterns of consumer behaviour.

This calls for a strategic, sustained response, with Departments and local government working in partnership to deliver a vision for sustainable town and city centres, as thriving sustainable hubs for the retail, services, hospitality and residential sectors.

Our aim is to bring a proposal to the Executive for discussion in the near future.

Ms McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on progress towards the redevelopment of Meenan Square in Derry.

(AQW 8869/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: TEO's Urban Villages Initiative is currently developing the business case for this major regeneration project, which includes options for a mixed-use development that will offer a range of facilities for the benefit of the community.

The project aims to reinvent the site as a shared space for fostering positive community identities; building good relations; and harnessing wider economic and social benefits, reclaiming and repurposing a dilapidated site which has for too long been a catalyst for anti-social behaviour.

The business case is being prioritised with a view to it being completed and ready for submission to the Department of Finance for approval by the end of this calendar year. In parallel, work is also ongoing to secure purchase of the site before the end of this financial year.

The site has a history of anti-social behaviour and it is important that fencing is installed immediately to mitigate this risk. In preparation for this, our delivery partner, Apex Housing Association submitted a planning application recently which will allow for fencing to be erected to secure the site immediately on purchase.

Mr G Kelly asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the key programme outcomes to date of the Community Relations Council-administered North Belfast Strategic Good Relations Programme

(AQO 852/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: The key aim of this programme is to improve relations between and within all sections of the community in North Belfast.

An independent review in 2019 highlighted the programme's positive impact on the wider community and recognised the complementarity with the wider T:BUC Strategy. The programme continues to have a high level of engagement with the local community in North Belfast, with projects directly impacting around 8,000 participants annually.

Examples of key good relations outcomes from the Programme include the North Talks Too project, which brings together representatives from Lower Oldpark, Lower Shankill and the Cliftonville area, working to support a confident and thriving community in these areas.

The North Belfast Women's Network provides an accessible resource and developmental support for women in the Greater Shankill area and beyond.

And a recent CRC shared learning event highlighted the ways in which NBSGRP contract holders have led the way in terms of innovative use of technology to continue delivery during these challenges times – including a podcast by Intercomm on shared history in North Belfast which proved very popular.

In addition, many contract holders are also involved in other good relations initiatives, for example interface barrier removal, and learning is shared across projects.

The Programme contributes to the work of the Together: Building a United Community Strategy, and contract holders work with the Community Relations Council to ensure their project outcomes align to the key priorities of the Strategy.

Ms McLaughlin asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister why it took almost nine months to advertise for the position of Head of the Civil Service.

(AQO 858/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: Planning for the recruitment campaign to appoint a new Head of the Civil Service began in January 2020 with the aim of advertising the position at the end of April. During February and March 2020 significant work was undertaken to develop and agree the recruitment literature, advertising and outreach; arrangements in relation to the first stage interviews; assessment by an occupational psychologist; and our specific role at the final interview stage.

We had planned to advertise in April 2020, however, there was some inevitable delay due to the significant and unprecedented challenges associated with the on-going COVID-19 situation with the recruitment being advertised in July.

Ms Kimmins asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline the sectoral issues and concerns raised during ongoing stakeholder engagement in relation to Brexit.

(AQO 862/17-22)

Mrs Arlene Foster and Mrs Michelle O'Neill: In our engagement on EU Exit we have met and corresponded with a range of individual businesses and sectoral representatives.

Throughout this engagement our stakeholders have stressed the importance of reaching an agreement with the EU to support our trade east west and north south, and their concern of a potential non-negotiated outcome in parallel to the continuing challenges of COVID 19.

They have also emphasised the increasingly limited amount of time they have left to prepare for the end of the Transition period and asked for urgent clarity, guidance and assurances on key issues including:

- How unfettered access for goods moving west to east will be delivered to protect their place in the internal market;
- The potential frictions that will apply to the movement of goods east to west, including SPS checks and tariffs on goods “at risk”; and
- Their ability to benefit from UK and EU FTAs to support the continued flow of trade north south and west east.

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) for his assessment of why there was an increase in the return of spawning salmon to our local waterways this year; and (ii) what can be done to ensure the numbers returning are maintained and enhanced.

(AQW 6421/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): A number of factors may have helped increase the numbers of returning salmon to our rivers. The juvenile recruitment of salmon fry in 2017 was excellent and those young salmon emigrating as smolts in 2019, experienced good migration conditions which may have promoted higher survival rates. There are some early indications that marine survival has also shown an increase, although it is too early to fully assess this, as the year's data is not yet complete. The on-going salmon conservation measures undertaken by my Department have also contributed. This includes ‘catch and release’ and habitat improvement works which are implemented in conjunction with angling clubs,

To maintain and enhance salmon numbers, the Department will continue to protect and conserve salmon and their habitat. It will promote and enforce catch and release for salmon where rivers are not meeting management targets. We will work with angling clubs to develop and improve habitat and fish passage in salmon rivers which will in turn support greater numbers of juvenile salmon. The Department will also continue to work with landowners, angling clubs and other Government Departments such as the Department for Infrastructure - Rivers and with the planning authorities by providing advice and guidance on any river development works which might impact on, or enhance, salmon habitat and fish passage.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what measures he has implemented to ensure that the plastic and disposable waste generated through the COVID-19 pandemic, such as masks, gloves, aprons etc., is sustainably and safely recycled.

(AQW 6435/17-22)

Mr Poots: I acknowledge that the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has seen an unprecedented increase in the use of disposable Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) items. The disposal of these items has been an issue my Department has been instrumental in developing and delivering key messages around throughout the crisis.

The vast majority of disposable PPE items cannot be recycled through conventional recycling facilities and therefore guidance from my Department has focused on the correct and safe disposal of such items, whilst also encouraging the use of reusable items, such as face coverings. The incorrect disposal of items of PPE poses a contamination risk to others, including essential workers in the waste sector who collect and sort our recycling.

Information and guidance relating to the disposal of single-use and reusable face coverings is available at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-face-coverings>.

My Department is working closely with Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful, who undertake the Northern Ireland Litter Composition Analysis, to monitor both short and long-term impacts that improper disposal of this type of PPE may have on our environment.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (i) whether the Mullaghglass landfill site has an odour management plan in place; and (ii) what are the long-term plans to manage the odour of this site after its expected closure in December 2021.

(AQW 7952/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The Mullaghglass landfill site does have in place an odour management plan which is based on the UK guidance for odour management at permitted facilities.
- (ii) After site closure, the landfill will be sealed by covering with a final multi-layer engineered cap, including impermeable layers, and will be under gas extraction to maximise the capture of landfill gas for renewable energy production. This will minimise the potential for any further odours. As part of the landfill closure requirements, the operator will continue to be responsible for the long term management and monitoring of landfill gas for several decades. In addition the site will continue to be regulated by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency in the post closure period.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when AQW 6603/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 8095/17-22)

Mr Poots: Please note AQW 6603/17-22 was answered on 05 October 2020.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs when AQW 6708/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 8098/17-22)

Mr Poots: Please note AQW 6708/17-22 was answered on 05 October 2020.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, as part of the Clean Air Strategy, whether his Department plans to introduce a requirement for each local council to develop a walking and cycling strategy, with targets aimed at reducing the number of journeys by private car.

(AQW 8449/17-22)

Mr Poots: In December 2016, the previous DAERA Minister, Michele McIlveen, gave a commitment to develop an air quality strategy. Since then, my officials have been working on developing a draft Clean Air Strategy discussion document. This work has involved close collaboration with other Departments, in particular the Department for Infrastructure.

The Discussion Document has now been finalised and will be launched shortly for a 12 week public consultation in the coming weeks. The consultation will invite views on a wide range of matters relating to air quality and it is likely that issues relating to active travel, including walking and cycling, will be raised at this stage. Responses to the consultation will be published and it is likely the Department of Infrastructure, will have interest in comments relating to walking, cycling and active travel.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs whether NI will be included in the interim arrangements currently being developed by the Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs to allow members of the public to submit complaints about potential breaches of environmental law from the end of the transition period.

(AQW 9539/17-22)

Mr Poots: My officials are currently in discussions with Defra regarding potential interim arrangements for Northern Ireland following the end of the transition period.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 8538/17-22, to detail the (i) dates when levels of particulates or nitrogen oxide in the Derry City and Strabane Council area exceeded the daily level proportionate to complying with the annual mean objectives; (ii) extent to which they exceeded those levels; and (iii) location of those excesses.

(AQW 9646/17-22)

Mr Poots: Air Quality is continually monitored across Northern Ireland. This includes monitoring pollutants such as particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide. In Northern Ireland, District Councils are responsible for reviewing the state of air quality in their district and part of this involves monitoring activities.

There are currently four automatic monitoring stations within Derry City and Strabane Council area (Londonderry Rosemount, Londonderry Dale's Corner, Strathfoyle and Strabane Springhill Park).

During 2019, all sites within Derry City and Strabane City Councils met their limit values in respect of annual mean and daily mean for particulate matter and nitrogen dioxide levels.

The data from the monitoring stations is publically available on the Air Quality NI website (www.airqualityni.co.uk/) which was redesigned earlier in the year. The data from the website is used in the first Air Quality App for Northern Ireland, which I launched on 7 May 2020. I would encourage everyone to download the new Northern Ireland Air App in order to receive the most up-to-date information on the quality of air across the province.

In addition to the App, my Department has been working on developing a Clean Air Strategy Discussion Document. The Discussion Document has now been finalised and will be launched shortly for a 12 week public consultation in the coming weeks. The consultation will invite views on a wide range of matters relating to air quality and I would welcome further engagement with Derry City and Strabane District Council at this stage to discuss issues relating to air quality within that District Council area.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the potential for a substantial expansion of kelp farming and of the resulting environmental impact.

(AQW 9648/17-22)

Mr Poots: There is currently one commercial kelp farm in Northern Irish waters at Church Bay, Rathlin Island. This has been licensed by my department under the Marine and Coastal Access Act since 2014.

My Department has not been approached regarding substantial expansion of kelp farming within the aquaculture sector and no assessment of potential has been made. Any applications for kelp farming are considered on a case by case basis. In determining any applications for a marine licence my Department must have regard to:

- a) the need to protect the environment,
- b) the need to protect human health,
- c) the need to prevent interference with legitimate uses of the sea,

and any such matters as the authority thinks relevant.

In line with the draft Marine Plan for Northern Ireland, there is a presumption in favour of aquaculture proposals where it can be demonstrated that there will be no unacceptable adverse impact on marine activities, uses and/or the marine area and any potential adverse impact is, in order of preference, avoided, minimised and/or mitigated.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to AQW 8207/17-22, to detail (i) when the £250,000 scheme of support for inland fishermen who are involved in the Lough Neagh eel and scale-fish fisheries will be finalised; and (ii) when payments will be made.

(AQW 9689/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) My officials are currently working on the necessary eligibility criteria to enable applicants to apply for Lough Neagh Financial Support Scheme. At this time I cannot confirm when this work will be finalised to launch the Scheme.
- (ii) Payments will be made when all eligible applications have been assessed

in accordance with the Scheme's eligibility criteria.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assessment his Department has made of the impact that increasing waste incineration capacity would have on rates of recycling.

(AQW 9721/17-22)

Mr Poots: Whilst I accept that energy recovery can be necessary in certain circumstances, I would stress the importance of applying the waste hierarchy in accordance with Article 4 of the Waste Framework Directive. Where waste generation cannot be prevented, reuse should be encouraged. If reuse is not suitable or the item has reached the end of its useful life, recycling should be undertaken. Only once these options have been exhausted should energy from waste or landfill be considered.

The transposition of the Circular Economy Package into domestic legislation will add further requirements to ensure that waste which has been separately collected for preparing for reuse or recycling is not incinerated, except where incineration delivers the best environmental outcome.

Although the planning process for waste incineration is not within my remit I do continue to assess the need for additional waste infrastructure and this will be further informed by an update to a Strategic Investment Board report which outlines Northern Ireland's future waste infrastructure needs to 2035.

My main focus is however on increasing the quality and quantity of recycling and my Department are progressing a range of initiatives in this area, including the Household Waste Collaborative Change Programme and the recent discussion document "Future Recycling and Separation of Waste in Northern Ireland".

I am confident the Northern Ireland will continue on this trajectory of increased recycling even if incineration capacity is increased.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, pursuant to my Topical Question on 3 November, to detail (i) the value of the support package for the fishing community of Lough Neagh; and (ii) when this package will be released.

(AQW 9725/17-22)

Mr Poots:

- (i) The Lough Neagh Financial Support Scheme will be funded under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund. The total value of the funding package will be up to £336,000.
- (ii) The funding package will be released when the criteria against which applications will be assessed have been finalised.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to detail (i) the conversations she has had with councils to allow people to visit recycling centres without first having to book appointments; and (ii) the reasons for continuing to use the booking system at recycling centres.

(AQW 9855/17-22)

Mr Poots: The majority of Household Waste Recycling Centres (HWRCs) have now re-opened across Northern Ireland with the latest information showing that 94 out of 96 sites now operational. The most recent figures gathered from across all 11 local councils indicate that a total of 15 HWRC sites across Northern Ireland are presently operating some type of booking or appointment system.

In April of this year, I approved a set of key principles and guidance to support councils with issues around the safe re-opening of HWRCs, you can view this [here](#). In order to protect the health and safety of HWRC staff and the public during this pandemic it is important that this set of guidelines, which includes maintaining effective social distancing, are followed and some councils have decided that a booking system has enabled them to better manage this at some sites.

The operation and ongoing management of HWRCs, including the implementation of any booking or appointment systems, is a matter for each individual council to decide upon and my Department has no powers to direct them in relation to these aspects of their service delivery.

Department for Communities

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQO 594/17-22, whether the forthcoming legislation will provide mitigation for claimants affected by the benefit cap and the two child maximum tax credit rule.

(AQW 6679/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín (The Minister for Communities): I intend to bring forward new legislation to provide for the extension of the existing welfare mitigation measures. This legislation will include proposed amendments to the Benefit Cap mitigation scheme to remove restrictions on entitlement. If approved this will ensure that all families with children who are affected by the Benefit Cap will receive a mitigation payment equivalent to the capped amount.

I am also considering the feasibility of introducing a scheme to mitigate the restriction on support for a maximum of two children in Child Tax Credit and Universal Credit. The proposal is at an early stage of development with the estimated costs for delivering any additional welfare mitigation schemes currently being assessed. However, I can confirm, that it is my intention to bring forward the necessary legislation for any new mitigation measures at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she has considered abolishing the (i) two child limit; and (ii) benefit cap in Universal Credit.

(AQW 7185/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am considering the feasibility of introducing a scheme to mitigate the restriction on support for a maximum of two children in Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit. The proposal is at an early stage of development with the estimated costs for delivering any additional welfare mitigation schemes currently being assessed. However, I can confirm, that it is my intention to bring forward the necessary legislation for any new mitigation measures at the earliest opportunity.

Currently Welfare Supplementary payments are made in certain situations where people are affected by the Benefit Cap in Universal Credit. These payments are part of the welfare mitigation measures. I intend to bring forward new legislation to provide for the extension of the existing welfare mitigation measures. This legislation will include proposed amendments to the Benefit Cap mitigation scheme to remove restrictions on entitlement. If approved this will ensure that all families with children who are affected by the Benefit Cap will receive a mitigation payment equivalent to the capped amount.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) what Sport NI capital funds are currently open to assist with capital projects for community and sporting groups; and (ii) whether such funds are due to open for applications going forward.
(AQW 7222/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: There are two capital funding programmes currently open to assist with capital projects for community and sporting groups.

- Sport NI has been allocated £650,000 in 2020/21 for the Your School Your Club initiative which invests in projects which enhance existing school sports facilities for use by local communities and sporting clubs outside of school hours. Investment is made on the basis of Expressions of Interest from district councils and schools, subject to availability of funding and state of readiness of the project to be completed by 31 March 2021.
- The Department has also allocated Sport NI a capital budget of £400,000 in 2020/21 to fund immediate health and safety requirements at sports grounds, with a particular focus on designated venues within the Safety at Sports Grounds (NI) Order 2006. Investment is made on the basis of health & safety needs identified by facility operators, district councils and the Sports Ground Safety Authority.

Sport NI is currently developing proposals aligned to its draft Corporate Plan (2020-2025) to bring forward additional funding opportunities for the sports sector.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities what steps her Department has taken to compile a database of the number and location of accessible properties in Northern Ireland Housing Executive and Housing Association stock; and when such a database will be available to the public.

(AQW 7617/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive in conjunction with the NIFHA is currently developing an in-house Accessible Housing Register (AHR) solution for social housing.

The AHR was programmed for completion and “go live” in May 20. However, this completion date was delayed due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. The revised “go-live” date is December 2020 at which stage it will become operational for both the Housing Executive and Housing Associations.

The AHR data will provide staff with waiting list information, allocations, general & AHR stock profiles but will not be available to the public.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Communities which of the 11 district councils have a process in place to deal with disciplinary issues pertaining to their Chief Executives.[R]

(AQW 8238/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: All of the 11 districts councils have a process in place. Eight of the 11 deal with such issues in line with the Joint Negotiating Committee for Chief Executives of Local authorities Model Disciplinary Procedure and Guidance. Three councils (Fermanagh and Omagh DC, Antrim and Newtownabbey BC and Mid and East Antrim BC) have their own Council Disciplinary Policy and Procedures.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Communities whether she intends to provide revenue and capital funding for town and village revitalisation post-COVID-19.

(AQW 8727/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has been delivering a range of regeneration programmes in town and city centres over many years, and will continue to do so post-COVID-19. This will include revitalisation projects, together with other interventions such as public realm works, environmental improvements, and development schemes.

My Department’s regeneration policy focus extends only to urban towns, which has been defined by NISRA as those with a population of 5,000 and above. The Department for Agriculture, the Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), through its Rural Development Programme, provides support for regeneration in smaller settlements.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic my Department has collaborated with DAERA and the Department for Infrastructure to provide £17.6m of additional funding to Local Councils for revitalisation activities in settlements of all sizes.

Mr Allen asked the Minister for Communities to detail the (i) number of grants; and (ii) amount each council made to businesses under the first tranche of the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Scheme.

(AQW 8848/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Payments totalling almost £6m for the first Tranche of the COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Programme have been made to councils to provide much needed support to local businesses as they recover and adapt to the impact of Covid-19.

Councils have decided to use part of their allocations to provide small grants to local businesses. The allocation and eligibility for the grants is a matter for each council to determine and as they are at various stages of administering their grant schemes, I am unable to provide the requested information at this time.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister for Communities to detail the status of the Housing Executive's Economic Appraisal for the Upper Long Streets in the New Lodge area; and why the Housing Executive is advising residents in that area that their homes cannot be sold to other social housing providers.

(AQW 8851/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive's Economic Appraisal for the Upper Long Streets in the New Lodge Area is being progressed within the Housing Executive. There will be engagement with my Department during November and, subject to that being successfully concluded, I expect the Appraisal to go to the January meeting of the Housing Executive Board for agreement.

The Housing Executive has not advised residents in that area that their homes cannot be sold to other social housing providers. Any proposal for the acquisition of a property for the purposes of meeting housing need is considered against the criteria in the Housing Association Guide for existing satisfactory purchase/acquisition and rehabilitation delivery within the context of the Social Housing Development Programme.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities whether they will bring forward a support package or hardship fund for the industries which support the arts, entertainment and events sectors such as lighting, staging, sound and audio.

(AQW 8899/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am pleased to say that my Department is delivering a Programme to support people and organisations in the culture, language, arts and heritage sectors which have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

I am also pleased to say that all organisations including commercial whose primary role is to create, present or support a wide range of sectoral categories will also be eligible to apply.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) the levels of financial support allocated to each of the district councils over the period of the pandemic; and (ii) total budget available to offer further support to each council.

(AQW 8930/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 19 May 2020, £20.3m was allocated to Department for Communities to support local councils which have delivered vital services during the Covid-19 crisis. This was for the period mid-March 2020 to 30 June 2020 and was allocated and paid to councils in June 2020 as set out in Annex 1.

On 24 September and 29 October 2020 further amounts of £40m and £15m respectively, was announced by the Executive for local councils for the period 1 July 2020 to 31 March 2021, to assist them with their financial pressures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

My Department is carrying out an analysis of the figures provided by each council reflecting their projected financial losses and COVID-19 costs for the period July 2020 to September 2020 and updated estimates / actual spend for the period mid-March 2020 to June 2020.

Once my Department has carried out a due diligence exercise on the information provided by councils, the figures will be signed off by individual Council Chief Executives. Final consultation with Association of Local Government Finance Officers and Society of Local Authority Chief Executives will also take place.

This will provide a basis for allocation that will be consistent with the original bid for support as approved by the Executive. Allocations of funding will be confirmed once the due diligence exercise has been completed.

My Department also activated the Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance (SEFA) - COVID-19 for the period 3 April 2020 to 3 October 2020 to reimburse councils with other costs due to the Covid-19 crisis. For the period 3 April 2020 to 3 July 2020 claims totalling £74,329.20 have been paid out to councils. Allocations are set out in Annex 2.

Councils have also received funding from my Department of £3.25m for a COVID-19 Community Support Fund through the existing Community Support Programme. The allocations to each council are shown in Annex 3.

My Department is investing £10m in the Capital COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Scheme which will be used in larger towns and city centres.

The funding will be allocated to councils in two tranches to deliver measures that will help provide a safe environment for visitors, shoppers and workers within town and city centres. This may include measures such as shop frontage and awnings/canopies; outdoor furniture, heaters and queueing systems; PA/Tannoy and digital screens, and other signage. Allocations for tranche 1 are shown in Annex 4.

Annex 1

COVID-19 Quarter 1 Allocations

Council	Covid-19 Q1 Allocation
Antrim & Newtownabbey	£1,949,158
Ards & North Down	£1,415,734

Council	Covid-19 Q1 Allocation
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

Annex 2**SEFA – COVID-19 Quarter 1 Allocations**

Council	SEFA Q1 Allocation
Antrim & Newtownabbey	£4,812.63
Ards & North Down	£3,464.48
Armagh, Banbridge Craigavon	£6,037.00
Belfast	£4,892.39
Causeway Coast & Glens	£13,434.45
Derry & Strabane	£16,104.34
Fermanagh & Omagh	£3,004.77
Lisburn & Castlereagh	£6,581.69
Mid & East Antrim	£5,646.06
Mid Ulster	£6,795.84
Newry Mourne & Down	£3,555.55
Total	£74,329.20

Annex 3**COVID-19 Community Support Fund Allocations**

Council	First Allocation	Second Allocation
Antrim & Newtownabbey	£69,450.00	£95,531.46
Ards & North Down	£65,550.00	£103,106.19
Armagh, Banbridge Craigavon	£133,800.00	£149,259.30
Belfast	£485,700.00	£485,700.00
Causeway Coast & Glens	£80,700.00	£126,226.54
Derry & Strabane	£280,950.00	£280,950.00
Fermanagh & Omagh	£67,950.00	£95,238.46
Lisburn & Castlereagh	£82,500.00	£82,500.00
Mid & East Antrim	£71,850.00	£103,528.69
Mid Ulster	£63,300.00	£85,548.08
Newry Mourne & Down	£98,250.00	£143,674.86
Total	£1,500,000.00	£1,751,263.59

Annex 4

COVID-19 Recovery Revitalisation Scheme Allocations

Council	Tranche 1 Allocation
Antrim & Newtownabbey	£215,000
Ards & North Down	£504,000
Armagh, Banbridge Craigavon	£545,000
Belfast	£1,336,000
Causeway Coast & Glens	£340,000
Derry & Strabane	£455,000
Fermanagh & Omagh	£221,000
Lisburn & Castlereagh	£210,000
Mid & East Antrim	£350,000
Mid Ulster	£281,000
Newry Mourne & Down	£433,000
Total	£4,890,000

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for Communities why the Housing Executive is placing people with addictions in B&B accommodation without any support in the Derry City and Strabane District Council area.

(AQW 8940/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has advised that placements of people with support needs in B&B and Hotels are used in the absence of more suitable accommodation and every effort is made to move the person to more suitable supported accommodation as soon as this becomes available.

As part of their response to COVID-19, the number of placements provided by the Housing Executive has increased by 136% when comparing April to September 2020 with the equivalent period in 2019. As a result of the unprecedented increase in demand, the Housing Executive has also sought to put in place additional support in places linked to dispersed accommodation such as B&Bs and Hotels. Within these situations, Housing Executive staff are also available to assist with any other support needs that may become evident during such a placement with care for the household/individual an integral part of the process.

In making placements in temporary accommodation, the Housing Executive will consider the availability of placements within the applicant's local area and any support needs which might have been identified during the assessment process. The objective being to make placements which are most appropriate to the requirements of the household. To facilitate this, the Housing Executive has access to 147 support services with a range of client groups catered for. These services provide a total 4,971 floating support units for those with additional support needs. Of these units 626 are available within Derry City.

The Housing Executive's Supporting People Team are producing a three year strategy for 2021-2024 which considers the existing needs and emerging demands on Housing Support Services. It will be informed by and in support of other strategies, including the Housing Executive Homelessness Strategy, wider strategies of health and criminal justice and aligned to outcomes identified in the Draft Programme for Government. It will also be informed in part by a strategic, evidence-based, assessment of need which saw some assessment completed in September 2020.

Through the life span of the Supporting People strategy there will be a focus on Ministerial priorities and the findings of the completed strategic needs assessment.

The strategy plans to address priorities and gaps in need through various means such as scheme reconfigurations, new or additional services facilitated by pursuing a more equitable basis of funding or through additional monies.

The Supporting People Strategy will progress to a public consultation which is planned to begin in December 2020.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Communities for an update on the e Co-ownership Housing Scheme, as announced in New Decade, New Approach.

(AQW 8984/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In New Decade New Approach the Executive committed to bring forward legislation to reclassify Housing Associations as external to the public sector to ensure the continuation of new social house building and the Co-Ownership Housing Scheme.

The Housing (Amendment) Act legislation to facilitate reversal of the Office for National Statistics' (ONS) classification of Housing Associations as Non-Financial Public Corporations, became law on 28 August 2020. ONS confirmed the

reclassification on 30 October 2020. The Department will fund Co ownership with £145m to provide 4000 affordable homes over the period 2020/21 - 2023/24.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities how many applicants on the social housing waiting list have points awarded for (i) overcrowding; and (ii) sharing, broken down by (a) constituency; and (b) council area.

(AQW 8993/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Housing Executive has provided the following tables which detail all applicants with overcrowding points, and all applicants with sharing points, as at the end of September 2020. The first table shows the applicants broken down by Parliamentary Constituency, and the second table by Local Government District.

Parliamentary Constituency	All Applicants with Overcrowding Points	All Applicants with Sharing Points
Belfast East	491	914
Belfast East/South*	76	150
Belfast North	1265	2178
Belfast South	600	1235
Belfast South/Strangford*	40	55
Belfast West	1546	2094
Belfast West/North*	31	54
Belfast West/South*	<10	18
East Antrim	308	575
East Derry	381	804
Fermanagh South Tyrone	427	711
Foyle	1390	2283
Lagan Valley	493	980
Mid Ulster	234	456
Newry & Armagh	682	1151
North Antrim	375	852
North Down	299	619
South Antrim	389	736
South Down	472	859
Strangford	360	648
Upper Bann	530	1050
West Tyrone	322	625
Grand Total	-----	19047

Local Government District	All Applicants with Overcrowding Points	All Applicants with Sharing Points
Antrim & Newtownabbey Borough Council	759	1360
Ards & North Down Borough Council	573	1115
Armagh City, Banbridge & Craigavon Borough Council	708	1434
Belfast City Council	3557	5892
Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council	528	1098
Derry City & Strabane District Council	1557	2621
Fermanagh & Omagh District Council	316	692
Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council	643	1197

Local Government District	All Applicants with Overcrowding Points	All Applicants with Sharing Points
Mid & East Antrim Borough Council	480	1019
Mid Ulster District Council	509	788
Newry, Mourne & Down District Council	1089	1831
Grand Total	10719	19047

* The following Common Landlord Areas (CLA) which cross Parliamentary Constituency boundaries should be noted.

■ Cregagh/Castlereagh	Belfast East/South
■ Willowfield/Upper Castlereagh Road	Belfast East/South
■ Carryduff	Belfast South/Strangford
■ Ainsworth	Belfast West/North
■ Twaddell/Upper Woodvale	Belfast West/North
■ Hamill St / John St	Belfast West/South
■ Carrick Hill / Unity Flats	Belfast West/North
■ Bridge End / Rotterdam Court	Belfast East/South

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she plans to review the Caravan Act, including the length of tenancy stipulated.

(AQW 9447/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for the legislation around caravans is shared between DfC and DfE. The Department for Communities' primary purpose in this legislation is in relation to Part 1 of the Caravans Act 2011 and those people who live on a caravan/park site as their permanent residence. However Part 2 of the Caravans Act 2011 contains specific legislation controlling the arrangements between park owners and those renting caravan pitches for more than 28 days.

The primary aim of the legislation is to ensure clarity and transparency in the terms of the agreement allowing caravan owners to station caravans on holiday parks. Although the Act deals primarily with static caravan owners it also deals with touring caravans where the owner enters into an agreement entitling them to keep their caravan on a site for more than 28 days.

The Act requires that the owner of the caravan park must give the proposed occupier a written statement, this includes setting out the express terms in the agreement and the implied terms. The Act does not specify the implied terms, rather the guidance on the Act provides examples of things which may be included and the list is not exhaustive.

The standard terms of any contract allowing a caravan owner to station their caravan on a holiday park are subject to a test of fairness under the Unfair Terms in Consumer Contract Regulations 1999.

The provisions in the Act came into effect on 16 September 2011 and in 2016 the Department for Communities reviewed the Act as part of our routine evaluation process and no changes were recommended.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she plans to review the licence agreement contained in the Caravan Act.

(AQW 9448/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The provisions in the Act came into effect on 16 September 2011 and in 2016 the Department for Communities reviewed the Act as part of our routine evaluation process and no changes were recommended.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities whether she has undertaken an assessment of the existing rights for caravan owners and in relation to the Caravan Act.

(AQW 9449/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: Responsibility for the legislation around caravans is shared between DfC and DfE.

The primary aim of the legislation is to ensure clarity and transparency in the terms of the agreement allowing caravan owners to station caravans on holiday parks. Although the Act deals primarily with static caravan owners it also deals with touring caravans where the owner enters into an agreement entitling them to keep their caravan on a site for more than 28 days.

The Act requires that the owner of the caravan park must give the proposed occupier a written statement, this includes setting out the express terms in the agreement and the implied terms. The Act does not specify the implied terms, rather the guidance on the Act provides examples of things which may be included and the list is not exhaustive.

The standard terms of any contract allowing a caravan owner to station their caravan on a holiday park are subject to a test of fairness under the Unfair Terms in Consumer Contract Regulations 1999.

The provisions in the Act came into effect on 16 September 2011 and in 2016 the Department for Communities reviewed the Act as part of our routine evaluation process and no changes were recommended.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for Communities, pursuant to AQW 8895/17-22, (i) how many grant applications have been received in each Council area; and (ii) what is the total amount sought from eligible applicants.
(AQW 9459/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department does not hold the information requested. I refer the Member to the response given in paragraphs (iii) and (iv) of my reply to AQW 8895/17-22

I can confirm, however, that the final Revitalisation Plans submitted by councils have identified a total of approximately £6.9m being allocated to grant schemes across both tranches of the Programme.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities whether she intends to review how welfare benefits are assessed; and whether she will consider bringing the process back into public sector control where her Department will be able to audit and manage performance.
(AQW 9463/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: An independent evaluation of the performance of both the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) Assessment Services and the Medical Support Services contracts in delivering health assessments for welfare benefits will be completed by the end of the year. Any enhancements identified through this evaluation will be considered for the future delivery of health assessments.

Additionally, a business case is under development to appraise all options for the delivery of health assessments from August 2023, including in-housing the service.

My Department manages a programme of monthly, quarterly and annual reviews of the current performance against defined service levels for both contracts. Officials also carry out an independent audit of completed health assessments to provide assurance on both quality and procedural accuracy.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities what discussions her officials have had with Westminster officials to examine whether the Carer's Allowance is delivering necessary support for carers; and whether there will be a COVID-19 payment made to carers.
(AQW 9465/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: In April 2020, my Department introduced two important temporary measures to help unpaid carers through the current COVID-19 emergency to ensure people most in need get the help and support they require:

- Unpaid carers are able to continue to claim Carer's Allowance if they have a temporary break in caring, because either they or the person they care for becomes infected with coronavirus or has to self-isolate because of it.
- Providing "emotional support" to a severely disabled person will also count towards the Carer's Allowance threshold of 35 hours of care a week.

My officials are in regular contact with all stakeholders as the coronavirus emergency progresses and we are continuing to look at how best to support people during this unprecedented time. We have extended the temporary easements in Carer's Allowance until 12 May 2021.

Carers in receipt of Universal Credit will also be able to benefit from the increase in the standard allowance put in place in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (around £1000 a year).

In addition, those in receipt of Carer's Allowance here may, depending on their circumstances, be eligible to access the range of other emergency financial support that my Department is providing during the COVID-19 crisis, including Discretionary Support.

In terms of providing longer term additional financial support for carers here, it is anticipated that this will be considered as part of the upcoming welfare mitigations review.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for Communities whether her Department has considered a support scheme for people unemployed as a consequence of COVID-19, similar to the Pandemic Unemployment Payment available in the Republic of Ireland.
(AQW 9486/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: My Department has introduced a number of financial support measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic for those who have become unemployed.

Depending on a person's circumstances, financial assistance is available to those impacted by the Covid-19 outbreak through Universal Credit, New style Jobseekers Allowance, and New Style Employment Support Allowance. Further information can be found at the following - <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-and-benefits>

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, I have taken a number of steps to ensure that the social security system is more flexible, to relieve hardship and to ensure people most in need get the help and support they require.

These include

- increasing the standard allowance of Universal Credit (and working tax credit) for this financial year by £1,040 per year (£20 a week). This is in addition to the annual uprating of 1.7%. This means that for a single Universal Credit claimant aged 25 or over, the standard allowance will increase from £317.82 to £409.89 per month;
- increasing the Local Housing Allowance rates for Universal Credit and Housing Benefit claimants so that it covers the cheapest 30% of local market rents;
- making a number of enhancements to the Discretionary Support scheme including increasing the amount of individual living expenses awards by increasing the rate of benefit used when calculating awards and allowing discretion to pay for longer periods;
- increasing the Discretionary Support Annual Income Threshold to £20,405 and increasing the debt threshold to £1,500 to ensure that more people on a low income can access assistance when they need it most;
- providing access to emergency financial support through the Discretionary Support (DS) scheme to students in full-time education who are normally not eligible for benefits; and
- providing a DS Self-Isolation Grant to a person when they or a member of their immediate family is diagnosed with COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate in accordance with guidance published by the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well-being. There is no restriction on the number of COVID-19 related grants that a claimant can receive.

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Communities what assessment has been made of the potential harm caused by remote gambling at the users' location compared to the location of the server.

(AQW 9493/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (NI) Order 1985 contains no provisions in relation to remote gambling. However, the 2014 Gambling (Licensing and Advertising) Act makes it an offence for online gambling service providers to advertise to consumers here unless they hold the appropriate licence issued by the Gambling Commission and comply with their codes of practice.

During 2016, the Department commissioned a Gambling Prevalence Survey. The vast majority of people sampled (95.2%) stated that they had gambled in person, and of these, almost two thirds reported the purchase of a National Lottery ticket or scratch card as the most popular type of gambling participated in. The survey also showed that the number of respondents participating in online gambling had increased from 6.7% in 2010, to 15.8% in 2016. Although 2.3% of the survey respondents were identified as problem gamblers, no source of the harm could be identified.

On 2 November, I published the Outcome report from the recent consultation into the future of gambling regulation. I will shortly seek the Executive's agreement to my proposed way forward and I hope to make an announcement on my proposals within the next few weeks.

Mr Butler asked the Minister for Communities what plans she has to ask the UK Government to repeal Section 5 of the Gambling (Licensing and Advertising) Act 2014 that regulates the online advertising of gambling products and services in Northern Ireland, so that the regulation of this activity can be developed and introduced here where the gambling takes place.

(AQW 9494/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: The Betting, Gaming, Lotteries and Amusements (NI) Order 1985 contains no provisions in relation to remote (online) gambling. 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. This inclusion ensures that consumers here will have the same level of protection in respect of the advertising of remote gambling.

The Committees of Advertising Practice (CAP) recently launched a public consultation on proposals to introduce new strengthened rules and guidance to better protect children and young people (under-18s) and vulnerable people from potential gambling-advertising related harms. This consultation is in response to research published by GambleAware.

Meanwhile, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), an independent body, will continue to monitor and enforce the strict guidelines around gambling advertising.

I continue to keep all aspects of the regulation of gambling under review, including the operation of Section 5 of the Gambling (Licensing and Advertising) Act 2014. I will make an announcement on the way forward shortly.

Mr Newton asked the Minister for Communities what discussions she has had with the officers of Belfast City Council and Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council regarding a financial support package to attract shoppers into the cities during the Christmas season; and to detail the awarded level of support.

(AQW 9515/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: I would refer the Member to the reply I gave to AQW 9205/17-22.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Communities for her assessment of the impact upon district council finances following the First-Tier Tribunal decision in respect of VAT claim taken by Mid Ulster District Council. [R]
(AQW 9541/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 17 October 2020, the First-tier Tribunal issued its decision in relation to a dispute concerning the VAT liability of charges paid by members of the public for access to sport and leisure facilities provided by Mid-Ulster District Council. HMRC contended that the charges should bear VAT at the standard rate, while Mid-Ulster District Council contended that the charges in dispute did not attract VAT.

The appeal by Mid-Ulster District Council was allowed and now the quantum has to be agreed between both parties.

However, pursuant to Rule 39 of the Tribunal Procedure (First-tier Tribunal) (Tax Chamber) Rules 2009, any party dissatisfied with the decision has a right to apply for permission to appeal not later than 56 days after the date of this decision.

Therefore, at this stage it is too early to assess the impact of this decision on council finances.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities whether she has had discussions with her counterparts in Westminster to extend the Minimum Income Floor suspension for 6 months, in line with the new Winter Economic Plan.
(AQW 9577/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: After careful consideration of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and to ensure support is continued for the self-employed, I have decided that the current easement of the suspension of the Minimum Income Floor in Universal Credit that was due to expire on 12 November 2020 will be extended to 30 April 2021.

Regulations to give effect to this extension will be made prior to 12 November 2020.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Communities for a breakdown of the number and type of organisations and individuals in each constituency who (i) applied; and (ii) were successful, for the Arts grant launched on 26 October 2020.
(AQW 9578/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 26 October I announced a further release of £15.75m from the £29m package for arts, language, culture and heritage sectors; £7.75m of which has been made available to arts organisations through a third round of the Organisation Emergency Programme. This programme, the Stability and Renewal Programme for Organisations, opened to applications on 28 October. The closing date for applications is noon on Friday 27 November. The Arts Council aim to communicate decisions by the end of January 2021 and so the information requested is not known at this point.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Communities what funding has been made available for payments to those who have to self-isolate due to close contact with a positive COVID-19 patient.
(AQW 9710/17-22)

Ms Hargey: On 25 March Minister Hargey responded swiftly to the pandemic by introducing a non-repayable Discretionary Support COVID-19 living expenses grant where a person or a member of their immediate family is diagnosed with COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate in accordance with guidance published by the Public Health Agency.

Almost 15,000 awards have been made to date, since the DS Self-Isolation Scheme grant was introduced in March.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Communities to detail (i) what payments are available to those in self-isolation; and (ii) how much they are.
(AQW 9758/17-22)

Ms Ní Chuilín: On 25 March Minister Hargey responded swiftly to the pandemic by introducing a non-repayable Discretionary Support Self-Isolation Scheme in the form of a grant, to provide support where a person or a member of their immediate family is diagnosed with COVID-19 or is advised to self-isolate in accordance with guidance published by the Public Health Agency.

There is no limit on the number of Discretionary Support Self-Isolation awards a person may receive as long as they meet the eligibility criteria. The amount payable is based on each applicant's individual circumstances and will include a specific amount for all dependent children in the household.

Almost 15,000 awards have been made to date, since the Discretionary Support Self-Isolation Scheme grant was introduced in March.

As we continue to respond to the impacts of the pandemic I will keep this under review.

Department of Education

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Education (i) whether an impact assessment has been carried out by his Department on the new build of Bangor Central Integrated Primary School at Balloo/Gransha; and (ii) to lay a copy of the assessment in the Assembly Library.

(AQW 7565/17-22)

Mr Weir (The Minister of Education): My Department has determined that the relocation to the proposed new site at Balloo Road would not materially change the pupil catchment area of Bangor Central Integrated Primary School. Under these circumstances a Development Proposal (DP) is not required and a formal assessment on the potential impact on integrated education due to the relocation of the school was not considered necessary.

In addition to examining data showing the existing location of pupils enrolled at Bangor Central Integrated Primary School, officials also considered the sustainability of neighbouring schools and assessed that any impact resulting from relocation would not be on a scale that would put at risk their sustainability.

In developing the business case for the project, a group of project stakeholders, consisting primarily of representatives from the school, identified and scored a list of non-monetary criteria which are relevant to the project. The recommended option in the approved business case (the relocation to Balloo) received a score of 9 out of 10 from the stakeholder group for the criterion "Promotion of Integrated Education."

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 7479/17-22, to provide a breakdown of each school that availed of (i) Chromebooks; and (ii) wi-fi vouchers.

(AQW 8600/17-22)

Mr Weir: The provision of digital devices and WiFi access for those pupils who need them has been a matter of significant importance for the Department. Priority has been given to children currently in year groups 12, 14, 7 and 4 (in that order) who are entitled to free school meals, and either have special educational needs, are newcomer children or are looked after children or otherwise vulnerable.

The detail you requested is listed in the tables below and represents all data available up to 15 October 2020;

Table A – provides a list of all schools that have availed of digital devices, both (Laptops and Chromebooks) under my scheme.

Table B - provides a list of all schools that have been allocated Hotspot Vouchers

Table C – provides a list of all schools that have been allocated Mifi Devices

I hope you find this helpful and gives you the assurance that this issue continues to be a priority for my Department.

Table A - Allocation of Digital Devices

■ Currie Primary School	■ Holy Family Primary School
■ Euston Street Primary School	■ St Josephs Primary School
■ Harding Memorial Primary School	■ Holy Trinity Primary School Belfast
■ Seaview Primary School Belfast	■ John Paul II Primary School
■ Nettlefield Primary School	■ St Patrick's Primary School
■ Ligoniel Primary School	■ Bunscoil Phobal Feirste
■ Donegall Road Primary School	■ Bunscoil Bheann Mhadagain
■ Ballysillan Primary School	■ Scoil an Droichid
■ Blythefield Primary School	■ Gaelscoil na Mona
■ Botanic Primary School	■ Cliftonville Integrated Primary School
■ Wheatfield Primary School	■ Forge Integrated Primary School
■ Lowwood Primary School	■ Ashfield Girls' School
■ Our Lady's Girls' Primary School	■ Ashfield Boys' School
■ Holy Rosary Primary School	■ Belfast Model School for Girls
■ Holy Cross Girls' Primary School	■ Belfast Boys' Model School
■ Mercy Primary School	■ St Louise's Comprehensive School
■ St Vincent de Paul Primary School	■ Mercy College Belfast
■ St Bride's Primary School	■ St Genevieve's High School
■ St Therese of Lisieux Primary School	■ De La Salle College
■ St Michael's Primary School	■ Blessed Trinity College
■ St Mary's Primary School Belfast	■ All Saints College
■ Sacred Heart Primary School Belfast	■ Colaiste Feirste

-
- Hazelwood College
 - Malone College
 - St Mary's Christian Brothers Grammar School
 - Hunterhouse College
 - Newstart Education Centre
 - Loughshore Education Resource Centre
 - Pathways EOTAS
 - Moat Primary School
 - Drumahoe Primary School
 - Newbuildings Primary School
 - Ballykelly Primary School
 - Omagh County Primary School
 - Strabane Primary School
 - Donemana Primary School
 - Artigarvan Primary School
 - Tempo Primary School
 - Maguiresbridge Primary School
 - Irvinestown Primary School
 - Newtownstewart Model Primary School
 - Cumber Claudy Primary School
 - Limavady Central Primary School
 - Sion Mills Primary School
 - Gaelscoil Neachtain
 - St Mary's Primary School Newtownbutler
 - St Mary's Primary School Killesher
 - St Mary's Primary School Mullymesker
 - Glendermott Primary School
 - St Mary's Primary School Killyclogher
 - St Brigid's Primary School Mountfield
 - St Patrick's Primary School Gortin
 - St Eugene's Primary School Victoria Bridge
 - St Brigid's Primary School Cranagh
 - St Joseph's Primary School Drumquin
 - Sacred Heart Primary School Omagh
 - St Columba's Primary School
 - Faughanvale Primary School
 - St Patrick's Primary School Newtownstewart
 - St John's Primary School
 - St Joseph's Primary School Ederney
 - St Peter's and St Paul's Primary School
 - St Naile's Primary School
 - St Patrick's Primary School Castlederg
 - St Mary's Primary School Cloughcor
 - St Peter's Primary School Plumbridge
 - St Joseph's Primary School Donagh
 - St Conor's Primary School
 - St Oliver Plunkett Primary School Strathfoyle
 - St Finlough's Primary School
 - St Davog's Primary School
 - Sacred Heart Primary School
 - St Oliver Plunkett Primary School Beragh
 - Our Lady of Lourdes Primary School Greencastle
 - Christ the King Primary School Omagh
 - St Mary's Primary School Gortnaghey
 - St Theresa's Primary School Strabane
 - St Theresa's Primary School Galliagh
 - Holy Family Primary School Ballymagroarty
 - St Eithne's Primary School
 - Longtower Primary School
 - St Eugene's Primary School
 - Holy Family Primary School Omagh
 - St Mary's Primary School Strabane
 - St Catherine's
 - Gaelscoil Ui Dhochartaigh
 - Gaelscoil Eadain Mhoir
 - Gaelscoil na gCrann
 - Enniskillen Integrated Primary School
 - Omagh Integrated Primary School
 - Castlederg High School
 - Omagh High School
 - Limavady High School
 - Lisneal College
 - Devenish College
 - St Mary's College
 - St Mary's High School Belleek
 - St Joseph's College Enniskillen
 - St Mary's College Irvinestown
 - St Patrick's and St Brigid's School
 - St Joseph's Boys' School
 - Dean Maguirc College
 - St Patrick's College Dungiven
 - St John's High School
 - St Aidan's High School
 - St Cecilia's College
 - Sacred Heart College
 - St Kevin's College
 - Gaelcholaiste Dhoire
 - Erne Integrated College
 - Drumragh Integrated College
 - Knockavoe School
 - Arvalee School and Resource Centre
 - Omagh Academy
 - Strabane Academy
 - Mount Lourdes Grammar School
 - St Michael's College
 - St Columb's College
 - Loreto Grammar School
 - Lumen Christi College
 - Enniskillen Royal Grammar School
 - EOTAS (Enniskillen)
 - EOTAS (Limavady)
 - EOTAS (Omagh)
 - EOTAS (Strabane)
 - Western Region Tuition Service
 - Foyle EOTAS
 - Foyle EOTAS (Longtower)
-

- Foyle EOTAS (Maydown)
- Harryville Primary School
- Groggan Primary School
- Kells and Connor Primary School
- Whiteabbey Primary School
- Abbot's Cross Primary School
- Moyle Primary School
- Linn Primary School
- Ballytober Primary School
- Rathcoole Primary School
- Hezlett Primary School
- Killowen Primary School Coleraine
- D H Christie Memorial Primary School
- Maghera Primary School
- Carnmoney Primary School
- Castledawson Primary School
- Hollybank Primary School
- Harpurs Hill Primary School
- Dunclug Primary School
- Rasharkin Primary school
- Ballyhenry Primary School
- Woodlawn Primary School
- Ashgrove Primary School
- Earview Primary School
- Ballysally Primary School
- Oakfield Primary School
- Irish Society Primary School
- Millquarter Primary School
- Ballyhackett Primary School
- New Row Primary School
- Crossroads Primary School
- St Columba's Primary School Straw
- St Mary's Primary School Draperstown
- St Mary's Primary School Greenlough
- St John's Primary School Coleraine
- St Mary's on the Hill Primary School
- St James' Primary School
- St Columba's Primary School Kilrea
- St Patrick's Primary School Loughguile
- St Joseph's Primary School Dunloy
- St Patrick's and St Brigid's Primary School
- St Nicholas' Primary School Carrickfergus
- Gaelscoil Eanna
- Gaelscoil an tseanchai
- Ballymoney Model Integrated Primary School
- Ballycastle Integrated Primary School
- Mallusk Controlled Integrated Primary School
- Acorn Integrated Primary School
- Spires Integrated Primary School
- Magherafelt High School
- Ballycastle High School
- Ballymoney High School
- Ballyclare Secondary School
- Dunclug College
- Dunluce School
- Abbey Community College
- Carrickfergus Academy
- Our Lady of Lourdes
- St Patrick's High School Ballymena
- St Colm's High School
- St Pius X College
- Edmund Rice College CBS
- Cross and Passion College
- St Patrick's College Maghera
- St Benedict's College
- St Conor's College
- Parkhall Integrated College
- Slemish College
- North Coast Integrated School
- Sperrin Integrated College
- Rosstulla Special School
- St Louis' Grammar School
- Ballymena Academy
- Dalriada Grammar School
- Loreto College
- St Mary's Grammar School
- Coleraine Grammar School
- NER Northern EOTAS
- NER Northern EOTAS - Drumard
- NER Central Eotas
- NER Central Eotas - The Loughan
- Brownlee Primary School
- Seymour Hill Primary School
- Carrickmannon Primary School
- Kirkistown Primary School
- Cregagh Primary School
- Donaghadee Primary School
- Millisle Primary School
- Carryduff Primary School
- Harmony Hill Primary School
- Killowen Primary School Lisburn
- Downpatrick Primary School
- Ballymagee Primary School
- Riverdale Primary School
- Cumran Primary School
- St Malachy's Primary School Downpatrick
- St Patrick's Primary School Holywood
- St Patrick's Primary School Castlewellan
- St Mary's Primary School Saintfield
- St Bernard's Primary School Belfast
- St Mary's Primary School Killyleagh
- St Brigid's Primary School Downpatrick
- St Nicholas' Primary School Ardglass
- Sacred Heart Primary School Dundrum
- Good Shepherd Primary School Belfast
- Christ the Redeemer Primary School

- Our Lady and St Patrick's PS
- Scoil Na Fuiseoige
- Portaferry Integrated Primary School
- Bangor Central Integrated Primary School
- Fort Hill Integrated Primary School
- All Children's Integrated Primary School
- Movilla High School
- Nendrum College
- Glastry College
- Laurelhill Community College
- Dundonald High School
- Bangor Academy
- Breda Academy
- St Mary's High School Downpatrick
- St Columba's College
- St Colmcille's High School
- St Columbanus' College
- St Colm's High School
- De La Salle High School
- Fort Hill College
- Lagan College
- Strangford College
- Blackwater Integrated College
- Clifton Special School
- Glenlola Collegiate
- SER Central EOTAS
- SER Central EOTAS (Downpatrick)
- Mullaglass Primary School
- Hardy Memorial Primary School
- Tandragee Primary School
- Carrick Primary School Lurgan
- Newtownhamilton Primary School
- Lisnadill Primary School
- Mountnorris Primary School
- Birches Primary School
- Bessbrook Primary School
- Edenderry Primary School Portadown
- Tullygally Primary School
- Dromore Central Primary School
- Abercorn Primary School
- Milltown Primary School
- Scarva Primary School
- Churchill Primary School
- Aughnacloy Primary School
- Augher Central Primary School
- Howard Primary School
- Dungannon Primary School
- Edenderry Primary School Banbridge
- Millington Primary School
- The Cope Primary School
- Ballyoran Primary School
- Hamiltonsbawn Primary School
- Windsor Hill Primary School
- Richmond Primary School
- St Teresa's Primary School Tullyherron
- Clea Primary School
- Mount St Catherine's Primary School
- St Malachy's Primary School Armagh
- St Patrick's Primary School Newry
- St Patrick's Primary School Aghacommon
- St Patrick's Primary School Armagh
- Carrick Primary School Warrenpoint
- St Mary's Primary School Barr
- St Patrick's Primary School Mayobridge
- Derrylatinee Primary School
- Edendork Primary School
- St MacCartan's Convent Primary School
- St Patrick's Primary School Aghadarragh
- St John's Primary School Moy
- St Mary's Primary School Fivemiletown
- St Paul's Primary School Cabra
- St Mary's Primary School Rathfriland
- St Mary's Primary School Dechomet
- St Patrick's Primary School Ballymaghera
- St Colman's Primary School Dromore
- St Mary's Primary School Derrytrasna
- St Mary's Primary School Banbridge
- St Brendan's Primary School
- St Joseph's Primary School Killeenan
- St Jarlath's Primary School
- Jonesborough Primary School
- St Laurence O'Toole's Primary School
- St Ronan's Primary School Newry
- St Colman's Primary School Kilkeel
- St Dallan's Primary School
- Presentation Primary School
- St Peter's Primary School Collegelands
- Our Lady's Primary School Tullysaran
- St Patrick's Primary School Drumgreenagh
- St Francis' Primary School Lurgan
- St Clare's Abbey PS
- Our Lady's and St Mochua's Primary School
- Gaelscoil UiNeill
- Kilbroney Integrated Primary School
- Portadown Integrated Primary School
- Windmill Integrated Primary School
- Saints and Scholars Integrated Primary School
- Kilkeel High School
- Dromore High School
- City of Armagh High School
- Newry High School
- Cookstown High School
- Drumglass High School
- Craigavon Senior High School
- St Joseph's Boys' High School Newry
- St Patrick's College Banbridge

- St Mary's High School Newry
- St Ciaran's High School
- St Paul's High School Bessbrook
- St Joseph's High School Crossmaglen
- St Patrick's High School Keady
- St Catherine's College
- Holy Trinity College
- St Patrick's College
- Brownlow College
- Newbridge Integrated College
- Integrated College Dungannon
- Donard School
- Lurgan College
- Portadown College
- St Louis Grammar School
- Our Lady's Grammar School Newry
- St Joseph's Grammar School
- Sacred Heart Grammar School
- St Ronan's College
- SR EOTAS
- SR EOTAS - Lough Road
- SR EOTAS (Newry)

Table B - Allocation of Hotspot Vouchers

- Currie Primary School
- Harding Memorial Primary School
- Seaview Primary School Belfast
- Nettlefield Primary School
- Donegall Road Primary School
- Ballysillan Primary School
- Blythefield Primary School
- Lowwood Primary School
- Holy Rosary Primary School
- Holy Cross Girls' Primary School
- Mercy Primary School
- St Vincent de Paul Primary School
- St Mary's Primary School Belfast
- Sacred Heart Primary School Belfast
- St Josephs Primary School
- Holy Trinity Primary School Belfast
- St Patrick's Primary School
- Cliftonville Integrated Primary School
- Ashfield Girls' School
- Belfast Boys' Model School
- St Louise's Comprehensive School
- De La Salle College
- Blessed Trinity College
- All Saints College
- Hazelwood College
- St Mary's Christian Brothers Grammar School
- Newstart Education Centre
- Loughshore Education Resource Centre
- Pathways EOTAS
- Moat Primary School
- Drumahoe Primary School
- Omagh County Primary School
- Newtownstewart Model Primary School
- Sion Mills Primary School
- St Mary's Primary School Newtownbutler
- Glendermott Primary School
- St Brigid's Primary School Cranagh
- St Joseph's Primary School Drumquin
- St John's Primary School
- St Patrick's Primary School Castlederg
- St Mary's Primary School Cloughcor
- St Peter's Primary School Plumbridge
- St Conor's Primary School
- Sacred Heart Primary School
- St Theresa's Primary School Galliagh
- Holy Family Primary School Ballymagroarty
- St Eithne's Primary School
- St Eugene's Primary School
- St Mary's Primary School Strabane
- Gaelscoil Ui Dhochartaigh
- Enniskillen Integrated Primary School
- Omagh Integrated Primary School
- Omagh High School
- St Joseph's College Enniskillen
- St Mary's College Irvinestown
- St Patrick's and St Brigid's School
- St Joseph's Boy's School
- St Patrick's College Dungiven
- Sacred Heart College
- St Kevin's College
- Omagh Academy
- Strabane Academy
- St Columb's College
- Loreto Grammar School
- Lumen Christi College
- Western Region Tuition Service
- Foyle EOTAS
- Harryville Primary School
- Whiteabbey Primary School
- Moyle Primary School
- Rathcoole Primary School
- Hezlett Primary School
- Hollybank Primary School
- Harpurs Hill Primary School
- Ballyhenry Primary School
- Ashgrove Primary School
- Ballysally Primary School
- St Columba's Primary School Straw
- St John's Primary School Coleraine
- St James' Primary School
- St Patrick's and St Brigid's Primary School
- St Nicholas' Primary School Carrickfergus

- Ballymoney Model Integrated Primary School
- Ballycastle Integrated Primary School
- Acorn Integrated Primary School
- Ballyclare Secondary School
- Glengormley High School
- Dunclug College
- Abbey Community College
- Our Lady of Lourdes
- St Colm's High School
- St Pius X College
- Cross and Passion College
- St Benedict's College
- North Coast Integrated School
- St Louis' Grammar School
- Ballymena Academy
- Coleraine Grammar School
- NER Northern EOTAS
- NER Central Eotas
- Brownlee Primary School
- Kirkistown Primary School
- Cregagh Primary School
- Donaghadee Primary School
- Millisle Primary School
- Cumran Primary School
- St Mary's Primary School Killyleagh
- St Brigid's Primary School Downpatrick
- Good Shepherd Primary School Belfast
- Christ the Redeemer Primary School
- Bangor Central Integrated Primary School
- Bangor Academy
- St Columbanus' College
- St Colm's High School
- Fort Hill College
- Strangford College
- Clifton Special School
- SER Central EOTAS
- Carrick Primary School Lurgan
- Birches Primary School
- Dromore Central Primary School
- Milltown Primary School
- Scarva Primary School
- Churchill Primary School
- Augher Central Primary School
- Howard Primary School
- Millington Primary School
- Ballyoran Primary School
- St Malachy's Primary School Armagh
- St Patrick's Primary School Newry
- St Patrick's Primary School Aghacommon
- St Patrick's Primary School Armagh
- Carrick Primary School Warrenpoint
- Derrylatinee Primary School
- Edendork Primary School
- St Mary's Primary School Fivemiletown
- St Mary's Primary School Derrytrasna
- St Mary's Primary School Banbridge
- St Jarlath's Primary School
- St Laurence O'Toole's Primary School
- Presentation Primary School
- St Francis' Primary School Lurgan
- St Clare's Abbey PS
- Portadown Integrated Primary School
- Windmill Integrated Primary School
- Cookstown High School
- Drumglass High School
- St Joseph's Boys' High School Newry
- St Patrick's College Banbridge
- St Mary's High School Newry
- St Ciaran's High School
- St Paul's High School Bessbrook
- Brownlow College
- Integrated College Dungannon
- Donard School
- St Ronan's College
- SR EOTAS

Table C - Allocation of MiFi Devices

- Botanic Primary School
- Wheatfield Primary School
- St Vincent de Paul Primary School
- Ballykelly Primary School
- Artigarvan Primary School
- Cumber Claudy Primary School
- Sion Mills Primary School
- St Mary's Primary School Newtownbutler
- St Eugene's Primary School Victoria Bridge
- St Columba's Primary School
- St Joseph's Primary School Ederney
- St Joseph's Primary School Donagh
- Omagh Integrated Primary School
- Omagh High School
- St Joseph's College Enniskillen
- St Patrick's and St Brigid's School
- St Patrick's College Dungiven
- St Cecilia's College
- Omagh Academy
- Western Region Tuition Service
- Ballyhackett Primary School
- Ballymoney Model Integrated Primary School
- Magherafelt High School
- Ballycastle High School
- Glengormley High School
- Dunclug College
- St Pius X College
- St Patrick's College Maghera

- Coleraine Grammar School
- Brownlee Primary School
- Portavogie Primary School
- Maghaberry Primary School
- Cumran Primary School
- Birches Primary School
- Dromore Central Primary School
- Augher Central Primary School
- Howard Primary School
- Millington Primary School
- Windsor Hill Primary School
- St Patrick's Primary School Aghacommon
- Derrylatinee Primary School
- Edendork Primary School
- St Patrick's Primary School Aughadarragh
- St Mary's Primary School Cabra
- St Jarlath's Primary School
- St Patrick's Primary School Drumgreenagh
- Windmill Integrated Primary School
- City of Armagh High School
- Cookstown High School
- Drumglass High School
- St Mary's High School Newry
- St Joseph's High School Crossmaglen
- Integrated College Dungannon
- SR EOTAS

Mr Givan asked the Minister of Education to detail the thresholds for funding allocation of percentages of Free School Meals pupils in schools.

(AQW 8888/17-22)

Mr Weir: Under the Common Funding Scheme, Social Deprivation funding distributed to schools through the Common Funding Formula is determined based on the percentages of pupils entitled to Free School Meals. The thresholds applied in 2020-21 are detailed in the table below.

	Nursery*	Primary	Post-primary
Band 1	32.92%	28.80%	27.27%
Band 2	46.67%	40.29%	38.55%
Band 3	Over 46.67%	Over 40.29%	Over 38.55%

* For the Nursery Phase, funding is allocated for those Full Time Equivalent pupils who have a parent in receipt of Income Support, Job Seekers Allowance, Universal Credit or having an entitlement to a free school meal.

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Education, as has been committed to previously, to detail a timeline for the completion and implementation of the parental responsibility policy for schools.

(AQW 9471/17-22)

Mr Weir: Guidance for schools on Parental Responsibility is contained in DE Circular 1999/7. The Department is currently undertaking a review of this Circular but at this stage there is no definitive timeline for publication of the revised document.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Education whether within the Engage Programme the distribution of support to enhance learning and recover lost learning is on track.

(AQW 9514/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Engage programme, which I launched on 23 September 2020, is providing vital help to primary and post primary schools as they seek to support pupils to engage with learning following the lockdown period. It will enable them to provide child centred one to one, small group or team teaching support for pupils they identify as in the greatest need.

All schools will now have received their Engage funding allocations in respect of the 2020/21 financial year. Schools will by now be planning towards or will have already started to implement their programme in line with their unique circumstances and pupils' needs.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education whether he will commit to working with his Executive colleagues to provide direct payments in lieu of free school meals over the Christmas school holiday period.

(AQW 9530/17-22)

Mr Weir: The issue of holiday hunger is not new and will require a cross Departmental approach when seeking to address this matter.

At the Executive meeting on 22nd October, the Department for Communities Minister agreed to take forward work on food poverty including holiday hunger for the longer term. Initial discussions between the Department of Education and the Department for Communities have taken place and Executive colleagues will be updated on progress including any proposals for the Christmas holiday period as soon as possible.

Ms S Bradley asked the Minister of Education whether he has given any consideration to facilitating those families who wish to remove their children from school to enter a period of voluntary isolation ahead of Christmas day, in order to spend the day with elderly or vulnerable family members.

(AQW 9576/17-22)

Mr Weir: I fully understand and appreciate the wish of families to spend an uninterrupted Christmas together in these difficult times. However, it is essential that children and young people of compulsory school age attend their school regularly and maintain a pattern of good attendance throughout their school career in order to allow them to fulfil their potential.

Regular attendance is particularly important given the amount of classroom time pupils have missed recently due to Covid-19 and I therefore will not be considering voluntary isolation as a legitimate reason for absence.

Circular Number 2020/08 sets out guidance to schools on managing pupil attendance in the context of Covid-19. It is clear that if a pupil is required to attend school either physically or remotely and does not attend or complete work at home, the school must record the absence as unauthorised.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education to detail what his Department is doing to fulfil the Executive's commitment to building a united and shared society through the Together: Building a United Community strategy.

(AQW 9581/17-22)

Mr Weir: My Department actively contributes to the implementation of the Executive's Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) strategy in the following ways:

- Support for the delivery by the Education Authority (EA) of the T:BUC Camps programme on behalf of The Executive Office - a headline action under the strategy's key priority "Our Children and Young People" and the Planned Interventions programme. T:BUC Camps aim to support positive attitudinal change towards people from different backgrounds; support contact & friendships between young people from different backgrounds; support better understanding and respect for cultural differences, and, through planned interventions, support youth work activity to divert young people from anti-social and potentially criminal behaviour.
- Delivery of the Shared Education Campuses (SEC) headline action to commence 10 new shared education campuses. This provides capital assistance to applicant schools to facilitate shared education through Shared Education Facilities; Enhanced Education Facilities, and Shared Education Campuses. There are currently a number of Shared Education Campus Projects in development. Three projects are proceeding with approved Business Cases.
- My Department has a statutory duty to encourage, facilitate and promote Shared Education, underpinned by the Sharing Works policy, and is currently developing proposals for a long term sustainable strategy for the mainstreaming of Shared Education across the wider education sector for my consideration.
- My Department's Community Relations, Equality and Diversity (CRED) policy also aims to ensure that young people develop self-respect and respect for others.
- The Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, delivered in collaboration with the EA, the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme Team and other stakeholders is also led by my Department and is one action in the Executive's Tackling Paramilitarism strategy (A4 – to prevent young people being drawn into paramilitary activity and promote lawfulness).

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) the rationale for his Department's Circular 2020/10 issued on 2 November 2020; (ii) how it can be safe for 30 children to remain in a small classroom all day with no social distancing, but not safe for those same 30 children to do PE in a large assembly hall for 30 minutes; (iii) how it is not safe for those same 30 children to do PE in the fresh air in the playground when only a short time before they were allowed to run free as a bubble at lunch time in the same playground; (iv) whether he is now instructing schools not to let children play in the playground in bubbles larger than 15; and (v) whether he will make public the science that underpins Circular 2020/10.

(AQW 9604/17-22)

Mr Weir: The circular issued by my Department on 2 November set out the legal requirements of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations introduced by the Department of Health. The Regulations prohibit organisation, operation or participation in an indoor or outdoor sporting event, with a legal exemption of an outdoor sporting if there is no contact between participations and the gathering consists of no more than 15 persons. It was essential to advise schools of the legal position in regard to PE. I had no flexibility in regard to the numbers specified by the Health legislation.

On 3 November, I secured a legal amendment to the Regulations to permit schools and other education settings to deliver indoor and outdoor PE, without a cap of 15 participants. New guidance was issued to schools.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education, in the light of current Education Authority advice to parents to use alternative private transport to school where possible, what support he will offer families currently experiencing financial hardship while not availing of free school transport to which they are entitled and thus incurring additional costs.

(AQW 9605/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Department's New School Day guidance states that home to school transport should only be used where there is no alternative available. If parents do not believe an alternative means of affordable transport is available, provided they are eligible for home to school transport, their child(ren) remain able to avail of such transport provision at no cost to themselves.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Education to provide clarity on guidance issued to schools regarding the delivery of the physical education curriculum.

(AQW 9606/17-22)

Mr Weir: The circular issued by my Department on 2 November set out the legal requirements of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations introduced by the Department of Health. The Regulations prohibit organisation, operation or participation in an indoor or outdoor sporting event, with a legal exemption of an outdoor sporting if there is no contact between participations and the gathering consists of no more than 15 persons. It was essential to advise schools of the legal position in regard to PE. I had no flexibility in regard to the numbers specified by the Health legislation.

On 3 November, I secured a legal amendment to the Regulations to permit schools and other education settings to deliver indoor and outdoor PE, without a cap of 15 participants. New guidance was issued to schools.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 8952/17-22, to detail (i) the timetable for a decision on the refund of examination fees booked on the basis of cancellations in May 2020; and (ii) when an options paper on this will be submitted to, and considered by, his Department.

(AQW 9649/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have been advised by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) that examination centres have not been invoiced for examination fees for summer 2020. As a result CCEA does not have examination fees to refund to centres.

I expect to receive the options paper, containing CCEA's recommendations on examination fee charges, in the very near future. I will carefully consider the options presented. Until I have completed that, I will not be in a position to set out how I intend to proceed or provide a definitive date for when this process will be completed.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Education for an update on (i) the Minor Works Application for Bunscoil Phobail Feirste; and (ii) when he expects the design team to be on site.

(AQW 9688/17-22)

Mr Weir: I understand that the Education Authority (EA) met with the Principal of Bunscoil Phobail Feirste on 9 November 2020 to scope the works required to deliver Special Educational Needs accommodation and a multipurpose space at the school. The EA will now prepare a Feasibility Report and Business Case which it is anticipated will be submitted to my Department for approval by March 2021.

Subject to Business Case approval in March, it is expected that construction would commence by the end of August 2021 at the earliest. With an estimated six month construction period the school could expect handover of the new accommodation in March 2022.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 7021/17-22, (i) for an update on the result of discussions between his Department and CCEA regarding qualification specifications and exams for academic year 2020/21; and (ii) when a final decision will be made on the provision of such.

(AQW 9693/17-22)

Mr Weir: On 9 October, I publicly announced changes to the delivery of GCSE, AS and A level qualifications in 2020/21 and wrote to all school leaders, parents and young people to provide clarity on the changes announced. Details of these changes are set out in addendums to each qualification specification which can be found on the CCEA website.

On 6 November, I agreed adaptations to a further five GCSEs to ensure that pupils are assessed on a minimum of 60% of the overall qualification. This decision has also been communicated to schools and CCEA will now work with schools to provide more information at a centre level as quickly as possible.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education (i) what additional funding has been provided to schools for (a) personal protective equipment; and (b) the provision of remote learning since they reopened; and (ii) what the average is for each, per school in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 9694/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) (a) My Department has allocated £13.5 million of additional funding to grant aided schools for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) on a per pupil basis. Details of the individual allocations to schools are available on the Education Authority's website.
- (b) Funding to support remote learning is not provided on an individual school basis as it is better value for money for digital devices and other services to be procured centrally. My Department has allocated the following funds to support the provision of remote learning:
 - £2.4 million to support the expansion of bandwidth in particularly low bandwidth areas, and also for the procurement of additional learning applications to support remote learning;
 - £2.2 million for the purchase of 8,000 Chromebooks for disadvantaged or vulnerable learners;

- £2 million for laptops for primary pupils for disadvantaged or vulnerable learners;
- £0.2 million for 8,000 WIFI vouchers for disadvantaged or vulnerable learners; and
- £25k for MIFI Units (i.e. Mobile WIFI dongles) for disadvantaged or vulnerable learners.

The costs provided do not include the cost of internal staffing resources within the Department and its arm's length bodies involved in developing resources and guidance for schools to support remote learning.

- (ii) Funding for remote learning is managed centrally by the Education Authority and is not distributed on a per school basis. It is therefore not possible to provide an average cost per school. The average funding allocated to grant aided schools for PPE (albeit on a per pupil basis) is £12,487 per school.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education, since the restart of schools in August, (i) how many pupils have applied for remote learning; and (ii) how many have been provided with it.
(AQW 9695/17-22)

Mr Weir: Pupils do not apply for remote learning. My Department has asked schools to have contingency plans in place for the delivery of remote learning to pupils in the event of a school closure due to COVID-19, or that a class or group of pupils need to self-isolate.

My Department does not collect data on the number of pupils who have been provided with remote learning, as this would be a bureaucratic burden on schools to provide on a daily basis.

A small number of children will be advised by their clinical team not to attend school. Where a child has been medically advised by a consultant not to attend school during 2020/21, parents should consult with their school Principal and the Education Authority regarding education provision for these pupils. This is not termed remote learning.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister of Education (i) to detail how the mental wellbeing of students taking GCSE, AS level and A level examinations will be ensured during the forthcoming exam period; (ii) whether he will commit to prioritising students' mental health in any new exams procedure that is introduced for this school year; and (iii) how he will ensure the process for determining the assessment procedures is open, fair and transparent.
(AQW 9697/17-22)

Mr Weir: Through the Education Restart Wellbeing Project a range of measures are being delivered in direct response to the Covid-19 pandemic to support the mental health and wellbeing of students including:-

- An Education Authority (EA) online portal of resources available to schools with information on supporting learners, leaders and staff.
- A range of information and materials are available on the EA website to support educational settings, young people and parents/carers with emotional health and wellbeing.
- The EA Youth Service have developed an online resource called 'youth online' available at www.youthonline.org.uk where children and young people can access information, advice and support directly from Youth Service staff. The Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS) for post primary aged pupils in mainstream Post Primary and Special Schools is available for young people to access through school and self-referral.
- The Education Welfare Service and Education Psychology Service are also working directly with all schools to support the wellbeing of young people and access services as required in accordance with presenting need.
- The £5m Education Restart Wellbeing Project funding has been approved, was launched on 10 November 2020 at St Columbanus College and will be allocated directly to schools very soon. By receiving their own allocation, schools will benefit from having the flexibility to use the money to provide health and wellbeing support for their pupils and/or staff.

With regard to the fairness of assessment procedures, my announcements of 9 October and 6 November indicate a reduction of assessment burden for young people to take account of lost face to face teaching time and ongoing disruption. This will ensure the validity, rigour and portability of qualifications, particularly for progression to university and other tertiary education providers as well as for future employment.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education how many (i) laptops; (ii) chromebooks; and (iii) broadband vouchers have been provided for children in Primary 7.
(AQW 9716/17-22)

Mr Weir: The provision of digital devices and WiFi access for those pupils who need them has been a matter of significant importance for the Department. Priority has been given to children currently in year groups 12, 14, 7 and 4 (in that order) who are entitled to free school meals, and either have special educational needs, are newcomer children or are looked after children or otherwise vulnerable.

I can confirm that children in Primary 7 who met these criteria were allocated the following;

Digital devices

- 499 laptops
- 1391 Chromebooks

Total digital devices allocated 1890

Broadband/wifi access

- Bt vouchers – 447
- MiFi – 85

Total 532

I hope you find this information helpful.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education what his Department is doing to ensure that the Engage Programme funding is used to support all children who have fallen behind due to the disruption to their education.

(AQW 9717/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Engage programme is a significant initiative which aims to limit any long-term adverse impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's learning due to the time spent out of school.

All children impacted by school closures will have experienced disruption to their education, and for that reason, all primary and post primary schools have received funding totalling £11.2m in the 2020/21 financial year which enables them to secure additional teaching resources. This will assist in the provision of high quality one to one, small group or team teaching support to those pupils identified by schools as in greatest need of additional support to engage with learning.

The Engage programme will focus on supporting pupils to be motivated and engaged to learn. It will be linked to the cross curricular skills, thinking skills and personal capabilities at the core of our curriculum and focussed on those areas where pupils would most benefit from additional teaching, practice and feedback.

In designing the programme, my Department has not prescribed what programme delivery should look like or specific parameters for schools to follow.

Schools know their pupils best and have autonomy and flexibility to use their professional judgement to decide which pupils and year groups will participate in the programme. So too, the content and structure of programme delivery will be based on each school's unique circumstances and assessment of their pupils' particular needs.

Appropriate accountability arrangements are in place, via schools' completion of the online Engage Planner reporting tool, to establish how Engage resources are being utilised and, in due course, to determine the impact of the programme. The Education and Training Inspectorate has also been commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the Engage programme.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Education whether he has agreed that funding given by the Executive for the Engage Programme will be allowed to be used by primary schools to purchase an online tutoring app from a private company.

(AQW 9718/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have not agreed that Engage programme resources will be allowed to be used to purchase an online tutoring app from a private company.

The Engage programme supports schools in securing additional qualified teachers to provide high quality one to one, small group or team teaching support within primary and post-primary schools. The purpose is to limit any long-term adverse impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on educational standards by supporting pupils' learning and engagement.

The separate Virtual Learning programme (worth up to £250k across all primary schools) provides financial support in 2020/21 for primary schools to purchase online literacy and numeracy software licences that they feel best meet the needs of their Year 7 pupils. The budget is limited to £10 per pupil. Schools have been given flexibility to choose online resources as they see fit and a wide range of software packages have been selected by schools to date.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Education how many cases of COVID-19 have been recorded as being transmitted within (i) primary school settings; and (ii) post-primary school settings.

(AQW 9738/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Public Health Agency (PHA) has been collecting data on the number of COVID school incidents reported to the PHA COVID School Team since schools reopened.

There is no data published which can identify the number of cases of COVID-19 that have been recorded as being transmitted within school settings.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail the total number of (i) pupil days lost; and (ii) teacher days lost in the first term of the 2020/21 academic year.

(AQW 9764/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) The number of pupil days absent is recorded by schools and reported to the Department in half day sessions. The table below shows the proportion of total possible pupil half day sessions recorded in the first term of the 2020/21 academic year.

Number and percentage of pupil half day sessions recorded as absent

	No. half day sessions recorded as Absent	No. of Total Possible half day sessions	Total Absent	Total Present
w/c 2 November	159,165	2,929,426	5.4%	94.6%
w/c 12 October	210,904	2,904,326	7.3%	92.7%
w/c 5 October	181,736	2,899,481	6.3%	93.7%
w/c 28 September	163,839	2,764,036	5.9%	94.1%
w/c 21 September	178,373	2,822,059	6.3%	93.7%
w/c 14 September	225,592	2,922,409	7.7%	92.3%
w/c 7 September	234,208	2,781,931	8.4%	91.6%
w/c 31 August	102,099	1,897,235	5.4%	94.6%

Additionally, the Department has received 43 exceptional closure requests from schools since the start of the 2020/21 academic year. In total these requests amounted to 71 days, 12 of which were not related to COVID-19. This excludes the three exceptional closure days granted by the NI Executive that schools were permitted to take during the Halloween break.

- (i) The absence records of teachers' are reported to the Department by all schools except voluntary grammar schools and recorded on the Teachers' Payroll System the month after an absence has occurred. Therefore, only absences that occurred up to the end of September are currently available. Absence data for October will be available from mid-December.

Between 1 August 2020 and 30 September 14,460 working days were lost due to sickness and 13,397 calendar days were lost due to other reasons for teachers.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) pupil; and (ii) staff absences in the first week of the term beginning 2 November 2020.

(AQW 9766/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) Pupil attendance data is captured using weekly standard reports from the Schools Information Management System (SIMS) of all primary, post primary, special and Educated Other Than at School (EOTAS) settings. For the week commencing the 2nd November 2020 5.4% of total possible attendance was recorded as pupil absence.
- (ii) Results from the 68% of educational settings (primary, post primary, special and EOTAS) that responded to the weekly survey on 3 November reported that 92.7% of teaching staff and 93.6% of non-teaching staff were on site that day. A further 2.8% of teaching staff and 1.3% of non-teaching staff were reported to be working remotely. The remaining 4.5% of teaching staff and 5.1% of non-teaching staff were reporting as not being on site for another reason.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education to detail the policies and procedures for the appointment of transferor governors.
(AQW 9786/17-22)

Mr Weir: Schedule 4 to the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 makes provision for the membership of the Boards of Governors (BoGs) of controlled schools. In accordance with Schedule 4, a number of members of the BoGs of controlled primary and secondary schools are nominated by the transferors and superseded managers of the school. For controlled integrated schools, nomination is by the transferors and superseded managers of controlled schools (other than controlled integrated schools) in the locality served by the school. The proportion of transferor governors on a school's BoG will vary according to the total number of members on the board.

The Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC) nominates transferor representatives to the BoGs of controlled schools for formal appointment by the Education Authority. The TRC is an unincorporated body comprising the three Protestant churches (Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist) that owned schools prior to their transfer to state ownership.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the provision of 4G wireless solutions for pupils attending classes from home.

(AQW 9857/17-22)

Mr Weir: Officials have been working with the Education Authority (EA), in partnership with BT, to provide a range of connectivity solutions for pupils, particularly those in a rural settings. 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 providing internet access.

Demand for wireless vouchers and MiFi units has been met for pupils in the 4 priority year groups. Up to 2 November 2020, 1799 vouchers and 325 MiFi devices have been issued to schools. The EA is processing requests from other year groups as a matter of urgency.

I hope you find this helpful.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education, in relation to the additional funding provided to schools to tackle COVID-19, to detail (i) how schools are expected to spend this money; (ii) the terms schools must adhere to when spending this money; (iii) whether there exists a guarantee all money spent on COVID-19 by schools will be covered by this funding; and (iv) whether any COVID-19 spend will come out of schools' delegated budget.

(AQW 9860/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Children's Services Co-operation Act

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education for an update on the operation, monitoring and reporting of the Children's Services Co-operation Act.

(AQW 9862/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 places a duty on named children's authorities to co-operate with each other and with other children's service providers to improve the well-being of children and young people; places a duty on the Northern Ireland Executive to promote such co-operation; and adopt a children and young persons strategy which sets out how it proposes to improve the well-being of children and young people. The Act requires the Executive to prepare a report on the operation of the Act within 18 months of the strategy being adopted by the Executive, with further reports at intervals of not more than three years.

On 14 November 2018 my Department published interim guidance to assist children's authorities understand the Act and the statutory duties it places on them in respect of co-operation, including the factors they should take into account when developing policy or procedures related to children's services or in delivering children's services. The guidance is available at <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/interim-guidance-childrens-services-co-operation-act-northern-ireland-2015>.

My Department has been leading on the development of the Executive Children and Young People's Strategy, although progress was slowed from March 2020 as the Department focused on addressing the Covid-19 pandemic. The strategy was referred to the Education Committee in September 2020 and I intend to bring it to the Executive for consideration in the near future. Once the strategy is adopted by the Executive, it will be laid in the Assembly and published. Following publication of the strategy, structures (proposals for which have been developed) will be agreed and put in place to monitor and report on the operation of the Children's Services Co-operation Act, including the actions taken to achieve the outcomes in the strategy and how children's authorities have co-operated with each other in the provision of children's services.

Although formal monitoring and reporting have not yet commenced, much effective co-operation leading to improved outcomes has already been documented via other complementary 'issue specific' reporting mechanisms and can be seen, for example, on the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and Safeguarding Board NI websites. Children's authorities have worked, and continue to work, co-operatively with each other and with other children's service providers to improve the well-being of children and young people when opportunities arise. Recent examples of collaborative working include the development of the Emotional Health and Well-being Framework (the Departments of Education and Health and the Public Health Agency); 'Our Journey Through Disability' (the Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT), Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership Newry & Mourne Locality Planning Group members and parents of children with disabilities); and an excellent pilot between Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, the Youth Justice Agency and the SHSCT supporting young people in Woodlands with mental health issues.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Education whether he intends to equalise survivor benefits provision within the Northern Ireland Teachers' Pension Scheme in line with the provisions which were introduced in England on 14 July 2020.

(AQW 9893/17-22)

Mr Weir: In a Written Ministerial Statement made on 20 July 2020, by the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the UK government concluded that changes are required to the Teachers' Pension Scheme England & Wales (TPS E&W) to address sexual orientation discrimination highlighted by a case brought in the Employment Tribunal against the Secretary of State for Education in GB. The UK government believes that the discrimination will also need to be remedied in other public service pension schemes.

The implications for NI public service pension schemes, including the Northern Ireland Teachers' Pension Scheme (NITPS), have been considered by the Collective Consultation Working Group (CCWG) which is co-chaired by Department of Finance officials and the NI Committee – Irish Congress of Trade Unions. CCWG recognise the impact of this case on NI public

service pension schemes and it is expected that, where necessary, provisions to remedy potential discrimination will be introduced by the affected NI schemes, including NITPS.

The Department is currently assessing what changes are required to scheme rules for NITPS. Whilst TPS E&W announced scheme changes on 20 July 2020, in order to equalise survivor benefits, those changes have not yet been implemented.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education what steps his Department is taking to address the progress of Minor Capital Works projects impacted negatively as a result of COVID-19 disruption.

(AQO 1042/17-22)

Mr Weir: As a means of taking pressure off the backlog of minor works, my Department has appointed four new Design Teams via the CPD Integrated Consultancy Team Framework Agreement to progress additional minor works projects.

The Education Authority is also currently undertaking a review of the processes and resources applied in delivery of all capital programmes with the aim of accelerating delivery.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) why the £11 million Engage Programme school restart funding was not made available to special school principals and pupils; and (ii) whether a full equality impact screening was completed before issuing this grant.

(AQW 10000/17-22)

Mr Weir:

- (i) Special schools are not included in the Engage programme as they don't receive a delegated budget; rather their staffing complement is provided according to identified and individual pupil need, often with one to one or small group adult to child ratios.

I have asked officials to work with the Education Authority and Special Schools Principals to consider options for a similar model to the Engage programme, subject to securing funding, to help address the impact of school closures, in terms of lost learning, on children and young people with complex needs in Special Schools. A meeting of the working group is to take place in coming weeks.

- (ii) The Engage programme was subject to an equality screening process and the policy was screened out. A copy of the screening document can be found on the Department's website at:-

<https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/education/Equality%20Screening%20-the%20Engage%20Programme%20%28August%202020%29.pdf>

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Education whether his Department will proceed with area planning in relation to schools. **(AQW 10002/17-22)**

Mr Weir: At an extraordinary meeting of the Area Planning Steering Group held on 21 October, the decision was taken formally to resume all area planning operations and structures from that date.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education whether he will commission an independent review of special educational needs provision.

(AQW 10008/17-22)

Mr Weir: There have been a number of reports about Special Educational Needs (SEN) provision in recent years/months, for example, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) 'Too Little, Too Late' Report which I received in March 2020, and more recently the issue was discussed at the Public Accounts Committee in October.

The EA has established a Strategic Development Programme that will encompass all operational changes required to SEN under one programme. Where possible and appropriate, this will include implementation of the recommendations from the 2020 Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) SEN Impact report, the Departmental SEN Learner Journey project, NICCY report and the EA's own internal audit of practice.

In terms of governance arrangements the Department has established a SEN Governance Group which will maintain strategic oversight and co-ordination of the overall programme of improvements within the EA and Department. This Group is chaired by the Department's Permanent Secretary and membership includes the Chief Executive of the EA and the Chair of the EA Board.

The Department is currently consulting on a New SEN Framework which will introduce new duties for the EA, Schools and Health designed to reduce timescales and bureaucracy, which will ultimately lead to improvements and efficiencies in the SEN process.

Given this on-going work I have no plans to commission an independent review of special educational needs provision at this time.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Education how many referrals for school absenteeism have been made to the Education Welfare Service in each year since 2015.

(AQO 1043/17-22)

Mr Weir: Education Welfare Service received the following number of referrals during the previous four academic years:

- 2015/15 – 4,419 referrals
- 2016/17 – 4,888 referrals
- 2017/18 – 4,835 referrals
- 2018/19 – 4,539 referrals
- 2019/20 – 2,703 referrals

The number of referrals in 2019/20 were somewhat lower than in previous years, which reflects the fact that schools were closed from March through to June due to the current pandemic.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister of Education how many positive COVID-19 cases among pupils and teachers are linked to transmission within the school setting.

(AQO 1045/17-22)

Mr Weir: Principals and school staff have been working tirelessly to keep schools safe for pupils and their efforts have ensured that schools remain a safe environment. However, we still need to be conscious that we are operating in a pandemic and therefore the return to more normal operations will be different to what schools, parents and pupils are used to.

My Department does not collect information on how many COVID-19 cases are linked to transmission within schools. It is the Public Health Agency (PHA) who hold and publish information on positive cases across all sectors.

We continue to work with the PHA and the Department of Health to ensure that information on education settings is produced on a sensible, informative basis.

The PHA is publishing weekly and monthly bulletins on the COVID-19 pandemic in Northern Ireland. This information includes information in relation to schools. The latest PHA stats indicate that up to the end of week 43 (ending 25 October 2020) 2,137 confirmed COVID-19 cases had been reported by schools to the PHA School Team.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment's contingency and scenario planning for examinations in 2021.

(AQO 1046/17-22)

Mr Weir: I have agreed a wide range of adaptations to GCSEs and A levels to reduce assessment burden. CCEA is now working at pace and engaging with schools to develop contingency arrangements to deal with a range of potential public health scenarios in the event that there is further significant disruption as the year progresses.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for Carrick Primary School, Lurgan.

(AQO 1047/17-22)

Mr Weir: Carrick Primary School was included in the list of projects I announced on 14 January 2020 to advance in design under the second call to the School Enhancement Programme (SEP2).

The school had also been submitted by the Education Authority (EA) for consideration under the Major Works protocol.

Under the SEP2 protocol, schools which secure investment under SEP2 will not be considered for a wholly new build project for seven years. In consultation with the EA, Carrick Primary School has chosen to remain within SEP2. It was subsequently withdrawn from consideration under the Major Works protocol.

The EA carried out a site visit on 18 June 2020 to discuss the scope of the proposed SEP2 project.

The tender process for an Integrated Consultant Team (ICT) for the SEP2 project has been initiated by the EA. Once appointed, the ICT will take the project through the design and construction phases.

I anticipate that the facilities provided under the SEP2 project will have a positive impact on the community at Carrick Primary School.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Education how the Engage Programme and the associated funding will support the education of those most in need.

(AQO 1048/17-22)

Mr Weir: Given the unique circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, all primary and post primary schools in Northern Ireland are receiving funding through the Engage programme to provide additional teaching resources.

The aim is to limit any long-term adverse impact of school closures on educational standards by supporting pupils' learning and engagement on their return to school.

Through the programme, qualified teachers will provide child centred one to one, small group or team teaching support within school to those pupils identified by the school as most benefiting from additional support.

As schools know their pupils best, they will decide for themselves what programme delivery should look like in their school. The structure of programme delivery will therefore be based on each school's unique circumstances and the needs of their pupils.

This is likely to focus on supporting pupils to be motivated and engaged to learn and it may help to develop social, emotional and behavioural skills to encourage success at school and with peers.

I would also expect that the programme will help many pupils to develop their resilience and capacity to respond more confidently to challenges, and support their health and wellbeing.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Education for an update on temporary variation numbers for post-primary schools in the Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council area for the 2020-21 academic year.

(AQO 1049/17-22)

Mr Weir: There are 10 post-primary schools within the Castlereagh and Lisburn City Council area providing a total of 8,388 school places, 1,447 of which are in Year 8.

For the 2020/21 academic year my Department approved an additional 15 Year 8 places at three schools in the area via Temporary Variation; 11 places at Lagan College and two places at both Laurelhill Community College and Wallace High School.

In addition, three schools received approval for temporary increases to their enrolment numbers to a total of 130 places to facilitate the return of pupils into their sixth forms.

Lisnagarvey High School was granted 72 additional places, Lagan College 30 additional places and Wallace High School 28 additional places.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the repeal of the exemption for teachers from the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998.

(AQO 1050/17-22)

Mr Weir: The Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (FETO) is the legislative responsibility of The Executive Office. Any amendment to that legislation would be a matter for them to address.

I am committed to delivering equality for all school sectors; this includes consideration of an end to the Article 71 Exception of FETO.

My officials are currently working with TEO to consider the matter further.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Education for an update on the new build for Rowandale Integrated Primary School, Moira.

(AQO 1051/17-22)

Mr Weir: Good progress has been made on the major capital investment project at Rowandale Integrated Primary School in Moira. This project will provide a new 14 class school building and associated facilities on the school's existing extended site.

The purchase of the additional land needed for the project was completed in July 2020. The planning application is currently under consideration with Lisburn & Castlereagh City Council and work to procure the Integrated Supply Team to construct the facilities is underway.

Subject to achieving planning permission and the completion of the procurement process, I anticipate that construction should commence on site in the second half of 2021.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Education what level of COVID-19-related individual absence or school closures would activate centre assessed grades for examinations in 2021.

(AQO 1052/17-22)

Mr Weir: It is sensible to plan for 2021 examinations taking place, and I have agreed a wide range of adaptations to GCSEs and A levels to reduce assessment burden. CCEA is now working at pace and engaging with schools to develop contingency arrangements to deal with a range of potential public health scenarios in the event that there is further significant disruption as the year progresses.

Department of Finance

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Finance whether he plans to intervene to ensure that Civil Service agency staff receive their outstanding backpay.

(AQW 9450/17-22)

Mr Murphy (The Minister of Finance): The 2019 pay award was approved and implemented for agency workers on assignment to NICS departments in September 2020. Work started immediately on calculating, checking and approving any back pay entitlement, and back pay has already been paid to a number of agency workers. The remaining payments will be made over the coming weeks.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Finance whether (i) dog kennel operators; and (b) cattery operators are eligible for the Coronavirus: Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.
(AQW 9456/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) which I introduced, is providing financial support to those businesses using commercial premises which are required by the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 to severely limit their operations or close. Further details on this Scheme, including eligibility requirements and how to apply are available at:

<https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/LocalisedRestrictionsSupport>

The Department of Health's Regulations specify precisely those activities that must be severely restricted or cease at this time; applications from businesses carrying out such activities are thereby 'passported' to the LRSS for assessment and payment. As dog kennel and cattery operations are not required to limit their operations or close under these current Health Regulations, they will not be eligible for the LRSS. However, the Department for the Economy has introduced the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme for businesses affected more generally by the restrictions and you may wish to apply.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 8667/17-22, whether the figures provided on available desk space take account of social distancing requirements.
(AQW 9484/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The figures provided in the response to AQW 8667/17/22 on available desk space does not take account of social distancing requirements. The figures quoted are the total number of available desk spaces in buildings.

Departments hold information on available desk space, taking account of social distancing requirements, in the buildings for which they have premises responsibility based on their Business and Employer's risk assessment that they carried out, as set out in the NICS Recovery Plan.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Finance how many disciplinary proceedings have been initiated in the NI Civil Service on foot of the findings of the Report of the Independent Public Inquiry into the Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme.
(AQW 9488/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There were ten matters of disciplinary proceedings initiated in the NI Civil Service on foot of the findings of the Report of the Independent Public Inquiry into the Non-Domestic Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme.

Mr Newton asked the Minister of Finance to detail the level of additional financial support, since the outbreak of the pandemic health crisis, that has been allocated to Northern Ireland from the Chancellor of the Exchequer.
(AQW 9518/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Treasury has guaranteed a total of £2.8 billion of additional funding for the Executive in 2020-21. This includes £1.6 billion in Barnett consequentials which were identified prior to the guarantee.

The guarantee was put in place to provide upfront COVID-19 funding, avoiding the drip-feed of Barnett consequentials following announcements of English programmes, thereby assisting the Executive to plan appropriately.

Details of this additional financial support are provided in the Table below.

England Only Measures	£million		
	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		

England Only Measures	£million		
	Resource	Capital	FTC
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		
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 CDEL		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		

England Only Measures	£million		
	Resource	Capital	FTC
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		
Extension of UK Guarantee (9 October)	200.0		
Extension of UK Guarantee (5 November)	400.0		
Totals	2799.5	4.4	0.4

Barnett consequentials are not hypothecated, meaning they do not have to be used for the purpose which gave rise to the consequential.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance what assessment he has made of the role that the Rating System can play to disincentivise owners of properties from letting them fall into a state of dereliction.

(AQW 9543/17-22)

Mr Murphy: There are a number of pre-existing features of the rating system that aim to help prevent properties falling into a state of dereliction. The policies of non-domestic vacant rating at 50% of the occupied liability, and the rating of empty homes at 100% of occupied liability, both operate with the express policy rationale of encouraging occupation of properties rather than letting them rest as vacant.

My Department also has statutory enabling powers that can be used to prevent so called 'deliberate dereliction' of empty domestic property in order to avoid rates in that sector, where there is a higher risk of dereliction being used as an avoidance step. Likewise the Back in Business scheme (which the Executive have agreed will be reinstated once Covid measures expire), acts alongside non domestic vacant rating to incentivise new business occupiers of long term vacant property to provide a 50% reduction on their first year's rates bill.

In terms of the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the business sector, and to help reduce the likelihood of businesses vacating their property, the Executive has provided an unprecedented £300 million plus in rates support packages for over 25,000 businesses, as well as tailored and sectoral support provision outside the rates system. These policy interventions, alongside other methods to mitigate dereliction or underuse of property remain the subject of ongoing review, in particular within the rating system which is dependent upon rateable property to finance local and central government functions.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the reform of building regulations to include Changing Places toilets in all future plans for public buildings.

(AQW 9579/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Officials in my Department's Building Standards Branch are finalising research to inform the work of a technical sub-committee of the local Building Regulations Advisory Committee that is currently being established to scope out proposals for wider stakeholder consultation. Christine McClements, the mother of a child with severe disabilities, who has extensive knowledge as a Civil Engineer and user of Changing Places Toilets, has already agreed to join the sub-committee. We are seeking other members with the relevant expertise from representative organisations and industry. Draft proposals could be agreed and ready for wider consultation sometime in the spring of 2021.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 9028/17-22, whether a business that has to close their cafe under the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020, which makes up a considerable proportion of their operations but not their total business, will be eligible for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.

(AQW 9632/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Restrictions on the hospitality sector are detailed in Schedule 2 paragraph 8 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 and apply to a person responsible for carrying on a business or members' club which sells or provides food or drink for consumption on the premises. The Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) was established with the sole purpose of providing financial support to any such business specified in the Health Protection Regulations which has been required to restrict or cease trading at this time.

Where a hospitality business cannot operate, albeit it has ancillary activities that are not restricted, the business may apply under this Scheme. Further details on the Scheme, including eligibility requirements and how to apply are available at: <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/LocalisedRestrictionsSupport>

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Finance to detail (i) the delays in the payment of grants under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme; and (ii) the expected amount of time from application to payment of grants under the scheme.
(AQW 9680/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) Applications for a 2 week support scheme opened on 14th October 2020 in the Derry City and Strabane Council area. The Scheme was subsequently extended by a further 4 weeks to include applications from all Council areas on 19th October 2020.

Financial Regulations to enable payments to be made to all Council areas under this scheme came into effect on Friday 30th October 2020. Land & Property Services (LPS) is working through applications as quickly as possible. Once an application has been processed and verified, an applicant will receive an e-mail to advise them payment is being made. This will normally follow within three working days of the e-mail.

Officials in my Department have worked as swiftly as possible to issue payments in line with Regulations without delay while maintaining their responsibilities for managing public money.

- (ii) At present over 11,400 applications have been received. Once the applications are received they must be checked and verified to see if they meet the scheme criteria. At the time of this response, £10.83 million of payments have issued to 2,910 businesses. A further 300 applications have so far been identified as not meeting the criteria – we expect this number to be greater as the process continues. It is not possible to give an accurate turnaround time on all applications as it will depend on the individual application and the amount of manual intervention required to validate it.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Finance what his Department is doing to fulfil the Executive's commitment to building a united and shared society through the Together: Building a United Community strategy.
(AQW 9686/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Announcement on 1 November.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether there are any Barnett consequentials arising from the announcement on 1 November that the UK Government would provide £1.8 billion of funding for Transport for London.*[R]*
(AQW 9730/17-22)

Mr Murphy: COVID funding has been provided to the Executive via the Treasury Guarantee. This guarantee is designed to provide upfront COVID-19 funding, avoiding the drip-feed of Barnett consequentials following announcements of English programmes, thereby assisting the Executive to plan appropriately. In that regard it is not possible to distinguish the elements of English funding which make up the guarantee until funding is reconciled to English programmes at the end of the year.

The Chancellor's 5 November announcement included an additional £400 million, bringing the total Guarantee for the Executive to £2.8 billion.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance whether there are any Barnett consequentials arising from the UK Government's economic support announcements on 31 October 2020.
(AQW 9731/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The funding for business support grants in England which was announced on 31 October is anticipated to attract a Barnett consequential however for 2020-21 COVID funding has been provided to the Executive via the Treasury Guarantee.

This guarantee is designed to provide upfront COVID-19 funding, avoiding the drip-feed of Barnett consequentials following announcements of English programmes, thereby assisting the Executive to plan appropriately. In that regard it is not possible to confirm the elements which make up the guarantee until funding is reconciled to English programmes at the end of the year.

The Chancellor's 5 November announcement included an additional £400 million, bringing the total Guarantee for the Executive to £2.8 billion.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Finance (i) whether a civil partnership registered in England or Wales can be converted to marriage in this jurisdiction; and (ii) if not, what actions can be taken to remove any barriers to allow this to happen.
(AQW 9774/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Northern Ireland) (No.2) Regulations 2020, which will come into force on 7 December 2020, were introduced by the British Government. They do not make any provision for the conversion of civil partnerships registered outside this jurisdiction to marriages in this jurisdiction. A couple who have registered a civil partnership in England and Wales will therefore not be able to convert their relationship to a marriage here. Such a couple

will need to convert their civil partnership to a marriage in England and Wales (or in a jurisdiction that permits overseas conversions) which will then be recognised as a marriage here.

Any change to this position to permit overseas conversions would require primary legislation.

Mr Frew asked the Minister of Finance (i) how many businesses in North Antrim have received the latest tranche of COVID-19 support in the form of the new Localised Restrictions Support Scheme; and (ii) what percentage this is of the total businesses who qualify, as of 4 November 2020.

(AQW 9799/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) LPS is currently unable to collate this information by Parliamentary Constituency. However, I can advise that, to date, payments have issued to 2142 businesses via the scheme.
- (ii) LPS does not have a definitive list of eligible businesses which is why an application process is required to determine eligibility. The total number of applications received to date from businesses is 11,241. Until applications have been processed, LPS cannot determine how many of the applications received meet the eligibility criteria. In addition, businesses that are eligible may not apply. It is therefore not possible to advise of the percentage of eligible businesses paid to date.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Finance how many people have died as a result of (i) coronary heart disease; and (ii) cancer in (a) 2015; (b) 2016; (c) 2017; (d) 2018; (e) 2019; and (f) 2020 to date.

(AQW 9804/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Deaths are registered with the General Register Office and analysed by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). The statistics in table 6.1 of the Registrar General Annual report 2018, cause of death tables provide, using the International Classification of Diseases (ICD10) codes, the data requested for 2015 to 2018. The ICD10 codes for Cancer are C00-C97. Your request for deaths due to 'Coronary heart disease' has been interpreted as Ischaemic Heart Disease (I20 to I25).

<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/registrar-general-annual-report-2018-cause-death>

Table 1c of the Registrar General Quarterly tables will provide the provisional statistics, as requested, for 2019 and 2020 (up to June). <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/registrar-general-quarterly-tables-2020>.

An update to these statistics for Q3 (July to September), 2020 will be published on 18th November 2020 on the NISRA website. <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/registrar-general-quarterly-tables-2020>.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Finance to detail the projected deaths from (i) coronary heart disease; and (ii) cancer in (i) the remainder of 2020; (ii) 2021; and (iii) 2022.

(AQW 9806/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The information requested is not available. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) does not produce statistical projections on deaths data.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance how many owners of anaerobic digester plants are entitled to Small Business Rates Relief.

(AQW 9921/17-22)

Mr Murphy: At present there are 5 anaerobic digesters in the Valuation List with a NAV below £15,001 which are entitled to Small Business Rate Relief.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Finance, pursuant to AQW 9469/17-22, how much it cost his Department, in each of the last five years, to grant Small Business Rates Relief to the 516 owners of wind turbines who received this relief.

(AQW 9924/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The number of Wind Turbines in receipt of Small Business Rate Relief (SBRR) and the total amount awarded in each of the last 5 rating years are detailed in the table below.

Rating Year	No receiving SBRR	SBRR Total
2015/16	340	£178,035
2016/17	491	£258,857
2017/18	579	£362,900
2018/19	562	£397,963
2019/20	505	£358,741

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Finance (i) for an update on the processing of Localised Restrictions Support Scheme payments; (ii) how many applications have been received; and (iii) how many have been paid.
(AQW 9959/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) I opened applications for a 2 week support scheme on 14th October 2020 in the Derry City and Strabane Council area and subsequently extended the Scheme by a further 4 weeks to include applications from all Council areas on 19th October 2020.

When applications opened on 14th October 2020, LPS was not in a position to immediately review applications and issue payments. A number of technical IT requirements had to be completed to facilitate access to the information required to administer applications. My Department also had to make regulations to provide the legal authority to issue the payments and these came into effect on 16 October. In addition, a number of processes for issuing large volumes of payments on approved applications had to be agreed and implemented.

Payments have been issuing to applicants from within the Derry City and Strabane Council area since 16th October 2020.

The regulations to extend the Scheme to all Council areas only came into effect on 30th October 2020. While it was possible to accept applications on the existing application portal from 19th October 2020, when the announcement to extend the scheme was made, it was not possible to issue payments to applicants within the extended scope area until after the regulations came into effect on 30th October 2020.

Officials from LPS worked as quickly as possible to start issuing payments as soon after the date regulations took effect.

LPS started to issue payments in respect of applications from businesses outside of Derry City and Strabane District Council area on 4th November 2020.

- (ii) A total of 11,322 applications had been received at the time of this response.
(iii) A total of 2,290 payments had issued at the time of this response.

Mr Muir asked the Minister of Finance to detail (i) the number of applications received; and (ii) the number of payments made for the COVID-19 Localised Restrictions Support Scheme.
(AQW 9972/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (i) The number of applications received at the time of this response is 11,241.
(ii) The number of payments made at the time of this response is 2,142.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Finance when businesses who have successfully applied to the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme will be issued payments.
(AQW 10017/17-22)

Mr Murphy: LPS officials are working as quickly as possible to review applications and issue payments.

It is not possible to give an estimate of the turnaround time on payments on all eligible applications as it will depend on the individual application and the amount of manual intervention required to validate it.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Finance to detail the (i) number of Localised Restrictions Support Scheme applications received to date; and (ii) average time taken for applications and payments to be processed.
(AQW 10027/17-22)

Mr Murphy:

- (iv) A total of 11,405 applications had been received at the time of this response.
(ii) 2910 payments have been issued to businesses with a value of £10.83M to date. It is not possible to give an accurate estimate of the turnaround time on all applications as it will depend on the individual application and the amount of manual intervention required to validate it.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister of Finance whether he will consider reviewing the legislation on the rating of vacant properties where a property could not be repaired to a habitable condition without major renovation.
(AQO 1060/17-22)

Mr Murphy: A domestic property that is truly derelict will be removed from the Valuation List and therefore will have no rate liability. I do not believe there is any need to review the legislation on the rating of vacant domestic properties.

Any person can ask the District Valuer in Land & Property Services to carry out a review of the rateable capital value of a property. The District Valuer will consider the actual state of the property and is guided by both statute and case law in determining if a property is considered to be beyond reasonable repair, such that it will never be a dwelling again.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Finance whether current European Union funding programmes will be replaced in full by the British Government.
(AQO 1061/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The British Government have given a commitment that as a minimum they will replace EU Structural Funds in full and have indicated that announcements will be made with those for the Spending Review. However I have concerns around how the British Government calculates the value of replacements and how replacement funding will respect the devolution settlement.

I am working alongside the Welsh and Scottish Governments to secure full replacement of the spending power that we derived from EU sources as well as the freedom to spend according to our local priorities.

I welcome the continued commitment to the PEACE Plus Programme which is currently under development and will be a key aspect of our future funding strategy.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister of Finance whether the British Government has implemented its New Decade, New Approach commitment to remove corporation tax liability from the Housing Executive.
(AQO 1062/17-22)

Mr Murphy: My Department has been pressing on this issue for some time now, with my Permanent Secretary raising the matter directly with her Treasury counterpart, who has now agreed to examine the issue.

Officials in my Department and the Department for Communities are liaising with Treasury and HMRC to set out the rationale for the removal of this multimillion pound corporation tax liability. I will continue to press for this matter to be resolved to free up much needed resources for the Housing Executive to use in addressing social housing need in the North.

I hope to have a response before the end of the month.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister of Finance what support has been made available to sustain the local newspaper industry.
(AQO 1064/17-22)

Mr Murphy: As Members are already aware, I circulated a paper to Executive colleagues back in June seeking to provide the newspaper industry here with a 12 months rate holiday, given the significant loss of income that the sector has experienced. I remain keen to see this matter tabled at the Executive and agreed.

The Executive has engaged local newspapers to help in the important communication of COVID-19 public health messages. Overall spend on COVID-19 advertising from March until the end of September by the Executive is around £1.3 million. In the region of £875,000 in total has been spent on local media buying and, of that amount, the support to the Print media is around £150,000.

Mr Allen asked the Minister of Finance for an update on the work to amend building regulations to make changing places toilets mandatory in certain types of new builds and larger renovations.
(AQO 1065/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Officials in my Department's Building Standards Branch are finalising research to inform the work of a technical sub-committee of the local Building Regulations Advisory Committee that is currently being established to scope out proposals for wider stakeholder consultation. Christine McClements, the mother of a severely disabled child, who has extensive knowledge as a Civil Engineer and user of Changing Places Toilets, has already agreed to join the sub-committee. We are seeking other members with the relevant expertise from representative organisations and industry. Draft proposals could be agreed and ready for wider consultation sometime in the spring of 2021.

Mr Beggs asked the Minister of Finance what consultation he is undertaking on an extension of rates relief for the hospitality industry beyond the end of the current financial year.
(AQO 1066/17-22)

Mr Murphy: Work is continuing on possible rating measures for the forthcoming year. I have met recently with a number of key stakeholders and ratepayers in the hotel and hospitality sectors and other business sectors to discuss the way forward, and I will be continuing my engagement over the coming weeks.

We are still in a very fluid situation, although I very much understand the need to bring certainty to businesses at the earliest opportunity for the next rating year.

I am continuing to draw on the consultation work carried out by my Department last autumn on business rates. Future rate support will need to be targeted at those sectors most in need and tailored to what we can afford in our Budget.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Finance how he is responding to calls by NI Water for substantial investment in waste water infrastructure.

(AQO 1067/17-22)

Mr Murphy: The Executive's 2020-21 Budget gave DfI a Capital DEL Budget of £558.2m. This is by far the largest capital Budget of any of department and represents a 19% increase on the department's 2019-20 opening Budget. Of the £558.2m DfI allocated £105m and £150.4m respectively to NI Water.

It is up to the Minister for Infrastructure to prioritise that capital budget.

NI Water were also allocated an additional £15m capital which I announced in September, to enable them to bring forward investment in sewerage infrastructure, including a number of waste water treatment works this year.

I recently met the Infrastructure Minister to discuss the pressures facing her department over the PC21 period as part of the Budget process.

Of course, funding for NI Water needs to be viewed in the context of all pressures facing the Executive and the finite amount of resources available.

Department of Health

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he has a diagnostic recovery plan which includes an awareness campaign and a shorter diagnostic pathway for people with ovarian cancer.

(AQW 7000/17-22)

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): The diagnosis and treatment of ovarian cancer in Northern Ireland is delivered in line with National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). Diagnosis is entirely a matter of clinical judgement as to the sequencing of diagnostic tests for those patients suspected of having ovarian cancer. Therefore it is possible for GPs to refer for ultrasound without the result of a CA125, thereby speeding up the diagnostic pathway, but this is completely the decision of the GP. In relation to awareness campaigns, an ovarian cancer campaign takes place annually during March - ovarian cancer awareness month.

Last year coproduction work began on the development of a 10 year Northern Ireland Cancer Strategy, with policy makers, health representatives and charities actively working in its development. This cancer strategy will consider support for patients along the whole cancer pathway including psychological support from diagnosis to during and after treatment. The strategy will include options and recommendations for further actions; these will link to 3, 5 and 10 year goals and intervals.

COVID-19 continues to present unprecedented capacity challenges across the cancer pathway which the service is actively managing. All possible steps will be taken to maintain services during the current and any future surges, including commissioning additional assessments and treatments from independent sector providers, with capacity prioritised for those patients with suspected or confirmed cancer.

I have established a Cancer Services Rebuilding Cell to oversee the resumption of cancer screening, diagnosis and treatment in clinically safe environments as quickly as possible, and to protect these services as much as possible throughout the pandemic, taking into account existing capacity constraints and the ongoing pandemic response.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he has a recovery plan focusing on support services, including psychological support, for ovarian cancer patients.

(AQW 7002/17-22)

Mr Swann: The diagnosis and treatment of ovarian cancer in Northern Ireland is delivered in line with National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). Diagnosis is entirely a matter of clinical judgement as to the sequencing of diagnostic tests for those patients suspected of having ovarian cancer. Therefore it is possible for GPs to refer for ultrasound without the result of a CA125, thereby speeding up the diagnostic pathway, but this is completely the decision of the GP. In relation to awareness campaigns, an ovarian cancer campaign takes place annually during March - ovarian cancer awareness month.

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Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the work his Department is undertaking in terms of providing a COVID-19 vaccination programme in schools.

(AQW 7280/17-22)

Mr Swann: Vaccination policy is informed by recommendations and advice provided by the independent Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI). JCVI will advise on which COVID-19 vaccine(s) might be used, and on the priority groups to receive the vaccine based on the best available clinical, modelling and epidemiological data.

JCVI have met several times to consider a COVID-19 programme and their latest interim advice was published on the 25 September. Current evidence indicates that the risk of serious disease and death from COVID-19 increases exponentially with age and is also increased in those with a number of underlying health conditions.

Accordingly, the prioritisation of a school based COVID-19 vaccination programme will be kept under review.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health what action will he take to ensure the introduction of the Cytosponge TFF3 test in hospitals and other healthcare settings.

(AQW 7595/17-22)

Mr Swann: The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) provides national guidance and advice designed to support health service commissioners and staff who are considering using new medical devices and other medical or diagnostic technologies to improve healthcare. NICE has a global reputation for rigour, independence and objectivity, which is informed by the best available scientific evidence.

NICE have confirmed that they do not currently make any recommendations on the use of the Cytosponge-TFF3 test in any of their guidelines. However, they are in the process of developing briefing on the use of the Cytosponge-TFF3 test which when published will inform the potential use of this technology in the National Health Service and in Health and Social Care, Northern Ireland.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether there are any plans to install more drive-in COVID-19 testing centres.

(AQW 8126/17-22)

Mr Swann: The location of testing facilities across Northern Ireland, including fixed sites and Mobile testing units (MTUs), is kept under constant review with MTUs deployed in response to local need.

Current information is available at:

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/covid-19-coronavirus/testing-and-tracing-covid-19/testing-covid-19>

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health for an update on the roll out of the uncapped PrEP trial; and whether people seeking the treatment will have to pay for access to the drug.

(AQW 8288/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is anticipated that there will be a pilot PrEP clinic available in Northern, Southern and South Eastern Trusts, as well as the recommencement of the Belfast clinic as of late October 2020. This development is dependent on both the availability of physical space and recruitment but Trusts are hopeful that a solution can be found to enable the clinics to become operational.

PrEP services had commenced in WHSCT in October 2019 in order to increase and improve patient access. The Western Trust continued to deliver the PrEP service throughout the pandemic. The WHSCT has committed to keeping PrEP clinics open until March 2021.

There is an on-going effort between the HSCB/PHA/Trusts and the Department to seek recurrent funding for this service so that individuals will continue to have free access.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many nurses in each Health and Social Care Trust have tested positive for COVID-19.

(AQW 8294/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of nurses that have tested positive for COVID-19 has been provided by each Health and Social Care Trust and is detailed in the table attached.

Number of nurses who tested positive for COVID-19 by HSC Trust

HSC Trust	Number of Nurses Tested Positive ¹
Belfast	60
Northern	98
South Eastern	35
Southern	105

HSC Trust	Number of Nurses Tested Positive ¹
Western	22

1 It should not be assumed that all of the staff were infected whilst at work.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQO 93/17-22, whether there has been any progress recruiting staff and capacity building at the Regional Fertility Centre to enable three cycles of IVF to be provided in line with the New Decade, New Approach commitment.

(AQW 8328/17-22)

Mr Swann: I announced, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, my plans to establish a Project Board to take forward the welcome New Decade, New Approach commitment to increasing the number of publicly-funded IVF cycles. However, although membership of the Project Board has been determined, progress has been temporarily delayed due to the ongoing COVID-19 response.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the Immigration Health Surcharge.

(AQW 8403/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) was introduced in 2015 by the Immigration Act 2014 (which applies to the whole of the UK).

The IHS is paid by temporary non-EEA migrants who come to the UK for 6 months or more and was introduced to ensure that temporary migrants make a fair contribution to the comprehensive range of NHS services available to them during their stay.

The IHS is collected by the Home Office as part of the immigration application process and it is payable in full, upfront, for the length of the individual's visa period.

Those who have paid the IHS are exempt from charge and entitled to access free healthcare on the same basis as those who are ordinarily resident in the UK.

Certain categories of person are exempt from paying the IHS:

- those applying for indefinite leave to enter or remain in the UK;
- health and care workers who are eligible for a Tier 2 Health and Care visa (or their dependant);
- diplomats or members of a visiting armed forces and not subject to immigration control;
- dependants of a member of the UK's armed forces;
- dependants of a member of another country's armed forces who is exempt from immigration control;
- family members of a European national with European Union treaty rights;
- those applying for a visa for the Isle of Man or Channel Islands;
- British Overseas Territory citizens resident in the Falkland Islands
- asylum seekers or those applying for humanitarian protection (or their dependant);
- domestic workers who have been identified as victims of slavery or human trafficking;
- those applying for discretionary leave to remain in the UK as someone who has been identified as a victim of slavery or human trafficking (or their dependant);
- those to whom the Home Office's domestic violence concession applies (or their dependant);
- if being made to leave the UK would be against their rights under Article 3 of the European Convention of Human Rights (or their dependant).

The IHS is currently £470 per year for students, those on a Youth Mobility Scheme visa and those under the age of 18 at time of application, and £624 per year for all other visa and immigration applications.

Northern Ireland is entitled to a share of the receipts collected, in line with the Barnett formula. The receipts collected vary from year to year and consequently the amount which Northern Ireland receives also varies from year to year.

The funding is part of the «general» funding received by the Department and the Department is free to allocate it according to current health priorities.

On 21st May 2020 the Prime Minister announced that overseas health and social care workers would be exempted from paying the IHS.

On 4th August 2020 the UK government launched a new visa for health and social care workers and their dependent family called the Health and Care Visa. This Visa forms part of the Tier 2 (General) Visa regime for skilled workers.

People applying for the Health and Care Visa, and their dependent family, are exempt from paying the IHS.

Mr O'Dowd asked the Minister of Health (i) to list the names of the panel appointed to investigate the level three Serious Adverse Incidents at Craigavon Area Hospital and Daisy Hill Hospital in regards to COVID-19 outbreaks; (ii) to detail the terms of reference for the panel; and (iii) on which date the panel commenced its investigation.

(AQW 8493/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Details of panel members appointed are:
- Dr Gopal Rao, Consultant Microbiologist London North West University Healthcare NHS Trust (Chair);
 - Dr Jean O'Driscoll, Consultant Microbiologist Buckinghamshire Healthcare NHS Trust;
 - Dr Simon Watt, Consultant Haematologist, Manchester University NHS Foundation Trust;
 - Dr Charles Cayley, Medical Examiner London North West University Healthcare NHS Trust;
 - Ms Christine Perry, Independent Clinical Consultant in Nursing Infection Prevention and Control; and
 - Dr Tim Wyatt, Consultant Microbiologist, Public Health Agency
- (ii) The Terms of Reference of the Severe Adverse Incident (SAI) investigation have been agreed by the Chair, submitted to the Health and Social Care Board, and shared with the families concerned.
- (iii) The first meeting with the SAI Chair took place on 29 September 2020, at which the Chair provided specifications of information required to commence the review. Weekly meetings are taking place between the Southern Health and Social Care Trust and SAI panel to progress the investigation process.

Ms P Bradley asked the Minister of Health when the consultation on the introduction of a soft opt-out organ donation system will be launched.

(AQW 8504/17-22)

Mr Swann: Although I cannot confirm an exact date at this time, as I announced on 22 July, it is my intention to launch a consultation on the introduction of a soft opt-out system for organ donation in the autumn.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health (i) how many dementia assessments have been carried out in each month since March 2020; (ii) how many have been diagnosed with the condition; and (iii) how these assessments are being carried out under the current restrictions.

(AQW 8673/17-22)

Mr Swann:

- (i) Please find information detailed below.

Table 1(a). Number of dementia assessments carried out at month end April-Sept 2020, by Belfast, Northern, Southern and Western Trusts.

Table 1(a).

Trust	April 2020	May 2020	June 2020	July 2020	August 2020	September 2020
Belfast*	48	55	81	110	108	128
Northern	54	72	82	110	105	120
Southern	6	7	25	40	37	60
Western	22	6	9	23	32	19

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

*Belfast HSC Trust advised that face to face assessments were only undertaken for emergency referrals in April, May and June.

Table 1(b). South Eastern HSC Trust have advised that their figures reflect the total numbers of patients assessed by the Mental Health Services for Older People, a combined memory & functional service. It is currently not possible to give the breakdown between Dementia & Functional mental health illness assessments carried out. The figures also include both new and review dementia assessments.

Table 1(b).

Trust	April 2020	May 2020	June 2020	July 2020	August 2020	September 2020
South Eastern	284	309	349	289	230	351

- (ii) Please find information detailed below.

Table 2. Number of dementia diagnoses at month end April-Sept 2020, by HSC Trust.

HSC Trust	April 2020	May 2020	June 2020	July 2020	August 2020	September 2020
Belfast	14	14	28	67	73	91
Northern	-	-	-	-	-	-
South Eastern	-	-	-	-	-	-
Southern	10	5	6	17	14	24
Western	0	0	8	14	13	36
Northern* Ireland	24	19	42	98	100	151

Source: Health and Social Care Trusts

*Northern and South Eastern HSC Trusts advised that the information for dementia diagnoses could only be obtained through a manual trawl through electronic data and could therefore only be supplied at disproportionate cost. The Northern Ireland figure represents dementia diagnoses across the other three HSC Trusts.

- (iii) During the initial response to the pandemic Trusts reconfigured services with staff being redeployed as necessary. Trust services are now being rebuilt whilst continuing to take precautions due to the on-going pandemic. Trust Memory Services have adapted to current circumstances and through the use of technology and other innovative practices, are able to undertake assessments and care reviews. Along with the Community and Voluntary sector, Trust staff will continue to provide local support to people with a dementia and their carers. This has included telephone calls to provide information and offer reassurance and use of other technologies including Apps and video links.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to outline his Department's plans to ask health and social care students to join the workforce as part of increasing staff as COVID-19 cases increase.

(AQW 8701/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department's overarching priority is to protect the learning of health and social care students so that they can successfully complete their studies and be able to join the workforce as registrants.

Some HSC Trusts have made a small number of temporary, part time, positions as Medical Student Technicians available to medical students on a volunteer basis.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health whether he will publish the medical and scientific evidence underpinning the Actions to Reduce COVID-19 Transmission Rates, as announced in the Assembly on 14 October 2020.

(AQW 8740/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Department of Health has recently published a bank of evidence papers that have helped shape its response to COVID-19.

This can be found on the Department's website at

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/covid-19-scientific-evidence>

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what the current waiting time is for adults to be assessed for autism spectrum disorder; and how he plans to reduce waiting times.

(AQW 8746/17-22)

Mr Swann: Data held by the Health and Social Care Board in relation to current waiting times for adult autism assessment is provided in the table below.

Adult Autism Assessment Active Waits as at End August 2020, by Timeband

Trust	0 to 4 weeks	>4 to 8 weeks	>8 to 13 weeks	>13 to 18 weeks	>18 to 26 weeks	>26 to 39 weeks	>39 to 52 weeks	> 52 weeks	Total
Belfast	1	2	2	3	11	39	21	346	425
Northern	17	21	20	14	36	65	8	0	181
South Eastern	3	6	9	11	13	42	28	83	195
Southern	2	3	2	2	3	18	18	124	172

Trust	0 to 4 weeks	>4 to 8 weeks	>8 to 13 weeks	>13 to 18 weeks	>18 to 26 weeks	>26 to 39 weeks	>39 to 52 weeks	> 52 weeks	Total
Western	3	3	9	1	9	29	24	50	128
Region	26	35	42	31	72	193	99	603	1101

People with Autistic Spectrum Disorder have access to a range of core HSC services. Support may be provided via GP and Primary Care in the first instance or referral onto services such as psychology or psychiatry, dependant on assessed need. Access to other community services where relating to Mental Health or Learning Disability support are also available where appropriate, as are services provided through the community/voluntary sector.

I am however fully aware of the rising demand for adult autism services within our health and social care sector and of the growing need for the standardisation of provision of services across the regional Trusts. This is why my Department has been liaising with the Health and Social Care Board and with the Public Health Agency to commence a review of adult autism services. Work on this review was due to commence in April of this year, but due to pressures on the system as a result of COVID-19, plans to commence this work had to be paused.

However, mindful of the challenges which COVID 19 has presented to families and people with autism, I have recently written to my Executive Colleagues to advise them of my intention to publish an interim autism strategy early in 2021 which will ultimately inform the development of a fully co-produced strategy later in 2021. It is intended that the work to review adult autism services will be undertaken as an action within this strategy. Like its predecessor, this interim strategy contain cross-departmental actions recognising that adults with autism require a wide range of supports across for example health, education, housing and employment.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health what support mechanisms are in place for adults diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.

(AQW 8747/17-22)

Mr Swann: Data held by the Health and Social Care Board in relation to current waiting times for adult autism assessment is provided in the table below.

Adult Autism Assessment Active Waits as at End August 2020, by Timeband

Trust	0 to 4 weeks	>4 to 8 weeks	>8 to 13 weeks	>13 to 18 weeks	>18 to 26 weeks	>26 to 39 weeks	>39 to 52 weeks	> 52 weeks	Total
Belfast	1	2	2	3	11	39	21	346	425
Northern	17	21	20	14	36	65	8	0	181
South									
Eastern	3	6	9	11	13	42	28	83	195
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Region	26	35	42	31	72	193	99	603	1101

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Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health what is the maximum capacity of COVID-19 testing possible in a single day.
(AQW 8790/17-22)

Mr Swann: Testing capacity in Northern Ireland has increased significantly since the beginning of the pandemic and is delivered through two routes.

Pillar 1 testing is delivered via Health and Social Care laboratories and laboratories operating as part of the Scientific Advisory Consortium. My Department is actively working with colleagues in the Public Health Agency and in the Health and Social Care Trusts to further enhance Pillar 1 testing capacity.

Pillar 2 testing is delivered through participation in the National Testing Programme managed by the Department of Health and Social care in London (DHSC). Officials here continue to link with DHSC on a regular basis to ensure that testing capacity through Pillar 2 is maximised for Northern Ireland

Overall testing capacity is continually reviewed by my Department. Optimising available testing capacity will continue to be a key priority for me and for my officials in the weeks and months ahead.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health (i) how many prisoners have been transferred to a secure Mental Health Unit, in each year for the last ten years; and (ii) how many prisoners have been transferred to a secure Mental Health Unit after being accommodated in a Care and Supervision Unit within the Northern Ireland Prison Service, in each year for the last ten years.
(AQW 8863/17-22)

Mr Swann: The South Eastern HSC Trust, who are responsible for the care of people in prison, indicate that information on the number of prisoners who have been transferred to a secure Mental Health Unit, and the number transferred after being accommodated in a Care and Supervision Unit is not available.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what support and treatment is available for lipedema patients, particularly patients in the more developed stages of the condition.
(AQW 8916/17-22)

Mr Swann: Patients with lipoedema are normally seen by the lymphoedema service. Patients whose care is not able to be managed by the lymphoedema and lipoedema services in Northern Ireland, and whose condition would be considered as clinically exceptional to others with the condition, can be referred by their lymphoedema and lipoedema specialist to a specialist provider in the UK.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health what support has been provided to dental businesses, engaged in NHS dental treatment, to meet additional costs incurred as a result of COVID-19 regulations.
(AQW 8941/17-22)

Mr Swann: At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I established a General Dental Services Financial Support Scheme (FSS) to support the industry. Since the inception of the scheme the combined level of FSS and net Item of Service (IoS) payments made to General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) is approximately £37.5 million. This compares with the £28 million worth of net IoS payments made in the same period in 2019-20. Further, I have approved the availability of an extra £5m to address the reduction in revenue from patients, resulting in an additional total investment of £14.8m.

Discussions are ongoing with the British Dental Association in respect of the specifics of the support arrangements for the remainder of 2020-21 with the commitment that the full General Dental Services budget will be utilised to support the service. The financial support has been, and will continue to be, conditional on dentists providing care to registered Health Service patients on the basis of need.

Mr Harvey asked the Minister of Health what plans his Department has to provide COVID-19-related financial support to dentistry.
(AQW 8942/17-22)

Mr Swann: At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I established a General Dental Services Financial Support Scheme (FSS) to support the industry. Since the inception of the scheme the combined level of FSS and net Item of Service (IoS) payments made to General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) is approximately £37.5 million. This compares with the £28 million worth of net IoS payments made in the same period in 2019-20. Further, I have approved the availability of an extra £5m to address the reduction in revenue from patients, resulting in an additional total investment of £14.8m.

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Miss McIlveen asked the Minister of Health what support is provided for women diagnosed with endometriosis.
(AQW 8976/17-22)

Mr Swann: Endometriosis services are provided as a sub-specialty within gynaecology and patients are normally referred to services provided by the Western and Belfast Health and Social Care Trusts.

Trusts are delivering services with reduced footfall across sites so as to comply with social distancing requirements and to keep patients and staff safe.

Trust Plans to rebuild services as safely and as quickly as possible, under the Strategic Framework which I published in June, will have been set back by the current surge in hospital admissions. Trusts are fully committed to maintaining essential services and resuming normal activity levels as soon as it is safe to do so for patients and staff. In the meantime, patients experiencing signs and symptoms of endometriosis should discuss any concerns with their GP.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health what plans are in place for the resumption of potentially life saving surgeries, including transplants, despite the current pressure the Health Service is facing.

(AQW 9122/17-22)

Mr Swann: Trusts are currently working to reschedule cancelled surgeries as soon as it is safe and feasible to do so within the current conditions. I recently published a Strategic Surge Framework and individual Trust Surge Plans. These set out how the HSC system will manage further Covid-19 surges, whilst still trying to maintain as many essential services as possible.

The deceased donor kidney transplant service was reinstated on 17 April 2020 following a brief pause, and delivered over 100 transplants during the initial wave of the pandemic. The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust will also consider live donor kidney transplants on an individual case basis. Recognising the significant challenges in delivering surgical activity during the current surge in hospital admissions, my Department is working with the Health and Social Care Board and the Belfast Trust to ensure the full resumption of kidney transplant services as soon as practicable within the prevailing COVID-19 conditions.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister of Health why flu vaccinations for over 65 year olds are being cancelled at short notice.

(AQW 9138/17-22)

Mr Swann: There has been a very high early demand for vaccines through the public seasonal flu vaccination programme this year. To meet this demand, virtually all centrally held stock of the flu vaccine used for those aged 65 and over has been distributed to GPs. This amounts to over 285,000 doses of vaccine, an unprecedented number at this stage of a seasonal flu vaccination programme.

There is a small volume of centrally held stock remaining and additional stock is due to arrive next week. In order to ensure that this stock is maintained throughout the season, a cap has been placed on GP ordering of this vaccine. This may have led to some GPs cancelling mass vaccination clinics; however, GPs are still able to order small volumes of this vaccine.

GPs have been asked to continue to use their existing stock to vaccinate those in the eligible groups. Where they have unused vaccine, and do not have immediate plans to use this, they have been asked to advise the PHA or Regional Procurement Pharmacy to enable redistribution to other practices that may require it.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Health whether additional technology, such as phones or video facilities, will be made available to GP practices to permit better access to the current telephone triage system.

(AQW 9190/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is recognised that remote triage and consultation requires an increase in digital working and support continues to be provided to GP practices to ensure the appropriate telephony equipment is in place to support the delivery of patient services.

The Business Services Organisation and the Health and Social Care Board have worked with representatives from the BMA Northern Ireland General Practitioners Committee on the introduction of solutions to enable virtual consultations with patients along-side telephone first triage and face to face contacts.

Advice has been provided to GP practices on the options available and the GMS ICT Support Team in BSO offers some support to practices in the use of this technology.

Investing in the upgrading of GP Practice telephony services is a key priority in 2020/21 and, on 23rd October, the Health and Social Care Board launched the GMS Telephony Equipment Grant Scheme which is available to all GP practices in NI. The Scheme provides funding, based on patient list size, towards the purchase of:

- a new VoIP/VoIP ready telephone system;
- additional telephone lines added to the current telephone system between the 1st April 2020 to 31st March 2021;
- mobile phones and contracts for practice use (for any spend between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021).

In order to ensure timely patient care and ease of access for other professionals involved in care for patients, practices also must ensure that they provide a direct dial telephone number to their relevant care homes, HSC trust laboratories and community pharmacies. They must also undertake to provide this number as appropriate to any services that require a direct line to facilitate urgent professional handover of patient care.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister of Health whether any consideration has been given to making calls to GPs surgeries free of charge, given patients can no longer use the walk in service.

(AQW 9191/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is no regional plan at present to provide free calls to GP surgeries, however practices are expected to ensure that patients contacting their practice do not incur charges above the equivalent of a local geographical call.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail each date he consented for the Department of Health to take forward Statutory Instruments relating to Brexit.

(AQW 9215/17-22)

Mr Swann: Please see set out below EU Exit related Statutory Instruments and the dates of consent for them to be taken forward:

Statutory Instrument	Date of Consent
The European Qualifications (Health And Social Care Professionals) (Efta States And Miscellaneous Amendments) (Eu Exit) Regulations 2020	24 June 2020
The Reciprocal And Cross Border Healthcare (Amendment) (Eu Exit) Regulation 2020	15 September 2020
The Nutrition (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (FSA led)	21 September 2020
The Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020.	22 September 2020
The Blood Safety And Quality (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020	05 October 2020
The Quality And Safety Of Organs Intended For Transplantation (Amendment) EU Exit Regulations 2020	05 October 2020
The Human Tissue (Quality And Safety For Human Application) (Amendment) EU Exit Regulations 2020	05 October 2020
The Food and Feed Hygiene and Safety (Miscellaneous Amendments etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 (FSA Led)	05 October 2020
The Human Medicines (Amendment Etc.) (Eu Exit) Regulations 2020	13 October 2020

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health when AQW 8035/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 9224/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to my previous answer to AQW 8035/17-22 answered on 26 October 2020.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister of Health (i) how many key actions identified in pages 60 and 61 of his Department's surge planning framework have been completed; (ii) how many are in progress; and (iii) how many have not yet commenced.

(AQW 9259/17-22)

Mr Swann: I can confirm that of the 19 actions listed in the Strategic Surge Planning Framework document (pages 60 and 61), 11 have been completed and 8 are in progress.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister of Health to detail (i) how many nurses, doctors, social workers and other allied professionals are currently available and working; and (ii) what proportion in each specialty are working in (a) COVID-19; and (b) non-COVID-19 roles.

(AQW 9277/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of nurses, doctors, social workers and allied health professionals available and working across Health and Social Care as at 9th October 2020 is detailed in the table below.

Profession	Staff available and working * as at 9th October 2020
Nurse	13,101
Doctor	4,504
Social Worker	3,631
Allied Health Professional	4,732

Source: HSC Trusts and regional HSC organisations

* Excludes bank staff, and staff recorded as absent due to sickness absence, COVID-19 related absences, career break, maternity/paternity/adoption leave, parental leave, term time, suspension, or unpaid leave.

In addition to the figures provided, HSC Trusts and regional HSC organisations also have a bank of staff to draw on as and when required.

A split between staff working in a COVID role or non-COVID role is not possible as COVID-19 is impacting across all service areas and roles.

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Health how many health and social care staff are currently undergoing COVID-19-related training.

(AQW 9312/17-22)

Mr Swann: Staff across HSC are helping with the treatment of COVID-19 patients.

Where staff are being redeployed to manage pressures, necessary induction takes place to enable all staff to take on different duties. Staff are only asked to take on tasks within their current level of competence.

Staff availability rather than training is the key challenge when responding to the increased demand. Staff absence, including those absent due to COVID-19, remains a key issue for Trusts in terms of managing the ongoing pressures.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health (i) how many of the key actions identified in pages 60 and 61 of his Department's surge planning framework have been completed; (ii) how many are in progress; and (iii) how many have not yet commenced.

(AQW 9325/17-22)

Mr Swann: I can confirm that of the 19 actions listed in the Strategic Surge Planning Framework document (pages 60 and 61), 11 have been completed and 8 are in progress.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the mental health services deemed as essential services during this second COVID-19 surge.

(AQW 9345/17-22)

Mr Swann: All mental health services are deemed as essential during this second Covid-19 surge. Since the beginning of the pandemic, mental health services have in general not stopped unless it has been deemed clinically appropriate or in direct response to workforce resource pressure, albeit some services have been delivered using different methods such as phone and video communication.

Mental health services in Northern Ireland are provided in line with the regional stepped care model. This approach remains during the COVID-19 pandemic. All those who need care and treatment will be provided with services that are clinically appropriate.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of calls to the Health and Social Care Trust Psychological Support Helpline for each week since January 2020.

(AQW 9347/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below provides the information requested.

	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct
BHSCT	0	16	34	34	4	8	13	20
NHSCT	3	28	19	11	7	4	0	0
SHSCT	0	28	25	16	18	11	18	9
SEHSCT	0	29	32	38	21	12	14	18
WHSCCT	0	27	17	19	26	14	11	27

Please note that figures for January and February are not included as the service began in April, with the exception of in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust which started in March. October figures reflect the position on the 27th of that month.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the connection between poverty, deprivation and rates of cancer.

(AQW 9365/17-22)

Mr Swann: In 2011-17, the Standardised Incidence Rate (SIR) for cancer in Northern Ireland was 600 cases per 100,000 population. The inequality gap between the 20% most and least deprived areas was 24%, with the SIR in the most deprived areas 694 cases per 100,000 compared with 559 cases per 100,000 in the least deprived areas. Since 2007-13 there has been no change in the inequality gap between the most and least deprived areas.

Source: Health Inequalities Annual Report 2020 <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/health-inequalities-annual-report-2020>

Last year my Department began the development of a 10 year Northern Ireland Cancer Strategy. While the global pandemic has undoubtedly had an impact on our ability to finalise the strategy, my intention is still to have a draft strategy and recommendations available for consultation at the earliest opportunity, before finalising the strategy in the new year.

In addition, in order to address health inequalities we therefore need to tackle the wider social determinants of health and reduce inequalities in these determinants. This approach is at the heart of Making Life Better, which is the Executive's overarching strategic framework to improve health and address health inequalities.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of times the Air Ambulance Service has been called out in each of the last three years, broken down by Assembly constituency; and whether his Department will fully fund the service in future.

(AQW 9382/17-22)

Mr Swann: The table below shows the number of missions undertaken by the Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS) team, in each financial year and by Council area, between the launch of the service on 22 July 2017 and 31 August 2020. This includes responses by the HEMS doctor and paramedic crew by helicopter or by rapid response vehicle (Delta 7), which is deployed in poor weather conditions or when tasked to an incident in close proximity to the base location. Figures are not held in a format which enables a breakdown by Assembly constituency.

In regard to funding arrangements, my Department continues to provide significant recurrent funding of approximately £1million per annum to enable the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service to cover the medical costs of the Helicopter Emergency Medical Service, including doctor and paramedic staff, training and equipment. This forms part of the agreed partnership funding model with Air Ambulance Northern Ireland, which raises charity funds (including public donations) to sustain the aviation side of the service. This has been found to be a highly effective model which operates in a number of UK HEMS services.

Council areas	22 Jul 17 - 21 Mar 18	1 Apr 18 - 31 Mar 19	1 Apr 19 - 31 Mar 20	1 Apr 20 - 31 Aug 20	Total
Antrim and Newtownabbey	13	23	34	27	97
Ards and North Down	12	27	37	38	114
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	20	51	84	52	207
Belfast	23	59	62	41	185
Causeway Coast and Glens	14	47	73	38	172
Derry City and Strabane	7	26	21	14	68
Fermanagh and Omagh	10	45	39	37	131
Lisburn and Castlereagh	26	54	49	29	158
Mid and East Antrim	16	30	43	35	124
Mid Ulster	22	46	53	48	169
Newry, Mourne and Down	36	65	83	81	265
Total	199	473	578	440	1690

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Health for an update on any extra funding being made available to NI Hospice; and whether he has asked the Executive for specific funds for NI Hospice.

(AQW 9393/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Health and Social Care Board has recently completed a review of its contract funding for adult hospice services as a result of which additional funding of £867,360 has been made available for hospices backdated to April 2019.

The Health and Social Care Board has also recently agreed a 4% uplift for 2020/21 to the value of its core funding Service Level Agreements held with hospices in Northern Ireland - for the Northern Ireland Hospice this applies to both adult and children's services.

In addition to the core contract funding for children's hospice services, since 2018, a Paediatric and Life Limited Service (PALLs) has been commissioned from the NI Children's Hospice. This service provides a specialist nursing role to support children, families and clinicians in recognising and managing end of life needs as well as access to a dedicated bed in the NI Children's Hospice or in the child's own home. Initially provided for 2 years, my Department has made this funding available for a further year in 2020/21 to ensure the continued delivery of the service by the NI Children's Hospice.

I welcome the recent allocation of additional funding provided to my Department for hospices which recognises the impact of COVID-19 on their fundraising activities.

I met with representatives of the Northern Ireland Hospice in September and am aware of their concerns in relation to increasing demand for services and financial challenges. I have asked that my Department, Health and Social Care Board officials and the NI Hospice continue to engage on the funding issues.

Given the current funding arrangements for adult hospice services date back to 2004, it is appropriate that consideration be given to reviewing these in light of the changing context and demographics for palliative care and I would hope that hospices would engage with this.

New Decade New Approach included a commitment to increase investment in palliative and end of life care to fully implement service improvements for palliative and end of life care including enhancing the contribution of hospices; and to increase support for palliative perinatal care.

Investment to meet the NDNA palliative care commitment has been captured in my Department's response to the recent Department of Finance Budget 2021-24 Information Gathering Exercise.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health what is the current daily testing capacity for COVID-19 in (i) pillar 1; and (ii) pillar 2. (AQW 9402/17-22)

Mr Swann: Testing capacity in Northern Ireland has increased significantly since the beginning of the pandemic and is delivered through two routes.

Pillar 1 testing is delivered via Health and Social Care laboratories and laboratories operating as part of the Scientific Advisory Consortium. My Department is working with colleagues in the Public Health Agency and in the Health and Social Care Trusts to further enhance Pillar 1 testing capacity.

Pillar 2 testing is delivered through participation in the National Testing Programme managed by the Department of Health and Social care in London (DHSC). Officials here continue to link with DHSC on a regular basis to ensure that testing capacity through Pillar 2 is maximised for Northern Ireland

Overall testing capacity is continually reviewed by my Department. Optimising available testing capacity will continue to be a key priority for me and for my officials in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health how much of the additional financial assistance for care homes responding to COVID-19 was underspent. (AQW 9407/17-22)

Mr Swann: Spend is continuing to be incurred. As indicated in my announcement on 21 October 2020 this assistance, along with additional funding recently received from the Department of Finance, still remains available for the support of care homes

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of eating disorder services in each Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 9419/17-22)

Mr Swann: Support for patients with eating disorders are provided by all Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. Eating disorder services are, like all other mental health services, under increasing pressures, with the number of referrals increasing by 43% between March 2019 and September 2020. The number of review patients seen has also increased significantly, with a 64% increase during the same period

To ensure that our eating disorder services continue to provide good quality care, action 9.2 of the Mental Health Action Plan is to review specialist mental health services.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the services his Department coordinates or commissions with the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on suicide prevention. (AQW 9420/17-22)

Mr Swann: A range of work is undertaken in collaboration across the Department of Health, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), the Public Health Agency (PHA), Health and Social Care Trusts and Community and Voluntary organisations to promote mental and emotional wellbeing, and to reduce social isolation, financial and debt problems, and other issues influencing suicide rates in rural communities.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Tackling Rural Policy and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Framework supports initiatives to address financial poverty, access poverty and social isolation.

TRPSI Funded initiatives funded include the Rural Support Charity which operates a telephone helpline and signposting service for farmers and rural dwellers. Rural Support also work in partnership with staff from the Farm Families Health Checks (FFHC). This programme is delivered in conjunction with the Public Health Agency and the Northern Health and Social Care Trust and provides 2,600 rural dwellers annually with a comprehensive physical and mental health screening service.

SPRING Social Prescribing is delivered with the support of the DoH, HSCB and in partnership with the rural Healthy Living Centres. It aims to link medical care to non-clinical locally delivered support services.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health to detail the cost to run an ICU bed in the (i) Altnagelvin; (ii) Antrim Area; (iii) Belfast City; (iv) Causeway; (v) Craigavon Area; (vi) Royal; (vii) South West Acute; (viii) Ulster; and (ix) Nightingale hospitals.
(AQW 9422/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the average cost of an ICU critical care bed day in hospital sites at (i) Altnagelvin; (ii) Antrim Area; (iii) Belfast City; (iv) Causeway; (v) Craigavon Area; (vi) Royal; (vii) South West Acute; (viii) Ulster are set out in the table below. These average costs relate to 2018/19 which is the latest information available.

Information on costs for the Nightingale Hospital is not available.

The average costs shown are the total costs of each critical care service divided by the total number of occupied bed days for each service for the financial year. The costs include direct staff costs, plus other inputs such as diagnostics, pharmacy and equipment, catering and laundry and an appropriate proportion of administrative and other overheads.

This information, along with indicative unit costs for other critical care beds, is also readily available via the following link on the Department of Health website: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/specialist-services>.

Critical Care Service	2018/19 - Average cost per bed day / £							
	Altnagelvin	Antrim Area	Belfast City	Causeway	Craigavon Area	Royal Victoria	S. W. Acute	Ulster
Intensive Care Unit	3,451	2,837	3,597	2,259	2,172	3,106	2,702	2,633

*Source: Health & Social Care Trust Financial Returns (TFRs)

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health what is the cost of running (i) a general inpatient bed; (ii) a mental health inpatient bed; and (iii) an outpatient bed.
(AQW 9423/17-22)

Mr Swann: The latest available costs from health and social care trusts relate to 2018/19 and are as follows:

Inpatients

- (i) The average cost per patient day across all clinical specialties was £777.
- (ii) The average cost per patient day for mental health specialties only (Programme of Care 5) was £470.

Outpatients

- (iii) The average cost of an outpatient attendance was £206.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Health when dental practices will be able to operate at full capacity.
(AQW 9445/17-22)

Mr Swann: Routine dental care resumed on 20 July 2020 however, enhanced infection prevention and control measures including additional Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) requirements, fallow time and cleaning after Aerosol Generating Procedures (AGPs) limit the number of patients that can be seen each day.

Currently, around 21,000 items of treatment are provided each week in Northern Ireland in General Dental Practice. Prior to the pandemic approximately 84,000 items of treatment were provided each week. At the moment, dentists are therefore operating at 25% of pre-Covid levels. This is similar to the activity levels in primary care dentistry seen across the UK.

To ensure that this limited treatment capacity is targeted appropriately, guidance issued to all Northern Ireland General Dental Practitioners recommends that patients are seen on the basis of need and that patients requiring emergency and urgent care are given the highest priority.

Updated operational guidance was issued to General Dental Practitioners (GDPs) on 21 October 2020 and included details of a marked reduction of fallow times. While the new guidelines should allow for an increased number of appointments per day, overall patient throughput is expected to remain below normal levels for the foreseeable future.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health whether he plans to increase the number of trans community representatives on the gender pathway review group.
(AQW 9451/17-22)

Mr Swann: Two service user representatives currently sit on the Gender Identity Service Pathway Review Group (GISPRG). The Health and Social Care Board, with the assistance of the Patient and Client Council (PCC), is currently seeking to recruit

fifteen people with lived experience of gender dysphoria and/or gender identity services to join a wider Liaison Panel that will sit under the GISPRG. Both the Co-chairs of the panel will be invited to join the Review Group.

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health whether his Department provides tablet computers to care homes, in line with other health authorities in Great Britain.

(AQW 9466/17-22)

Mr Swann: Funding is available for care homes to support the use of tablet computers. This was part of the £11.7m funding package I announced in June and will continue to be supported through the further funding package I announced recently.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister of Health whether women nearing the 40 year old threshold, who missed the opportunity to get IVF treatment due to COVID-19, will no longer be eligible for treatment.

(AQW 9483/17-22)

Mr Swann: I appreciate that the delay in accessing fertility treatment due to the COVID-19 pandemic may have caused distress to those currently awaiting treatment. In order to mitigate this, the eligibility for anyone currently on the waiting list has already been extended by a year.

Mr McGrath asked the Minister of Health to detail the allied health professional workforce model which is currently being implemented in the Whiteabbey Nightingale Hospital; and what assurances he can give that the unit will be adequately resourced and staffed for patients who have had COVID-19 and require extensive rehabilitation.

(AQW 9492/17-22)

Mr Swann: I have commissioned an additional Nightingale facility on the Whiteabbey Hospital site. This will be an intermediate care facility, providing 100 additional 'step down beds'. The facility will operate under an enhanced nursing and therapies rehabilitation and step down model, which will be clinically led by Advanced Nurse Practitioners, with medical support provided by a primary care provider.

The new facility will be operational on a phased basis from late-November, with all infrastructure and equipment in place by mid-December 2020.

The availability of staff to respond to the increased demand is extremely challenging and this is exacerbated by the number of staff absent because of COVID-19. In anticipation of a second surge my Department re-opened the Workforce Appeal in September in an effort to try and build capacity again. Yet again the response has been exceptional with over 4,800 applications already made. I would encourage anyone with the relevant skills and experience who is interested in joining or returning to the health service to consider applying.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health when he will publish the evidence on which the decision to maintain the pause in shielding on 23 October 2020 was based.

(AQW 9500/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Chief Medical Officer and his team recently assessed the approach to the current risks presented by COVID-19 and their assessment is that the resumption of shielding arrangements is not necessary at this stage.

In terms of the evidence on which this decision was based, it reflects the context of a range of factors. These include greater understanding of COVID-19 and clinical outcomes, how to prevent its transmission, and appreciation of the impact of shielding on many people's physical and mental well-being. A number of important changes have taken place in the approach to managing COVID-19 and reducing its transmission since shielding was originally advised. These include a greater awareness of the importance of social distancing, the requirement to use face coverings, COVID secure workplaces and greater adherence to respiratory and hand hygiene. The statement by the Chief Medical Officer, confirming that shielding remains paused, can be found here: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/shielding-remain-paused>

The decision to retain the pause in shielding will be kept under continuous review. If in the future this position changes, further guidance will be issued and we will communicate directly with clinically extremely vulnerable people to ensure they have the information they need. In the meantime, people who are clinically extremely vulnerable should continue to scrupulously follow the advice we have given to keep themselves safe.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health how many baby scans have been conducted since the beginning of the pandemic.

(AQW 9522/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since the beginning of the pandemic there have been 14,987 booking scans carried out in Northern Ireland (1st February – 31st October 2020).

Information on other scans, including anomaly scans, is not yet available.

Mr Stalford asked the Minister of Health how many births have occurred in hospitals since the beginning of the pandemic.

(AQW 9523/17-22)

Mr Swann: Since the beginning of the pandemic there have been 16,283 births in Northern Ireland (1st February – 31st October 2020).

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the additional support in place for Health and Social Care staff in relation to (i) COVID-19 accommodation; (ii) access to food; (iii) psychological support; and (iv) additional break time areas.

(AQW 9525/17-22)

Mr Swann: A wide range of additional supports have been provided as follows

- (i) Trusts have developed facilities that provide for full isolation residential accommodation for Trust staff who stay on hospital sites and who need to isolate from their colleagues in line with track and trace and/or as quarantine accommodation for our continuing flow of international medical and nursing recruits. The staff are fully supported whilst in isolation in terms of daily care phone calls, food and laundry services etc.
- (ii) Staff continue to have access to food through the staff restaurants plus snacks from vending machines on sites. On COVID wards, where staff are restricted in their movement outside these areas, food is delivered to staff. This includes sandwiches and hot food from the patients' menus. They are also provided with tea, coffee and milk etc. Any staff quarantining or isolating as referred to above are also provided with food supplies.
- (iii) A diverse range of psychological services have been made available to staff by Trusts since the onset of COVID-19 in an attempt to meet the greatly varying needs of the workforce.

These include:

- Individual Psychological Support via Occupational Health
- A range of drop in clinics / bookable appointments
- Psychological Wellbeing Support Phone Line
- Resources via Trusts' intranet
- Team Time – a virtual space from Point of Care Foundation for teams to discuss the emotional impact of their work
- Team workshops with focus on coping with uncertainty and anxiety
- Spaces for listening – supported conversations within teams
- Team Support Framework- a flexible, bespoke and virtual team support tool.

A Health & Wellbeing SharePoint Site has also been developed jointly by BSO/PHA/HSCB. This information site was launched during the initial COVID-19 lockdown, and has had approximately 10,000 hits from staff.

Content ranges from providing guidance/advice on home working, mental and physical health, links to free stress control classes, COVID-19 support lines, financial wellbeing information, and links to external organisations such as Inspire, Aware and other Mental Health organisations which provide resources and counselling services. The site will remain as a permanent resource for staff and the content will be continually updated and developed.

- (iv) As part of Trusts' COVID-19 ongoing surge response planning, clear guidance has been developed for managers and staff on COVID-19-safe working practices.

The guidelines are based on teams working together to assess risks in every aspect of their working shift including their staff refreshment and rest facilities. The guidelines provide a range of proposed mitigations to help support staff remain COVID-19-safe whilst they take their rest breaks including identifying alternative areas in wards/departments/facilities that staff can use for their breaks in order to maintain social distancing. Visual cues and cleaning materials have been provided in each area.

Additional efforts have also been made to support local managers in their responsibilities for shared working spaces. Trusts are also mindful of the importance of ensuring that staff can use their break times to talk to their colleagues about what they are experiencing. Working together supportively as a team in these challenging times is viewed to be a key requirement, while ensuring that COVID-19-safe working practices are well understood and adopted.

In a number of hospital sites many ward and ICU family visiting rooms have been modified and given over to staff as additional rest spaces. Additional external areas have been identified and fitted with shelter and temporary heating where possible. Drop-in temporary showering and changing facilities have been provided. In some areas main restaurants are now open longer hours as break-out spaces for staff rest and refreshment.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of cases referred to the primary care COVID-19 centres for each week since they were established, broken down by time of day and each COVID-19 centre.

(AQW 9528/17-22)

Mr Swann: The number of cases referred to the primary care COVID-19 centres for each week since they were established is outlined in the table below. Information on the brake down of referrals by time of day and each COVID-19 centre is not held by the Department.

Start	Start	Week	Weekly No. of Covid Centre Contacts reported
Mon/06/Apr/20	Sun/12/Apr/20	2	590
Mon/13/Apr/20	Sun/19/Apr/20	3	969
Mon/20/Apr/20	Sun/26/Apr/20	4	890
Mon/27/Apr/20	Sun/03/May/20	5	999
Mon/04/May/20	Sun/10/May/20	6	788
Mon/11/May/20	Sun/17/May/20	7	760
Mon/18/May/20	Sun/24/May/20	8	772
Mon/25/May/20	Sun/31/May/20	9	578
Mon/01/Jun/20	Sun/07/Jun/20	10	593
Mon/08/Jun/20	Sun/14/Jun/20	11	495
Mon/15/Jun/20	Sun/21/Jun/20	12	524
Mon/22/Jun/20	Sun/28/Jun/20	13	473
Mon/29/Jun/20	Sun/05/Jul/20	14	470
Mon/06/Jul/20	Sun/12/Jul/20	15	426
Mon/13/Jul/20	Sun/19/Jul/20	16	396
Mon/20/Jul/20	Sun/26/Jul/20	17	425
Mon/27/Jul/20	Sun/02/Aug/20	18	440
Mon/03/Aug/20	Sun/09/Aug/20	19	488
Mon/10/Aug/20	Sun/16/Aug/20	20	506
Mon/17/Aug/20	Sun/23/Aug/20	21	623
Mon/24/Aug/20	Sun/30/Aug/20	22	646
Mon/31/Aug/20	Sun/06/Sep/20	23	711
Mon/07/Sep/20	Sun/13/Sep/20	24	1017
Mon/14/Sep/20	Sun/20/Sep/20	25	812
Mon/21/Sep/20	Sun/27/Sep/20	26	712
Mon/28/Sep/20	Sun/04/Oct/20	27	770
Mon/05/Oct/20	Sun/11/Oct/20	28	906
Mon/12/Oct/20	Sun/18/Oct/20	29	907
Mon/19/Oct/20	Sun/25/Oct/20	30	1045
Mon/26/Oct/20	Sun/01/Nov/20	31	891

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to detail the dates and content of any representations or submissions, his Department made to the Department of Health and Social Care regarding the implementation of the Falsified Medicines Directive.

(AQW 9529/17-22)

Mr Swann: It is not possible to detail all the dates and content of all representations made to the Department of Health and Social Care regarding the implementation of the Falsified Medicines Directive as these take place on a frequent basis and cover all areas in relation to the delivery of Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland following the end of the Transition Period.

My officials continue to brief me as to progress on these matters, and in turn, I and my Department provide regular updates to both the Northern Ireland Executive and the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Health.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust spent the money they raised on car parking charges for the 2019/20 financial year.

(AQW 9558/17-22)

Mr Swann: The income generated in 2019/20 from car parking across the South Eastern Trust has been spent on the operational upkeep of car parking facilities including the maintenance costs of parking assets, such as barriers, CCTV and pay stations.

In addition, the income was used to enhance security on hospital sites and to fund a number of travel planning initiatives such as bike shelters, additional off-site parking capacity, staff shuttlebuses, maintenance of electric pool cars, the travel plan coordinator and the Trust Shop Mobility schemes on the Lagan Valley and Ulster Hospital sites which facilitate vehicle to hospital transfer of patients with mobility issues and disability.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how much the Chief Executive for the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust paid in car parking charges on Trust grounds in the 2019/20 financial year.

(AQW 9559/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Chief Executive of the South Eastern Trust paid £180 for car parking in the year 2019/20 as a full time employee.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health why full free car parking charges, without conditions, for all health staff have not been introduced at the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 9561/17-22)

Mr Swann: The South Eastern Trust has confirmed that from 5 November 2020 it will be reinstating the same parking arrangements that were available to staff during the initial wave of the Covid-19 pandemic – i.e. - free car parking and access for all staff. In line with my instruction this will be in place up to and including 31 March 2021.

Staff who have paid for car parking at machines will be reimbursed for the period 29 October 2020 (when I announced free staff car parking for this wave of the Covid response) to 4 November 2020.

However, as patients and visitors continue to access services on hospital sites, the Trust is encouraging staff to use the free off-site car parks and avail of the free and enhanced park and ride services available at the Lagan Valley and Ulster hospitals.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister of Health when the Gender Review Pathway group will finish and publish its findings and recommendations.

(AQW 9566/17-22)

Mr Swann: The work of the Gender Identity Pathway Review Group was paused earlier this year to allow staff to quite rightly focus their efforts on dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, this important work has since restarted.

Every effort is being made to progress the review in a timely manner with a view to the group reporting its findings and recommendations to my Department by summer 2021 although this is predicated on the availability of staff during the ongoing pandemic.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health to detail the contributory factors used to estimate how much it takes to run a hospital bed.

(AQW 9582/17-22)

Mr Swann: In estimating unit costs, trusts must attempt to capture their full operating costs and apportion these appropriately across programmes of care and clinical specialties. There are therefore a large number of individual elements included in the estimated cost, but the main factors are listed below:

Direct costs:

- Medical and nursing staff, operating theatres, pharmacy, equipment.
- Medical, paramedical and diagnostics:
- Labs, radiography, physiotherapy, occupational and other therapies, social work, dietetics.

Overheads:

- Catering, laundry and cleaning, corporate admin, medical records, energy, buildings maintenance, capital costs.

The daily cost of a hospital bed can vary greatly between clinical specialties and also between hospital sites as different conditions require very different levels of medical input, and some care may be provided more in outpatient or day case settings rather than in the inpatient setting.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of home visits carried out by GP practices for each week between January 2019 and October 2019, broken down by GP federation.

(AQW 9584/17-22)

Mr Swann: This information is not available. GPs are independent contractors and this information is not held centrally.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health for an update on the feasibility of outcome-based payment for cancer medicines. (AQW 9608/17-22)

Mr Swann: A three phase research study on outcomes-based payments for cancer medicines is being taken forward in England by the Office for Health Economics, RAND Europe and King's College London, in conjunction with Greater Manchester Health Partnership. Early work has been published and phase two will now examine key uncertainties and barriers that have been identified in the first phase report. If taken forward, the study's third phase will carry out a live pilot of an outcomes-based payments scheme within Greater Manchester, based on the principles set out in the first phase report. The implications of the study can be considered once the research has concluded.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister of Health for an update on the availability of flu vaccines to complete the full vaccination programme. (AQW 9611/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is sufficient vaccine with school health teams, in central storage, and in the manufacturer supply chain to complete the schools flu vaccination programme.

Of the flu vaccine used for those aged 65 and over, almost all stock has been distributed to GPs. A small amount remains in central storage and additional stock is due to arrive next week. Taken together, this amounts to 296,000 doses which should be sufficient to complete the vaccination programme for those aged 65 and over who wish to receive the vaccine.

In relation to the vaccine used in adults under the age of 65, all stock has been distributed to GPs, Health Trusts and community pharmacies. There are no stocks of this vaccine remaining in central storage; however, a further 192,800 doses are due to arrive within the next two weeks.

The first report on uptake rates of vaccine across the public seasonal flu programme up until 31 October is due with my department by the second week of November. This will provide detail of available unused stock remaining within the supply system at local level.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 8262/17-22, whether he will publish the agenda and minutes of the Transformation Management Board in future and those of the previous meetings. (AQW 9635/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department already publishes a weekly summary of the issues discussed at each meeting of the Management Board. The summaries are available at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/health-and-social-care-chairs-forum-weekly-updates>.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of the impact that COVID-19 is having on student nurses and allied health profession students in their studies and clinical placements. (AQW 9636/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department is very aware of the impact of Covid-19 on the Health and Social Care workforce including nursing and allied health professional students (AHP).

COVID-19 has had an impact on nursing and AHP undergraduate programmes and mitigating measures are in place. We remain fully committed to safeguarding students' progression through their pre-registration education and training.

My officials maintain regular contact with the Universities and Health and Social Care Trusts to ensure that all students are supported in their studies and whilst on clinical placements.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 8702/17-22, what formal correspondence his Department has had with the Nursing and Midwifery Council regarding emergency registration arrangements due to COVID-19. (AQW 9637/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has had no recent formal correspondence with the Nursing and Midwifery Council regarding Emergency registration arrangements due to Covid – 19.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of Muckamore Abbey staff who have (i) been cautionary suspended; (ii) had their suspension lifted; (iii) been re-suspended; and (iv) charged, broken down by (a) Trust; and (b) agency staff. (AQW 9640/17-22)

Mr Swann: Responsibility for placing staff on precautionary suspension rests with the Belfast Trust as the employing body.

As of 6 November, (i) 64 Muckamore Abbey staff have been placed on precautionary suspension; (ii) 3 staff have had their suspension lifted; and (iii) 1 staff member has been re-suspended. (iv) Decisions on charging staff are taken by the PSNI as part of the ongoing criminal investigation.

All the staff placed on precautionary suspension are Trust staff.

As of 6 November, (i) 15 Muckamore Abbey staff have been absent from 0-6 months; (ii) 9 staff have been absent for 6-12 months; (iii) 20 staff have been absent for 12-18 months; and (iv) 17 staff have been absent for 18-24 months.

All the absent staff are Trust staff.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 7495/17-22, to report on the experience of patients suffering from long Covid; and the lessons to be learnt from that experience.

(AQW 9647/17-22)

Mr Swann: There is accumulating evidence to suggest that people who have had both mild and severe symptoms of COVID-19 can experience long-term health effects such as problems with breathing, chronic fatigue and stress.

Research to evaluate the long-term health and psychosocial effects of COVID-19 in affected persons is ongoing.

The National Institute for Care and Health Excellence (NICE) is developing a guideline on long Covid which is due to be published by the end of the year. The guideline will address, among other things, a formal definition of the disease, how to identify on-going symptoms and a definition of best practice investigation and treatment options to support the management of the condition across diverse communities.

When published, the guideline will be fully considered alongside the wider body of emerging research to inform future policy and service decisions in Northern Ireland.

Ms Flynn asked the Minister of Health for his assessment of whether the allied health professional workforce model which is being implemented in the Whiteabbey Nightingale Hospital will be fit for purpose for patients who have had COVID-19 and require extensive rehabilitation.

(AQW 9656/17-22)

Mr Swann: I am content that the allied health professions workforce model that is being implemented in the Whiteabbey Nightingale Hospital will be fit for purpose for patients who have had COVID-19 and are requiring rehabilitation services.

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many nursing vacancies there currently are in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 9660/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of registered nursing vacancies actively being recruited to at 30 June 2020 in the South Eastern and Southern HSC Trusts is detailed in the table below.

HSC Trust	Registered nursing vacancies actively being recruited to at 30 June 2020
South Eastern	298
Southern	249

Source: Recruitment & Selection Shared Services (BSO) & HSC Trusts

Mr Easton asked the Minister of Health how many nursing vacancies there currently are in the in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust.

(AQW 9661/17-22)

Mr Swann: Information on the number of registered nursing vacancies actively being recruited to at 30 June 2020 in the South Eastern and Southern HSC Trusts is detailed in the table below.

HSC Trust	Registered nursing vacancies actively being recruited to at 30 June 2020
South Eastern	298
Southern	249

Source: Recruitment & Selection Shared Services (BSO) & HSC Trusts

Ms Dillon asked the Minister of Health how much has been spent in total by his Department on funding for the Family Drug and Alcohol Court (i) for each of the last three years; and (ii) the projected spend for 2020/21.

(AQW 9681/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Early Intervention Transformation Programme (EITP) was a cross-departmental Delivering Social Change Atlantic Philanthropies Signature Programme. EITP was funded by the Delivering Social Change Programme, the Atlantic

Philanthropies and jointly by the Departments of Health, Justice, Education and the Departments for Communities and the Economy.

The EITP provided a total of £461k funding to the Family Drug and Alcohol Court pilot delivered by the Department of Justice and the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. The breakdown per financial year is as follows:

Year	Funding (£)
17/18	£173,652
18/19	£286,962
19/20	0

The Family Drug and Alcohol Court pilot concluded in March 2019 and EITP formally closed in November 2019. No further funding has been provided under the EITP since the 2018/19 financial year.

Mrs Cameron asked the Minister of Health what support is available to assist care homes with significant increased administrative pressures.

(AQW 9699/17-22)

Mr Swann: As indicated in my announcement regarding an additional funding package on 22 October 2020, you will be aware I have set aside important support for care home staff including £27.3m of additional funding for the sector.

This £27.3m funding package is in addition to previously announced support packages. £9m of the funding will be paid directly to care homes to reflect the costs of:

- the rolling programme of testing for both residents and staff;
- the costs of overseeing safe visiting and setting up care partner arrangements; and
- the increased management time needed to oversee homes.

Care Providers will not need to apply for this funding which will be allocated based on the number of residents each has, with a set amount per home to recognise some of the additional management overheads.

The remaining funds can be claimed back by homes to support additional staffing costs (for instance, because of more acutely unwell residents or the need to support individuals self isolating), continue with enhanced cleaning and enhanced sick pay, support changes to the physical environment (to support safe visiting, for instance) and meet other increased costs, such as IT.

Trusts are currently working to start allocating this funding and will provide more details in due course.

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health why the number of beds listed as available on the departmental COVID-19 dashboard fell from 3,680 to 2,903 when the 18 October figure is compared with the 28 October figure.

(AQW 9705/17-22)

Mr Swann: From 18th October onwards, the methodology for calculating bed occupancy changed. In order to take into account the dynamic nature of bed modelling and the flow of patients in and out of hospital over the course of a day, the revised methodology now includes patients where a 'Decision to Admit' (DTA) has been made, e.g. from an Emergency Department, thereby projecting more accurate occupancy levels across hospital sites. Trusts are also being asked to provide additional Admissions data as at 9am on the morning of reporting to help assess operational pressures which are impacting upon bed occupancy. The revised methodology now includes adult only acute and geriatric inpatient beds at the 12 main hospital sites as presented on the Dashboard; it excludes Paediatric, Obstetric, Mental Health and Day Beds, as well as beds in smaller hospital sites which may have been included in the previous methodology. Data prior to 18th October should not be compared with data from this date, however the time series has been retained to demonstrate the trend in COVID-19 occupancy levels. Further information on the methodology used for calculating occupancy levels pre and post 18th October can be found within the 'G&A Notes' page of the Department's COVID-19 Dashboard.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health how many staff have been allocated to the Whiteabbey Nightingale facility to date, broken broken down by (i) the service; and (ii) the hospital that staff have been redeployed from.

(AQW 9715/17-22)

Mr Swann: As at 6 November 2020, the following staff have been sourced for Whiteabbey Nightingale Hospital. Recruitment is ongoing to fill the remaining vacancies within the staffing model.

Role	Model WTE	Sourced WTE	Service	Hospital
B8C AD Project Manager	1	1	NHSCT Strategic Development and Business Services Division	N/A

Role	Model WTE	Sourced WTE	Service	Hospital
B8B Workforce Project Manager	1	1	NHSCT HR, OD and Corporate Communications Division	N/A
B8A AHP lead	1	1	NHSCT Nursing and User Experience Division	AAH
B8A Assistant Clinical Services Manager	1	1	NHSCT Medicine and Emergency Medicine	AAH
B8A Advanced Nurse Practitioner	2.55	2	NHSCT Cancer Services NHSCT Acute Assessment Unit	AAH AAH
B7 registered nurse	1	1	MEM Division	WAH
B6 registered nurse	5.56	1	NHSCT MEM Division	WAH
B5 registered nurse	18.16	12.6	7.08wte NHSCT MEM 0.96wte NHSCT internal voluntary transfer policy 4.56wte agency block bookings	WAH AAH external
B3 unregistered nurse	3.33	3	NHSCT MEM	WAH
B2 unregistered nurse	7.77	5.66	NHSCT MEM	WAH
B6 Occupational Therapy	1.49	1	internal NHSCT redeployment	tbc
B4 Occupational Therapy	2.48	1	internal NHSCT redeployment	Tbc
B6 Physiotherapy	1.74	1	Community Rehabilitation Service	WAH
B3 Physiotherapy	2.48	1	MEM Physiotherapy Service	WAH
B5 Radiography	1.74	1	1wte agency	external
B2 Portering	1.5	1.5	NHSCT Support Services	WAH
B2 Domestic Cleaning Services	4.33	4.33	NHSCT Support Services	WAH
B2 Catering	3	3	NHSCT Support Services	WAH
B3 Catering	1.42	1.42	NHSCT Support Services	WAH
B2 Laundry worker	0.24	0.24	By additional hours NHSCT Support Services	WAH

Key:

AAH	Antrim Area Hospital
AHP	Allied Health Professional
MEM	Medicine and Emergency Medicine Division
WAH	Whiteabbey Area Hospital

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of Muckamore Abbey staff that have been off due to ongoing investigations for between (i) 0-6 months; (ii) 6-12 months; (iii) 12-18 months; and (iv) 18-24 months, broken down by (a) Health and Social Care Trust staff; and (b) agency staff.

(AQW 9719/17-22)

Mr Swann: Responsibility for placing staff on precautionary suspension rests with the Belfast Trust as the employing body.

As of 6 November, (i) 64 Muckamore Abbey staff have been placed on precautionary suspension; (ii) 3 staff have had their suspension lifted; and (iii) 1 staff member has been re-suspended. (iv) Decisions on charging staff are taken by the PSNI as part of the ongoing criminal investigation.

All the staff placed on precautionary suspension are Trust staff.

As of 6 November, (i) 15 Muckamore Abbey staff have been absent from 0-6 months; (ii) 9 staff have been absent for 6-12 months; (iii) 20 staff have been absent for 12-18 months; and (iv) 17 staff have been absent for 18-24 months.

All the absent staff are Trust staff.

Miss Woods asked the Minister of Health (i) when the final report and recommendations of the Maternity Strategy Implementation Group will be published; and (ii) how it will be made available to relevant stakeholders.

(AQW 9726/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Maternity Strategy Implementation Group submitted its end of strategy report to the Department's Chief Medical Officer and Chief Nursing Officer in summer 2020. The report summarises the progress in implementing the Strategy for Maternity Care in Northern Ireland 2012-2018.

My Department's ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that the consideration of the report has been somewhat delayed, but as soon as is possible we will complete that work, and if appropriate publish the report.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister of Health for an update on the recruitment of surgical staff to fill vacant posts at Daisy Hill Hospital.

(AQW 9733/17-22)

Mr Swann: The general Surgical Department in Daisy Hill Hospital has funding for 6 consultant surgeons. Currently there are 5 substantive and one locum surgeon in post.

Recognising this position is set to change pre-Christmas, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust has recently made offers to 3 locum surgeons who were deemed to be suitable. Two have accepted and will commence with the Trust at the end of November 2020.

The Trust is also intending to advertise three permanent posts in early December.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health (i) how many under-18s have downloaded the StopCovidNI app; (ii) how many under-18s have reported symptoms through the StopCovidNI app; and (iii) for his assessment of the effectiveness of making the StopCovidNI app available for under-18s.

(AQW 9739/17-22)

Mr Swann: In line with ICO guidance and GDPR requirements, personal information such as age is not collected by the "STOPCovid NI" app. Neither are symptoms reported on nor checked via the 'StopCOVID NI' app.

However the 'COVIDCare NI, and online symptom checker app does record symptom queries. In the period since the latest version of the 'StopCOVID NI' app was launched, the 'COVIDCare NI' symptom checker app has processed 41,456 symptom checks. 4,134 of those symptom checks related to persons aged under 18.

The StopCovidNI proximity app and COVIDCareNI symptom checker app support the work to break the chains of transmission of the virus and guide people of all ages to appropriate treatments.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister of Health (i) how many people are currently on the waiting list to see an Ear, Nose and Throat consultant; and (ii) how long on average are people waiting for an appointment.

(AQW 9740/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department publishes National Statistics on Hospital Waiting Times on a quarterly basis. The latest published position is June 2020, with the September 2020 publication due for release on 26th November 2020. These publications can be found at: <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/topics/dhssps-statistics-and-research/hospital-waiting-times-statistics>

However, to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on hospital waiting times, my Department has also been publishing provisional management information on a monthly basis. These reports can be found at:

<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/interim-waiting-times-reports>

The data provided within this answer is based on the provisional position as at 30th September 2020 and is therefore subject to change.

At 30th September 2020, 40,763 patients were waiting for a first Ear, Nose and Throat consultant led outpatient appointment. Table 1 to follow shows how long patients currently on the waiting list have been waiting to date.

At 30th September 2020, 11,363 patients were waiting for an inpatient/day case appointment within the Ear, Nose and Throat Specialty. Table 2 shows how long patients currently on the waiting list have been waiting to date. All of these patients were still on the waiting lists at 30th September 2020.

These data do not indicate how long patients waited for an ENT appointment as they are still on the waiting lists, but rather presents how long they have waited to date.

Table 1: ENT waiting times for a first consultant led outpatient appointment at 30th September 2020

Specialty	Number of weeks waiting at 30th September 2020							Total number waiting	Average weeks waiting
	0-6	>6-9	>9-12	>12-15	>15-18	>18-52	>52		
ENT	2,800	928	727	750	564	12,461	22,533	40,763	67.3

Table 2: ENT waiting times for an inpatient/day case appointment at 30th September 2020

Specialty	Number of weeks waiting at 30th September 2020						Total number waiting	Average weeks waiting
	0-6	>6-13	>13-21	>21-26	>26-52	>52		
ENT	353	219	121	50	2,989	7,631	11,363	93.8

Ms Ennis asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 8730/17-22, how many baby and child deaths occurred in each year since 2016.

(AQW 9752/17-22)

Mr Swann: Figures on baby and child deaths registered in Northern Ireland are the responsibility of the Department of Finance, and can be found here: <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/death-statistics>

Mr McNulty asked the Minister of Health to detail the number of hours support provided to children with Special Educational Needs in terms of (i) physiotherapy; (ii) occupational therapy; and (iii) speech and language therapy in (a) September 2019; (b) October 2019; and (c) October 2020.

(AQW 9765/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Special Educational Needs status is not routinely captured on Health and Social Care systems. The requested information is therefore not available as it can only be obtained through a manual trawl of thousands of individual children's files, and so could only be provided at disproportionate cost.

Mr Beattie asked the Minister of Health (i) whether it is the current policy of his Department to make Northern Ireland a trauma-informed community; and (ii) if so, how will he achieve that.

(AQW 9776/17-22)

Mr Swann: My Department has been instrumental in establishing the Northern Ireland Trauma Informed Practice Steering Group. This is a cross-Departmental, Inter-Agency and Multi-Disciplinary Group that has the strategic vision of making Northern Ireland a community and workforce that is aware of the impact of Trauma on children's outcomes and is able to respond effectively. The Steering Group has adopted a Logic Model for Trauma Informed Practice in Northern Ireland to help translate a number of defined activities and outputs into improved outcomes in response to trauma. Funding from the Early Intervention Transformation Fund has been used to develop the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland Trauma Informed Practice Team.

Mr G Kelly asked the Minister of Health (i) whether he is aware that, following a job evaluation process of portering staff at RVH, the outcome was that they would be classed as being Band 2; and (ii) whether he will intervene to resolve the issue of the date when backpay will be awarded from.

(AQW 9800/17-22)

Mr Swann: The Belfast Trust's HR department have engaged with local management and Trades Unions and are agreeing a way forward in line with the Agenda for Change process. This will include agreement with Trades Unions on the appropriate date for back pay, to be based on the point at which these staff began to work at this level.

Mr Clarke asked the Minister of Health to detail the total staff cost at Muckamore Abbey of those who have been off due to the ongoing investigations between (i) 0 to 6 months; (ii) 6 to 12 months; (iii) 12 to 18 months; (iv) 18 to 24 months, broken down by (a) Health and Social Care Trust staff; and (b) agency staff.

(AQW 9812/17-22)

Mr Swann: The costs requested are set out in the table below. The figures represent the approximate total pay cost of the staff who are currently suspended from the point of their suspension to the end of October this year.

Months Suspended	0-6	6-12	12-18	18-24
Total Pay Cost	£30,307	£309,372	£833,409	£381,586

All the absent staff are Trust staff.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, pursuant to AQW 8954/17-22, and in light of England's decision to reintroduce shielding, to detail (i) his rationale for not reintroducing shielding in Northern Ireland; and (ii) the criteria for reintroducing shielding.

(AQW 9818/17-22)

Mr Swann: In response to the infection rate in Northern Ireland, a range of robust new restrictions were introduced on 16 October. As part of this, following careful consideration, the advice of the Chief Medical Officer was that shielding should remain paused. In light of the new restrictions, updated advice for the Clinical Extremely Vulnerable has been published online.

While I am aware of the new measures introduced in England, I am clear that the right approach to protect our community is through measures tailored for the conditions in Northern Ireland.

The position on shielding will be kept under continual review and I will not hesitate to act to protect vulnerable people, including the reintroduction of additional protections for the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable, should this become necessary again.

Mr Gildernew asked the Minister of Health to list the services within each hospital that have had to stop temporarily due to COVID-19.

(AQW 9876/17-22)

Mr Swann: I refer the member to AQW 9133/17-22, answered on 30 October 2020.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister of Health when AQW 7595/17-22 will be answered.

(AQW 9907/17-22)

Mr Swann: The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) provides national guidance and advice designed to support health service commissioners and staff who are considering using new medical devices and other medical or diagnostic technologies to improve healthcare. NICE has a global reputation for rigour, independence and objectivity, which is informed by the best available scientific evidence.

NICE have confirmed that they do not currently make any recommendations on the use of the Cytosponge-TFF3 test in any of their guidelines. However, they are in the process of developing briefing on the use of the Cytosponge-TFF3 test which when published will inform the potential use of this technology in the National Health Service and in Health and Social Care, Northern Ireland.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Health whether he will review the policy restricting family visitation for end of life hospital patients.

(AQO 1072/17-22)

Mr Swann: A key plank in our approach to the COVID crisis is that no one should die alone. Wherever feasible patients approaching the end of life should be afforded the opportunity to spend time with family members and/or loved ones. This is applicable to all areas of care.

To reduce the distress for families and support decision making for staff dealing with circumstances in which end of life care is being provided, my Department has issued updated guidance which recognises end of life care as being an exceptional circumstance in which restricted visitation to a patient will be permitted regardless of the Regional Alert Level Position at that time, but at all times balancing the public health and infection control guidance with the need for compassionate care at end of life.

I acknowledge the anguish of all families who find themselves in this position and it is with great sadness that it has not been possible to permit a higher number of visitors and frequency of visits during the patient's palliative care and end of life period.

Very difficult decisions have had to be made to provide a balance of measures required to minimise infection transmission into and within hospitals with the rights of patients to have access to loved ones in their time of need.

Ms Ennis asked the Minister of Health what progress is being made to provide an accessible paediatric pathology service.

(AQO 1073/17-22)

Mr Swann: The full range of paediatric pathology services is available to parents from across Northern Ireland, however it remains extremely challenging across these islands to recruit into this highly specialised service, and as Members will aware it has therefore been necessary to deliver these services from Alder Hey Children's Hospital in Liverpool since January 2019.

I remain committed to the provision of a local service in the longer term. Unfortunately, despite numerous national and international recruitment campaigns which remain open-ended, and ongoing efforts by the HSC to encourage trainees into this specialty, this has not been possible to date.

I am therefore also committed to exploring the potential for an all-island network model to deliver these services in the longer term. However, it has not been possible to progress this matter further at present, due to the need to reprioritise resources in both jurisdictions, to protect essential healthcare services for the duration of the pandemic, and to free up stretched resources.

Mr Speaker, I fully appreciate the importance of these services to families. In the meantime my Department's priority is to ensure that bereaved parents continue to have access to the highest quality service, one that provides not only the clinical answers and the rapid reporting that families expect, but also the care and support that they require and deserve. I am assured from the initial feedback my Department has received that the interim arrangement with Alder Hey provides this.

Mr Catney asked the Minister of Health for an update on the work of the Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland.
(AQO 1074/17-22)

Mr Swann: Professor Siobhan O'Neill took up the post of interim Mental Health Champion, on 10 August 2020. During this relatively short period of time she has focused on raising awareness of the need to care for our mental health and highlighted the support available. To raise awareness she has spoken to a wide range of media across TV, radio, print, podcasts and online, participating in public discussion about topical issues.

Professor O'Neill has met with a broad range of stakeholders across charity, education, research, commissioning and health and wellbeing, as well as undertaking public advocacy work across Departments, meeting Ministers and officials, groups and panels to gain an insight into the current situation.

Professor O'Neill sits on the Department's Mental Health Strategic Reform Board and Strategic Advisory Panel, relaying views of stakeholders with whom she has met, to inform the development of the Mental Health Strategy.

To address Covid-19 mental health concerns, Professor O'Neill has also been involved in the delivery of a regional social media campaign to promote positive mental health and wellbeing of people across the Public Health Agency, NI Health and Social Care Trusts and Northern Ireland Ambulance Service.

Mr Irwin asked the Minister of Health when he will amend the restrictions on visiting maternity wards to permit greater access.

(AQO 1075/17-22)

Mr Swann: The current visiting guidance took effect from 23 September 2020.

While this guidance is kept under constant review, there is no current intention to change the existing visiting restrictions, which are in place to limit the risk of the virus spreading.

Dr Archibald asked the Minister of Health what steps he is taking to increase pillar 1 COVID-19 testing capacity.

(AQO 1076/17-22)

Mr Swann: In Northern Ireland, Pillar 1 testing is delivered via the Health and Social Care (HSC) laboratories (including the Regional Virology Laboratory) and through the Scientific Advisory Consortium which includes Queen's University, University of Ulster, the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute and Almac.

Since the beginning of the pandemic Pillar 1 testing capacity in Northern Ireland has increased significantly.

My Department continues to work very closely with this network of local partners to enhance testing capability and capacity and there are active plans underway to develop capacity further.

Optimising available testing capacity remains a key priority for me and for my officials in the weeks and months ahead.

Mr Blair asked the Minister of Health what steps he is taking to ensure that care homes are prepared for a second wave of COVID-19 this winter.

(AQO 1077/17-22)

Mr Swann: There are a number of actions and measures we are taking to support and protect care homes as Covid-19 continues to spread in the community and as infection levels in homes start to rise. These include:-

- A revised surge plan for care homes, informed by the Rapid Learning Initiative, which contains 56 actions. Actions in the surge plan are being delivered by the PHA, HSCB, Trusts, Department and care homes themselves. Progress against the surge plan is being overseen by a regional Adult Social Care Surge Group, jointly chaired by the Chief Social Worker and Chief Nursing Officer;
- Continuing supply of PPE, continuing access to free training through NISCC and CEC, ongoing assistance through Trust service support teams, continuing support from the RQIA and ongoing expert guidance from the PHA;
- Trusts, the HSCB, PHA and Department are monitoring returns provided by care homes through the RQIA's care home portal to identify key trends and particular homes which may need further assistance. In addition, this data is used to monitor our regional surge level for care homes;
- From 3 August a rolling programme of testing commenced for all residents and staff in homes which did not have a confirmed outbreak of the virus. This involved testing all staff on a fortnightly basis and all residents on a monthly basis. My officials will continue to actively monitor and assess current and emerging science relating to Covid-19, to inform our approach to testing in care homes;
- I have put in place a number of measures to provide financial support to care homes. I announced up to £6.5m in April to support care homes with additional costs and up to a further £11.7m in June to support enhanced sick pay, enhanced

cleaning, and purchase of equipment. I recently announced a further package of up to £27m, in addition to previously announced support. In addition, an income guarantee to help provide homes stability remains in place;

- In addition to this funding, care homes have been provided with over 48 million items of PPE, at a cost of over £16m. We also continue to connect smaller local providers with homes, so that they can purchase their own PPE.
- During the first surge Trusts also provided more than 26,000 hours of free staff time to work in care homes and fill gaps in rotas. Each Trust has a dedicated care home support team in place provide advice, guidance and training to care homes to enable them to meet the care needs of residents. In addition, we have provided funding support for enhanced and additional environmental cleaning and we are considering the case to create dedicated training support for cleaning staff in care homes. Proposals are also being developed by HSC Trusts to expand their dedicated teams of infection prevention and control nurses, and this will include support for care homes.

I have recently relaunched our workforce appeal and remain clear that Trusts should consider how individuals identified through this mechanism can be placed in the independent sector – subject to all the appropriate risk assessments being in place.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister of Health what additional support he has provided to young families and children to cope with mental ill health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQO 1078/17-22)

Mr Swann: The COVID-19 pandemic has brought with it countless unprecedented challenges for children and young people and undoubtedly the mental health of many will be impacted as a result. It is therefore important that young people and their families take care of their mental and emotional wellbeing during this time; and know how, where and when to get help.

In response to the pandemic, I published a Mental Health Action Plan and a COVID-19 Mental Health Response Plan in May 2020, with specific actions focused on the mental health needs of children and young people.

The Minding Your Head website has been revamped in response to the pandemic; it contains information to help individuals and families look after their own mental health and to support others, including a link to online support such as the HSC Apps Library.

Much work has also been done by the Children & Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) to produce key resources for children and young people, specifically in relation to managing the impact of COVID 19.

It is important to stress that children and adolescent mental health services continue to operate throughout the pandemic, and I would encourage anyone who has concerns about their mental health to seek help and speak to their GP.

It is also worth highlighting that my Department is leading on a cross-Government Action Plan to take forward agreed recommendations from the Children Commissioner's 'Still Waiting' Report, to improve mental health services and support for children and young people, where resources allow. Implementation of the 'Still Waiting' Action Plan was included as an action in the Mental Health Action Plan.

Actions in the 'Still Waiting' report include the implementation of Primary Care Multidisciplinary Teams with mental health practitioners attached to GPs across the region. MDTs have played a key role in the emergency response during the past number of months, with the mental health practitioners and practice based social work staff proving particularly valuable at this time.

I understand work is almost complete on the Department of Education's Framework for Children & Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education – the main emphasis of which is to support schools to promote emotional health and wellbeing at a universal level, through a holistic, multi-disciplinary approach. The framework is also focussed on providing early and enhanced support for those children and young people who may be at risk or showing signs of needing further help. While DE have been leading on the Framework, DoH have been particularly involved in the mental health aspects. With this in mind, I have recently committed recurrent funding of £1.5 million to help support this important work.

Mr Humphrey asked the Minister of Health how he will ensure that cancer treatments are not negatively impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQO 1079/17-22)

Mr Swann: COVID-19 has undoubtedly had a severe impact on diagnostic and cancer treatment services, however, urgent cancer diagnostics and treatment were delivered during the first wave and will continue to be delivered during this second surge, as safely as possible in COVID-19 safe spaces and using the independent sector hospitals where appropriate.

However, we should be under no illusions that these are challenging times. Services are already coming under pressure and as the number of COVID-19 positive inpatients increases, this will have a negative impact on our ability to maintain other services. The position relating to services in Trusts is a dynamic position and is related to staff absence as well as the rising numbers of COVID-19 inpatients. It is therefore not possible to state definitively which services are being or will be impacted. Staff in all areas are continuing to work as hard as they can to maintain and prioritise services. If services do need to be postponed, this will only happen where absolutely necessary and they will be rescheduled as quickly as possible on a prioritised basis.

One of my primary aims in the difficult weeks ahead will be to ensure the continued delivery high quality diagnosis and cancer services, providing of course that it is safe to do so.

Mr Butler asked the Minister of Health for an update on the elective care centre at Lagan Valley Hospital.
(AQO 1080/17-22)

Mr Swann: Considerable progress has been made at the Day Procedure Centre at Lagan Valley Hospital. The Day Procedure Centre is currently providing much needed support to other Trusts in response to the downturn in elective services during this surge period, particularly for regional cancer diagnostic work.

Urology, general surgery, ENT, gynaecology and varicose vein day procedure lists are already underway or are planned. So far, there has been positive feedback from staff and patients alike. Engagement continues with a range of other surgical specialties to identify and prioritise procedure that are suitable for the Day Procedure Centre at Lagan Valley Hospital.

The service delivery position in Lagan Valley and across the HSC is dynamic and is related to staffing levels and the impact of rising numbers of Covid-19 patients.

Department for Infrastructure

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure when (i) driving tests; and (ii) driving lessons can recommence.
(AQW 9141/17-22)

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): The Driver & Vehicle Agency's (DVA) booking system for driving tests reopened on 5 October and thousands of bookings have been made. At this time the DVA has not released any driving tests slots beyond January 2021.

Driving instructors have been included in the Executive's regulations on businesses that must close until 13 November to help stop the spread of Covid-19. Following this Executive decision driving tests will also cease over this period of increased restrictions based on public health and scientific advice. The booking service is now closed and the DVA will contact those who had their driving tests cancelled to advise them how they can reschedule their appointments.

The DVA acknowledges that learner drivers are keen to take their driving tests at the earliest opportunity and will continue to work hard to maximise the availability of test slots. However, all driving test services across these islands are experiencing high demand with longer than usual waiting times. Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the proposed Narrow Water bridge at Warrenpoint.
(AQW 9424/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am committed to progressing the long awaited transformative, iconic, Narrow Water Bridge. The Narrow Water Bridge is a commitment in New Decade, New Approach and is currently at options analysis stage and my officials are working to update an economic appraisal of options for development in collaboration with Southern colleagues in the Department for Transport.

Work has included significant stakeholder engagement and most recently, in September, I met with representatives from the Narrow Water Bridge Community Network and local political representatives to discuss the local support for a bridge to link the communities on both sides of the lough and how to maximise the multiple opportunities this project would deliver for local communities and our wider island economy.

I have recently engaged with Minister Ryan on the Narrow Water Bridge at the North South Ministerial Council on 7 October.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether a feasibility study has been carried out for a proposed rail link to Belfast international Airport.
(AQW 9425/17-22)

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, including connectivity to our airports.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many Translink bus runs have been cancelled in North Down due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 9426/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on Translink services since March 2020 when I took the decision to reduce services on the bus and train network.

Whilst service changes have been made in the North Down area, there have been no bus cancellations.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in light of the latest accident on the A48 Cotton Road/Newtownards Road where a young girl was knocked down, whether she will now reduce the speed limit to 40mph.

(AQW 9427/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I was very sorry to hear reports of the collision involving a pedestrian on the Cotton Road and I hope the young person is recovering from her traumatic experience. I have asked officials to contact the PSNI when their investigation is complete to obtain further information relating to this collision and to consider any emerging factors relevant to my Department.

Regarding your request for a reduction in speed limit at this location, as previously advised in our recent correspondence on this matter, I can confirm that I have asked my officials to carry out a speed limit review along this stretch of road and to advise you of the outcome when this has been completed.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will consider making The Point, Groomsport, an adopted road.

(AQW 9428/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The basis for adopting private roads or laneways is similar to that which applies to streets in new housing developments, in that they all must be brought up to the required standard before adoption and subsequent maintenance by my Department.

In order for my Department to agree to the adoption of The Point, significant improvements would need to be carried out by or on behalf of the frontagers, to include full road construction with a footpath on one side, provision of a turning head, road drainage and upgraded street lighting.

If these works were completed then my Department would adopt the road providing:

- 1 the majority of frontagers consented to and requested in writing that the street should become a public road; and
- 2 appropriate planning permission through Council Planning was in place with any associated costs in bringing The Point up to adoption standard, including planning, design and construction costs, borne by the frontagers.

My officials are always willing to provide whatever guidance and advice is required to assist frontagers take forward projects such as this.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many times the street lights on the B511 Bangor Road, Groomsport, have had an outage in the past three years; and (ii) to detail the cause of the reoccurring failures of the street lights.

(AQW 9429/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can confirm that over a 3 year period there have been 60 street light outage reports recorded in relation to the Bangor Road, Groomsport.

These lights are mounted on Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) poles which support overhead electricity lines. NIE is aware of faults occurring with their lines during inclement weather and is working to resolve the issue in conjunction with officials from my Department.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to street lights that have remained off for over one year despite many outage reports submitted, whether there is a policy within her Department not to repair complicated individual street light outages.

(AQW 9430/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I can advise that my Department's policy is to repair all street light outages within its designated timescales. However there may be occasions when for operational reasons, such as when LED retrofitting is planned or extensive traffic management works are required, repairs may be deferred.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for Infrastructure when her Department will have the street lighting working again along the B511 Bangor Road, Groomsport.

(AQW 9433/17-22)

Ms Mallon: A number of street lights on the Bangor Road, Groomsport have not been working due to a fault with the electricity supply. Northern Ireland Electricity (NIE) are responsible for this repair and my Department reported the fault to them on 16 October 2020.

I understand that NIE attended the site and carried out an interim repair to restore the electricity supply to the lights. However a further fault has emerged during the recent inclement weather and NIE has again been contacted. My officials will continue to work closely with NIE to find a lasting resolution so that street lighting on Bangor Road can be restored as soon as practicable.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the anticipated planning review.
(AQW 9434/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The regulations setting out the terms of the review were agreed at Committee at the end of September 2020 and were subsequently made on 12th October 2020, and came into operation on 2nd November 2020.

Officials have commenced work on the review within the terms set out in the regulations, and it is hoped that the review report will be agreed and published as soon as possible but before the end of March 2021.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail all current called-in planning applications.
(AQW 9435/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I attach a list of the 16 live called in applications as at 30 June 2020, in line with my Department's most recently published official statistics.

Application	Proposal	Location
H/2009/0270/F	Works to listed buildings	Former William Clark & Sons Ltd, Upperlands, Maghera Co Londonderry
H/2009/0271/LB	As above	Former William Clark & Sons Ltd, Upperlands Maghera, Co Londonderry
LA01/2017/0250/LBC	Proposed works involve an additional three storey extension	Adelphi Hotel, Portrush
LA01/2017/0251/F	As above	Adelphi Hotel, Portrush
LA01/2017/0689/F	Retention and Part refurbishment/ restoration	39-41 Main Street and 2 Atlantic Avenue, Portrush
LA01/2017/1287/F	Regularisation of existing structures	Adelphi Hotel, Portrush
LA01/2017/1289/LBC	As above	Adelphi Hotel, Portrush
LA01/2018/0446/LBC	Retention and part refurbishment/ restoration	39-41 Main Street and 2 Atlantic Avenue, Portrush
LA02/2016/0968/F	Proposed alterations and extension	First Presbyterian Church, Main Street, Broughshane
LA02/2017/0453/LBC	Demolition of Session House	First Presbyterian Church, Main Street, Broughshane
LA04/2017/0474/F	Re-development of Casement Park	Lands at 88 - 104 Andersonstown Road, Belfast
LA04/2017/0541/HSC	The storage/use of Gas Oil	Lands at Airport Road West, Belfast Harbour Estate, Belfast
LA04/2019/2653/F	Demolition of existing property and erection of a 9 storey building	Chancery House, 88 Victoria Street, Belfast
LA05/2015/0342/O	Extension of existing established industrial	Lands immediately south east of Moira Industrial Estate
LA10/2019/1386/F	33kV power line to serve Curraghinalt mine	NW of 56 Mullydoo Road Greencastle
LA11/2019/1000/F	33kV power line to serve Curraghinalt mine	Adjoining 89 Woodend Road Ballymagorry

Subsequent to 30 June, 3 of these applications have been withdrawn (including two at the Adelphi Hotel, LA01/2017/0250/LBC and LA01/2017/0251/F, and Lurgan Road, Moira - LA05/2015/0342/O) and 2 have had approval decisions issued (two additional Adelphi applications - LA01/2017/1287/F and LA01/2017/1289/LBC). You will also be aware that I have issued a Notice of Opinion to approve the Casement Park application, but until such time as my final decision is given, this application will remain current.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Newry Southern Relief Road.

(AQW 9436/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Newry Southern Relief Road is one of the infrastructure projects within the Belfast Region City Deal being taken forward by my Department. Currently work is progressing development of the design of the road and preparing the draft Statutory Orders, along with an Environmental Impact Assessment Report in advance of public consultation, which I hope to be in a position to consider next year.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will provide further support to the taxi sector during COVID-19.

(AQW 9437/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In recognition of the hardships faced by the industry at this time, my main priority is to get a financial support scheme operational as quickly as possible and which I intend to launch in the next few days. The Executive has agreed a scheme providing financial support of £14m for taxi drivers. This package, taken together with the £1.2m that I have already put in place to waive fees for the renewal of taxi vehicle licences, will ensure that more drivers will be able to continue in the trade and hence be available for recovery, post-Covid.

I will also continue to press for the inclusion of the taxi sector in the various other support schemes being taken forward across the Executive.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) for her assessment of what Brexit will mean for drivers travelling into the south; and (ii) what her Department is doing to ensure all-island transport is not disrupted.

(AQW 9438/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Following the transition period, holders of a valid NI/GB driving licence will need to carry their NI/GB driving licence with them at all times. They will not, however, be required to carry an International Driving Permit (IDP) to drive in Ireland. In addition, a motor insurance green card will be required for vehicles from GB and Northern Ireland, being driven in the south or other EU Member States.

In response to the coronavirus pandemic driving licences that expire(d) between 1 February and 31 December 2020 have been extended by eleven months, and drivers are not required to renew in this period. If there is not a negotiated outcome that allows mutual recognition of driving licences, other EU member states may not recognise extended GB NI-issued licences from 1 January 2021.

My Department is in daily contact with the Department of Transport to ensure that the needs of Northern Ireland are taken into account in negotiations with the EU, and that there is as little disruption as possible for drivers travelling into the South, and for all-island transport.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the implications limited resources in terms of design capacity is having on future minor and major works programmes, broken down by roads division.

(AQW 9440/17-22)

Ms Mallon: While design resource is one factor in the delivery of future minor and major works programme, the key factor that dictates the scale and number of roads and other schemes that can be delivered is overall funding levels. The reality is that operating with a single year budget and a lack of certainty around funding in future years inhibits our ability to plan in advance for future schemes given the long lead-in times and procurement requirements.

The current funding envelope within which my Department is required to operate only allows for higher priority schemes to be taken forward at this time. Until funding in future years is determined, it is not possible to comment on the implications of any restricted design capacity on future programmes.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the extent of delays in land acquisition due to resource limitations, broken down by roads division.

(AQW 9441/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There is currently only one vacancy within Divisional Lands teams (in Southern Division) and this is not considered to significantly impact on land acquisition or delivery of programmes.

While land acquisition is one factor to be considered in the delivery of future minor and major works programmes across Divisions, the key factor that dictates the scale and number of roads and other schemes that can be delivered is overall funding levels. The reality is that operating with a single year budget and a lack of certainty around funding in future years can also inhibit the ability to plan in advance and purchase land for future schemes.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail all the minor and major works programmes which are currently delayed, or put on hold, due to limited resources in terms of design capacity and land acquisition, broken down by roads division.

(AQW 9442/17-22)

Ms Mallon: While design resource is one factor in the delivery of future minor and major works programmes across Divisions, the key factor that dictates the scale and number of schemes that can be delivered is overall funding levels. It is considered that all schemes included in this year's minor and major works programmes are progressing satisfactorily and that no schemes included in this year's programme are delayed or put on hold because of resourcing issues within the design or lands teams.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure how she will address the shortage of personnel which currently exists within (i) designs capacity; and (ii) land acquisitions, broken down by roads division.

(AQW 9443/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In common with other parts of the NI Civil Service, the Department has experienced some delays to recruitment processes as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions.

However, processes are in place to fill priority vacancies in all parts of the Department as a matter of urgency including in design and land acquisitions. These include both internal and external recruitment through NICS HR as well as specific recruitment of Civil Engineering Graduate Trainees and Apprentices.

Mr T Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the extent of resource limitations in terms of design capacity, broken down by roads division.

(AQW 9444/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are approximately 145 internal civil engineering posts within the DfI Roads Consultancy business unit of which 39 relate to road / junction improvement designs. 12 of these posts are currently vacant with the breakdown across Divisions is as follows:

Roads Division	Number of Vacant Posts in Road Design Teams
Eastern Division	5
Southern Division	3
Western Division	2
Northern Division	2

There is currently a recruitment process ongoing which, when completed, will enhance the overall internal design capacity.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) the private streets in West Tyrone which are not adopted by her Department; and (ii) the length of time they have been unadopted.

(AQW 9478/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department does not hold this information by constituency but rather holds it by Council area. However we still hold information on the old Council boundary areas of Omagh and Strabane and believe this makes up the West Tyrone constituency.

The list of un-adopted development/private streets sites below are at various stages ranging from planning permission recently granted to largely complete. These sites/phases make up the road infrastructure in housing developments that are proposed for adoption. The site name/address provided has been extracted from the planning permission, however, it should be noted that this does not always match that used in subsequent naming of the development.

Although my Department is unable to specify exactly the period of time that all private streets have been unadopted, the year when files were opened for each site is a good indicator and details of this have been provided. You will also appreciate this list is subject to ongoing change as developments are completed and new ones added.

Omagh District Council Area

Private Street Ref. No.	Site Name/Address	Town/ Village/ Settlement	Year file opened
PS/201/16/2	Radergan Road	Beragh	2016
PS/201/18/1	Drumnakilly Rd	Omagh	2018
PS/201/18/2	Cranny Oaks	Omagh	2018
PS/201/19/1	Tattyreagh Road	Omagh	2019
PS/202/07/2	Churchdale Meadows	Gortin	2007
PS/202/18/1	Dublin Rd	Omagh	2018
PS/202/19/1	Tamlaght Rd/ Brookmount Rd	Omagh	2019

Private Street Ref. No.	Site Name/Address	Town/ Village/ Settlement	Year file opened
PS/202/19/2	Tamlaght Meadows	Omagh	2019
PS/203/11	Glencam Road	Omagh	2011
PS/203/17/1	Tamlaght Rd	Omagh	2017
PS/203/17/2	Tamlaght Rd	Omagh	2017
PS/203/18/1	Woodside Avenue	Omagh	2018
PS/203/19	Loughmuck Meadows	Omagh	2019
PS/203/99	Killynure Court	Omagh	1999
PS/204/04	Drumnaforbe Heights	Drumquin	2004
PS/204/06	The Orchard	Omagh	2006
PS/204/06/2	SE of The Orchards	Omagh	2006
PS/204/17/1	Farmhill Road	Omagh	2017
PS/204/19/1	East of 6 Mullanmore Rd	Omagh	2019
PS/204/94/2	Ballynamullan Road	Omagh	1994
PS/204/99	Castle Grove	Omagh	1999
PS/204/99/2	Castle Grove	Omagh	1999
PS/204/99/3	Castle Grove	Omagh	1999
PS/205/03	Mullaghmena Avenue	Omagh	2003
PS/205/03/2	Mullaghmena Avenue	Omagh	2003
PS/205/03/3	Mullaghmena Avenue	Omagh	2003
PS/205/03/4	Mullaghmena Avenue	Omagh	2003
PS/205/10	Glencam Road	Omagh	2010
PS/205/16	Knockcarra Grove	Omagh	2016
PS/205/19/1	Tamlaght Spar	Omagh	2019
PS/206/02	Shanmullagh Drive	Dromore	2002
PS/206/08	Loughview Court	Loughmacrory	2008
PS/206/08/2	Loughview Court	Omagh	2008
PS/206/15	Ballynamullan Road	Omagh	2015
PS/206/18	Winters Lane	Omagh	2018
PS/206/18/2	Winters Lane	Omagh	2018
PS/206/95/10	Lambrook Drive	Omagh	1995
PS/207/16	Rear of St Julians Cottages	Omagh	2016
PS/207/17	To rear of 36-44 Main St	Carrickmore	2017
PS/207/19	Rodgers Villas	Omagh	2019
PS/207/97	Altamuskin Road	Sixmilecross	1997
PS/207/98/6	Coolnagard	Omagh	1998
PS/207/98/7	Coolnagard	Omagh	1998
PS/208/06	Killybrack Heights	Omagh	2006
PS/208/06/2	Glencam Road	Omagh	2006
PS/208/16/1	6-12 Circular Rd	Omagh	2016
PS/208/16/2	Circular Road	Omagh	2016

Private Street Ref. No.	Site Name/Address	Town/ Village/ Settlement	Year file opened
PS/208/17/1	South of Corradinna Rd	Omagh	2017
PS/208/18/1	Pinefields	Omagh	2018
PS/208/18/2	Pinefields	Omagh	2018
PS/209/10/1	Woodbrook Village	Omagh	2010
PS/209/10/2	Woodbrook Village	Omagh	2010
PS/209/10/4	Woodbrook Village	Omagh	2010
PS/209/16/1	Carnalea Manor	Omagh	2016
PS/209/16/2	Carnalea Manor	Omagh	2016
PS/210/05	Millbrook, Rarogan Road	Omagh	2005
PS/210/19/1	Beltany Rd (former Nestles car park)	Omagh	2019
ps/211/06/3	Moylagh Road	Beragh	2006
PS/211/06/4	Moylagh Meadows	Beragh	2006
PS/211/16	Meeting House Rd	Sixmilecross	2016
PS/212/04	Drumnakilly Road	Omagh	2004
PS/212/18/1	34-44 Derry Road	Omagh	2018
PS/212/99/7	Shergrim Grove	Omagh	1999
PS/213/05	Rathronan	Omagh	2005
PS/214/06/2	Highfields	Omagh	2006
ps/214/07/1	Dooish Rd	Drumquin	2007
PS/214/07/2	Dooish Rd	Drumquin	2007
PS/214/07/3	Dooish Rd	Drumquin	2007
ps/214/07/4	Dooish Rd	Drumquin	2007
ps/214/07/5	Dooish Rd	Drumquin	2007
PS/215/08/1	South of 39 Eskragh Rd	Eskra	2008
PS/215/97/3	Glenside	Omagh	1997
PS/215/97/5	Glenside	Omagh	1997
PS/215/97/6	Glenside	Omagh	1997
PS/217/09	St Marys Court	Killyclogher	2009
PS/217/99	Altamuskan Road	Omagh	1999
PS/301/85/2	Forest View	Mountfield	1985
PS/301/94	Greencastle Road	Omagh	1994
PS/301/95	Hazelhill Road	Carrickmore	1995

Strabane District Council Area

Private Street Ref. No	Site Name/Address	Town/Village/ Settlement	Year File Opened
PS/101/15	Stoneybrook, Lisnaragh Road	Donemana	2015
PS/101/15/2	Stoneybrook Lisnaragh Rd	Donemana	2015
PS/101/17	Bradley Way	Strabane	2017
PS/101/19	Hawthorn Grove, Derry Road	Strabane	2019
PS/102/14	Art Road	Artigarvan	2014

Private Street Ref. No	Site Name/Address	Town/Village/Settlement	Year File Opened
PS/102/16	NE of 81 Mount Carmel Height	Strabane	2016
PS/102/20/2	Bracken Hill Strabane	Strabane	2020
PS/102/20/3	Bracken Hill Curley Hill	Strabane	2020
PS/102/92	Foyle Vale, Park Road	Strabane	1992
PS/103/05/2	Elmwood Green, Erganagh Road	Castledearg	2005
PS/103/18/1	Lismore Park	Sion Mills	2018
PS/103/99/7	Ferndale, Orchard Road	Strabane	1999
PS/104/06	Dergvale, Castlegore Road	Castledearg	2006
PS/104/12/1	Kilclean Road	Castledearg	2012
PS/104/14	Ard Cullen, Ballycolman Road	Strabane	2014
PS/105/02	Grieve Park, Moorlough Road	Glenmornan	2002
PS/105/09/1	Victoria Meadows, Victoria Road	Magheramason	2009
PS/105/09/2	Victoria Meadows, Victoria Road	Magheramason	2009
PS/105/09/3	Victoria Meadows, Victoria Road	Magheramason	2009
PS/105/09/3	Victoria Meadows, Victoria Road	Magheramason	2009
PS/105/18	Moyle Road	Newtownstewart	2018
PS/105/97/1	Garvan Park, Garvan Road	Sion Mills	1997
PS/105/97/2	Garvan Park, Garvan Road	Sion Mills	1997
PS/105/99/2	Barnhill Court, Derry Road	Strabane	1999
PS/106/03/1	6 & 10 Strabane Road	Castledearg	2003
PS/106/18/1	East of Mount Carmel Heights	Strabane	2018
PS/107/03	Berryhill Close, Berryhill Road	Donemana	2003
PS/107/08	Camus Road	Douglas Bridge	2008
PS/107/12/1	Glenevish Hill, Glen Road	Strabane	2012
PS/107/12/2	Glenview Manor, Glen Road	Strabane	2012
PS/107/12/3	Glenview Manor, Glen Road	Strabane	2012
PS/107/12/4	Glenview Manor, Glen Road	Strabane	2012
PS/109/02	Barley Hill View, Coolaghy Road	Ardstraw	2002
PS/109/03	Dublin Road	Newtownstewart	2003
PS/110/10/1	Stoneybrook, Lisnaragh Road	Donemana	2010
PS/110/10/2	Stoneybrook, Lisnaragh Road	Donemana	2010
PS/110/97/4	Urney Court, Bellspark Road	Clady	1997
PS/111/07/2	Dublin Street	Newtownstewart	2007
PS/111/12	Strahans Road, Backtown	Strabane	2012
PS/111/95/7	Ashleigh Court, Kilclean Road	Castledearg	1995
PS/111/95/8	Ashleigh Court, Kilclean Road	Castledearg	1995
PS/115/07/1	Hawthorn Grove, Derry Road	Strabane	2007
PS/115/07/2	Hawthorn Grove, Derry Road	Strabane	2007
PS/115/07/3	Hawthorn Grove, Derry Road	Strabane	2007
PS/115/07/3	Hawthorn Grove, Derry Road	Strabane	2007

Private Street Ref. No	Site Name/Address	Town/Village/Settlement	Year File Opened
PS/116/05	The Hollow, Moorlough Road	Glenmornan	2005
PS/116/10/1	34 Berryhill Rd	Artigarvan	2010
PS/117/04	Bradley Way	Strabane	2004
PS/117/07/3	Woodend Road	Ballymagorry	2007
PS/118/06	Melmount Road	Victoria Bridge	2006
PS/124/06	The Paddocks, Garvan Road	Sion Mills	2006
PS/128/06/3	Linen Green, Melmount Road	Sion Mills	2006
PS/128/06/4	The Linen Green, Melmount Rd	Sion Mills	2006
PS/128/06/5	The Linen Green, Melmount Rd	Sion Mills	2006
PS/128/06/7	The Linen Green, Melmount Rd	Sion Mills	2006
PS/129/06	East of 55 Strabane Rd	Castledearg	2006
PS/129/06/2	East of 55 Strabane Rd	Castledearg	2006
PS/129/06/3	Strabane Road	Castledearg	2006
PS/130/06	East of Cluney Gds Clady	Clady	2006
PS/131/06	Bridge End Park	Strabane	2006
PS/702/93	Springwell Manor, Strabane Road	Castledearg	1993
PS/703/88	Castlegore Road	Castledearg	1998
PS/706/90	Bessie Bell Court, Strabane Road	Newtownstewart	1990

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the Fintona flood alleviation scheme.
(AQW 9480/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is continuing to assess whether at present there are any viable flood alleviation works that can be taken forward. A financially viable scheme has not been identified at this stage, but it is anticipated that the final assessment process will be complete by the end of this calendar year.

In the meantime my Department annually inspects and maintains a number of designated urban watercourses in the Fintona area. In addition watercourse inlet structures, that my Department has responsibility for, are inspected and maintained on a weekly basis and my officials play an active role in supporting the community resilience group in the area.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department has plans for a new Omagh bus centre.
(AQW 9481/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Translink has advised it currently has no plan in place for a new Omagh Bus Centre. However, there is currently a project on the capital plan for a replacement garage at Omagh, subject to funding being available.

I do recognise the potential which new bus stations could provide to areas such as Omagh. Unfortunately, I have severe and challenging budget constraints with significant pressures across my Department. I will be assessing these pressures reflecting my priorities, the commitments in "New Decade: New Approach" and the budget made available for the 2021/22 period ahead.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure what assessment her Department has made on the impact that a large-scale electric vehicle rollout in Northern Ireland would have on air pollution levels.
(AQW 9534/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Road transport is a significant contributor to both greenhouse gases and air pollutants, responsible for emissions of carbon dioxide, nitrogen oxides and particulate matter. In terms of the impact on air pollution, whilst electric vehicles do not emit nitrogen oxides, small particle pollution from brake, tyre and road wear is still produced. Therefore, whilst supporting the uptake of electric vehicles, I am encouraging people to walk and cycle whenever possible.

My Department continues to identify, plan and implement measures to promote and enable a shift onto more sustainable modes of transport to reduce emissions and improve air quality. My Department will continue to work closely with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs who 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 air quality whilst simultaneously cutting carbon emissions.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps her Department is taking to encourage more people to switch to electric vehicles.

(AQW 9535/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Since taking up post I have made clear my commitment to delivering greener, cleaner, sustainable transport. I chose to have an electric vehicle for my Ministerial duties and recently wrote to Executive colleagues to invite them to do the same.

The 'Road to Zero' strategy sets out a number of targets and actions in order to achieve an increase in electric vehicles. The Office for Low Emission Vehicles (OLEV) provides a range of e-car related grants towards the purchase of electric vehicles including home, workplace and residential charge points to support the delivery of these targets. My officials work closely with OLEV to monitor the range of e-car related grants and provide advice and guidance to support the transition to zero emissions.

Recently alongside Minister Ryan in the Irish Government and Minister Matheson in the Scottish Government I committed funding in partnership with the EU to deliver increased investment in e-charging points across the island as part of our ambition to transform transport.

In addition, my Department is working to identify further action to support the decarbonisation of transport and infrastructure services that will help to reduce carbon emissions and address the climate emergency. I agreed with Minister Poots MLA earlier this year to work collaboratively to promote the use of electric vehicles and specifically to improve the charge point network across the North. I remain committed to working in partnership with my Executive colleagues and others across our islands to help deliver a change in the way we travel that also helps us to tackle the climate crisis.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether her Department will consider rural areas when developing electric vehicle charging infrastructure.

(AQW 9536/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The current e-car public charge point network is owned, operated and maintained by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB). The market is also open to other commercial operators who wish to provide charging infrastructure. My Department will, however, liaise closely with commercial providers to ensure the charging infrastructure remains fit for purpose and that consideration is given to provision of charging infrastructure across the North, including in rural areas.

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 pleased that my Department has been able to financially support the EU Funded FASTER project to install EV Rapid Chargers. The project will complement and enhance the existing EV charging infrastructure, and will mean a total of 73 electric vehicle charging points across the eligible area of the Programme i.e. the island of Ireland and the West of Scotland by 31 March 2023.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in order to address the climate emergency, what steps her Department is taking to enhance the charge point infrastructure.

(AQW 9537/17-22)

Ms Mallon: 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 wish to provide charging infrastructure. My Department has recently been engaging with ESB on their plans to upgrade and improve the reliability of the existing public network.

I have also recently announced my intention to bring forward proposals to assist the expansion of the recharging infrastructure for electric vehicles by providing additional permitted development rights. These allow works to proceed without the need to apply for planning permission.

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 pleased that my Department has been able to financially support the EU Funded FASTER project to install EV Rapid Chargers. The project will complement and enhance the existing EV charging infrastructure, and will mean a total of 73 electric vehicle charging points across the eligible area of the Programme i.e. the island of Ireland and the West of Scotland by 31 March 2023.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 8277/17-22, whether her Department has informed, or intends to inform, the European Commission as to why it is appropriate to (i) allow unauthorised Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) development to continue at Lough Neagh Special Protection Area; (ii) permit unauthorised EIA development to become immune from enforcement action; and (iii) justify how such actions do not breach the EIA directive.

(AQW 9538/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has provided relevant information to the European Commission in relation to the Lough Neagh case at different stages in the process, and will continue to provide it with information as appropriate and necessary.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to her recent announcement to plan a high speed rail feasibility study from Derry-Belfast-Dublin-Cork-Limerick, whether she will engage with her Ministerial counterpart in the south to progress a western arc rail route which could provide a rail connection from Derry-Letterkenny-Sligo- Galway.
(AQW 9553/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Executive and the Irish Government are committed, through the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC), to help deliver all island infrastructure projects that will benefit people across the island, including investment in infrastructure that will support cooperation and unlock the full potential of our island economy.

At last month's NSMC Transport sector meeting, Minister Ryan and I agreed to extend the feasibility study for high speed rail to include Derry and Limerick. I am committed to working with Minister Ryan to explore what other rail enhancements are possible. I intend to discuss rail connectivity further with Minister Ryan in the coming months.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an indicative timescale for a decision being made following the Department receiving the inspectors report for the A1.
(AQW 9562/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am very aware of how important the A1 improvements are for the many people who have expressed their support for the scheme, especially those who have lost loved ones. My thoughts are with the family who lost their loved one in a collision on the A1 earlier this month.

The Inspector issued his report to the Department on 19 October 2020. Officials will require some time to fully and efficiently consider the Inspector's proposals and recommendations.

When I have been apprised on the findings, I will give them careful consideration before deciding on the next steps for this scheme. I very much recognise the importance of these improvements and hope to be in position to publish the Department's response to the Inspector's report towards the end of January 2021.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail the number of private electric vehicles, compared to the number of private vehicles in total.
(AQW 9565/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, Swansea, with permission from the Department for Transport publishes licensed vehicle statistics for GB and NI from their administrative database.

A comprehensive statistical data set is available <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/all-vehicles-veh01#licensed-vehicles>

Included in the data set Table VEH0130 indicates that at the end of Quarter 2 2020 there were 3,673 plug in electric vehicles across all categories in Northern Ireland.

At March 2020 there were 1.2 million registered vehicles in Northern Ireland.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for Infrastructure what engagement she or her Department has had or plans to have with the Union Connectivity Review.
(AQW 9587/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The Union Connectivity Review was announced by Prime Minister Johnston on 30th June 2020, to examine current connectivity arrangements and help plan improvements to road, rail, air and sea links between all parts of the UK.

On 13th August the Department for Transport formally wrote to me to advise that a Chair had been appointed to the Review.

In September I wrote a joint letter to the Secretary of State for Transport, Grant Shapps, along with Transport Ministers from the Scottish and Welsh governments, asking for clarity on the nature of the Review and its implications for devolved administrations, to whom Transport Policy remains a devolved matter.

This was followed by a call with Minister Shapps and a meeting with the Chair of the Union Connectivity Review is currently being scheduled to take place in the coming weeks.

Mr Stewart asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether wedding car hire businesses are eligible to apply for the Support Fund for Taxi Drivers and Private Coach and Bus Operators, announced on 29 October 2020.
(AQW 9588/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I recently secured funding of £14m for taxi drivers and £5m for private bus and coach operators from the Executive. The funding for taxi drivers is open to drivers in all classes, including Class C which wedding car drivers fall under. This package, taken together with the £1.5m that I have already put in place to waive fees for the renewal of taxi and bus

vehicle licences, will ensure that more drivers will be able to continue in the trade and hence be available for recovery, post-Covid.

The financial assistance scheme for taxi drivers is open to all self-employed licensed drivers including wedding car drivers who were available to work from 22nd March to 30th September 2020. The eligibility criteria for the scheme is being finalised, and details will be made available when it launches this week. The bespoke support offered will be via a one off payment of £1500. This one off payment will be a contribution to their yearly overhead costs including PPE and recognises the financial pressures sustained by eligible taxi drivers due to Covid-19.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for Infrastructure, following her recognition of its importance to Enniskillen, whether the Southern Bypass scheme will go to tender before the end of December 2020.
(AQW 9593/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I acknowledge the significance of the Enniskillen Southern Bypass and reaffirm my commitment to moving ahead with this important scheme. I am currently considering the making of the statutory orders for the scheme after which I will consider the next steps.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on all flood alleviation studies in West Tyrone.
(AQW 9602/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department is undertaking a number of flood alleviation studies in West Tyrone. It is anticipated that feasibility studies for Elmwood Green, Castleberg, Sion Mills Village and Campsie Bridge, Lower Market Street, Omagh will be completed before the end of the 2020/21 financial year. It is also expected that a feasibility study for Strabane will be completed by summer 2021. It is also anticipated that the final assessment process, to assess the potential for a flood alleviation scheme for Fintona, will be complete by the end of this calendar year.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for Infrastructure what steps are being taken to enforce traffic restrictions, or otherwise control traffic, at the Dark Hedges.
(AQW 9617/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department introduced a Prohibition of Traffic Order on the Bregagh Road between Ballykenver Road and Ballinlea Road on 30 October 2017 at the request of Causeway Coast & Glens Borough Council. The PSNI has responsibility for the enforcement of this traffic restriction. There are no other traffic restrictions or control measures in the vicinity of the Dark Hedges.

Mr M Bradley asked the Minister for Infrastructure what measures will be put in place to provide shelter from the weather for drivers who have to wait outside MOT Centres while their vehicles are tested.
(AQW 9621/17-22)

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.

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. Therefore DVA customers are advised in their reminder notice and booking appointment confirmation, to come prepared for the weather as they may need to remain outside for the duration of the test and there may be no shelter available.

I fully appreciate your concerns and accept this is far from an ideal situation. Following a further review of their risk assessments, the DVA is putting in place localised arrangements to accommodate as many customers as possible within the test centre buildings while their vehicles are being tested. Customers will be required to wear face coverings and comply with the H&S requirements at each test centre and this position will be kept under review.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether, in the event of a shortage of driving test instructors, DVA will prioritise the resumption of Approved Driving Instructor testing.
(AQW 9644/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There are currently around 1,000 Approved Driving Instructors (ADIs) and approximately 50 Potential Driving Instructors (PDIs), active on the Register. 8 PDIs, who have obtained their Part 1, are waiting on their Part 2 and Part 3 tests.

The Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) conducts approximately 47,000 Category B (private car) practical driving tests per annum. The ratio of driving test to ADI is 47 per annum, which does not suggest there is a shortage of driving instructors.

The DVA is considering the safe resumption of all driver testing services, including the ADI Part 2 and Part 3 qualifying tests, and will directly contact PDIs with details of when these tests will be reinstated and how they can book a test.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether the financial assistance provided to taxi drivers to contribute to yearly overhead costs and additional costs incurred by personal protection equipment, will negatively affect and potentially disqualify struggling taxi drivers from benefit payments, such as housing benefit.

(AQW 9655/17-22)

Ms Mallon: It will be up to eligible taxi drivers in applying for the financial assistance scheme and, based on their individual financial circumstances, to consider any implications for other financial support and benefits that they receive. My Department is not in a position to determine the implications on benefit payments for individual applicants.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she will provide support for (i) wedding car; and (ii) other car operators.

(AQW 9664/17-22)

Ms Mallon: You will be aware that I secured funding of £14m for taxi drivers recently from the Executive. This package, taken together with the £1.2m that I have already put in place to waive fees for the renewal of taxi vehicle licences, will help taxi drivers to be able to continue in the trade and therefore be available for recovery, post-Covid.

The financial assistance scheme is open to all self-employed licensed drivers, including wedding car drivers, who were available to work from 22nd March to 30th September 2020 and who meet the eligibility criteria. The criteria for the scheme is being finalised and details will be made available when it launches this week. The bespoke support offered will be via a one off payment of £1500. This one off payment will be a contribution to their yearly overhead costs including PPE and recognises the financial pressures sustained by eligible drivers due to Covid-19.

Mr Boylan asked the Minister for Infrastructure (i) how many individuals in the north of Ireland hold southern driving licences; and (ii) whether these licences will need to be traded for northern licences before the end of the transition period.

(AQW 9665/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The DVA does not hold details of the number of drivers who are resident in Northern Ireland, who hold a driving licence issued in the South and who have not exchanged their driving licence with the DVA.

Holders of a Group 1 (car/motorcycle) driving licence issued in the South can drive in Northern Ireland as long as the licence is valid, or they can exchange the licence for a Northern Ireland one to show new address details. The rules for lorry, minibus and bus driving licence holders (vocational driving licence) are different, and they can drive using a driving licence issued in the South for five years after becoming resident, or for those aged 65 or over, for 12 months after becoming resident. In order to continue driving after these periods, the driver is required to get a Northern Ireland driving licence.

Existing arrangements, which allow the holder of a driving licence issued in the South who is resident in NI or GB, to exchange their licence for a NI or GB one, will continue unchanged until 31 December 2020.

My officials have been engaging with counterparts in the Department of Transport regarding what arrangements in respect of driving licences will apply from 1 January 2021. It is the intention of the British Government to publish the future arrangements that are agreed with Member States in respect of driving licences before the end of the transition period.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure why planning guidelines for quarrying have not been updated.

(AQW 9669/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Current planning policy for minerals development are contained within 'A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland' and the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS).

There are planning guidelines for quarrying contained in 'Vibration and Blasting Guidelines (NI)' published in September 2017 which were updated from the previous 1995 report.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure to define what constitutes an occupied property in planning terms.

(AQW 9670/17-22)

Ms Mallon: There is no singular definition in Northern Ireland planning law or policy which specifically defines the term 'occupied property'.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure what her Department is doing to fulfil the Executive's commitment to building a united and shared society through the Together: Building a United Community strategy.

(AQW 9683/17-22)

Ms Mallon: While my Department does not directly lead the delivery of Together: Building a United Community actions, I recognise that we have an important supporting role to play in building a united and shared society and am committed to doing so.

Examples of this include our work in support of the Urban Villages Programme through specific projects such as the Colin Connect Transport Hub and also through our contribution through planning policies to the development of shared spaces that

can be used and enjoyed by all. Our public transport system is also crucial in helping people and communities connect with each other and with employment and other opportunities.

Together with other departments, we also have an important role to play in helping rid communities of unwanted flags, emblems and other displays that can cause division. In this regard, the Justice Minister and I have jointly written to the First and deputy First Ministers asking sight of the Commission on Flags, Identity, Culture and Tradition (FICT) report. I remain committed to working collectively with Executive colleagues towards a sustainable solution in this area.

Miss Woods asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 8376/17-22, what contact her Department has had with the European Commission over her decision not to take enforcement against unauthorised Environmental Impact Assessment development that has become immune, or is currently taking place as a result of her Department's decision not to stop unauthorised sand extraction from Lough Neagh Special Protection Area.

(AQW 9727/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department has provided relevant information to the European Commission in relation to the Lough Neagh case at different stages in the process, and will continue to provide it with information as appropriate and necessary.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure what exceptional circumstances meant that her Department was the only Department to bid for holiday pay as part of the October monitoring round.

(AQW 9729/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Untaken annual leave is required to be recognised as a liability at each financial year end. Under normal circumstances, the liability from one financial year to the next is not usually significantly different for my Department. However, given the unprecedented situation, it is anticipated that the amount of annual leave carried forward will be greater than the previous year end, hence increasing the liability this financial year.

My Department is facing significant resource pressures as a result of income lost due to the pandemic and simply is not able to absorb any further pressures. Given the challenging financial position, my Department submitted the pressure arising from the estimated increase in the year-end holiday accrual as a bid in the October monitoring round.

This issue is not unique to DfI. I cannot speculate on the actions of other Departments and why they may or may not have bid for similar pressures.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) actions taken to increase capacity at MOT centres; and (ii) current capacity compared to the situation prior to (a) the pandemic; and (b) the lift faults issue.

(AQW 9732/17-22)

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.

The current capacity for vehicle testing is approximately 30% in comparison with levels prior to the pandemic and the lift issues. To meet increasing demand, the DVA is in the process of recruiting additional examiners and will also use overtime to provide additional capacity and cover for vehicle tests, if due to a variety of unforeseen reasons such as sick absence or the requirement to self-isolate, examiners are unable to attend work.

Like all public facing services, the Covid-19 restrictions mean that the DVA has had to adapt its services to ensure that they can be provided safely and they would ask customers for their patience at this difficult time. Vehicle testing capacity will increase as restrictions ease and risk assessments are updated until such times as normal service delivery resumes.

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 and scientific advice as we work as quickly as we can to serve all our customers.

Ms Kimmins asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 9226/17-22, whether Mountain View Drive will also be included in this assessment for traffic calming measures.

(AQW 9734/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have asked my officials to add Mountain View Drive, Newry to the existing list of locations that are being assessed for possible provision of traffic calming measures in accordance with our established framework.

Mr K Buchanan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in order to assist local high street business and help improve trade, what consideration her Department has given to temporarily extending parking restrictions from one hour to two hours in town centres.

(AQW 9748/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am fully committed to doing all I can to help businesses and the communities get through and recover from the current pandemic. Since becoming Minister, I have also made clear my desire to change the way we use our roads and streets, and make sure they work for the whole community, both residents and businesses alike.

My Department's approach to the provision of on-street parking is already aimed at helping businesses, as well as helping local people access their city and town centres, in a way that is designed to cater for a range of varied needs. Extending permitted parking times, while benefitting some businesses, would disadvantage others who are, despite the circumstances arising from the pandemic, still dependent on the quick turnover of available spaces.

I am therefore of the opinion that the current approach still represents the best way forward in terms of achieving a balance that best accommodates the varied and competing needs of the different types of businesses and business users in our towns.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for Infrastructure, in relation to planning, whether her Department has considered the introduction of mineral safeguarding areas.

(AQW 9750/17-22)

Ms Mallon: Regional planning policy for minerals development is set out in the Department's Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS). The SPPS requires councils to bring forward appropriate policies and proposals for minerals development in their Local Development Plans (LDPs). In particular LDPs should, inter alia, safeguard mineral resources which are of economic or conservation value, and seek to ensure that workable mineral resources are not sterilised by other surface development which would prejudice future exploitation.

Furthermore, in preparing their LDPs, councils may also identify areas most suitable for minerals development within the plan area. Such areas will normally include areas of mineral reserves where exploitation is likely to have the least environmental and amenity impacts, as well as offering good accessibility to the strategic transport network.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) how many times each of the Strangford Ferry Service ferries have been out of service for maintenance or breakdown in the past twelve months; and (ii) the maintenance cost for each ferry in that time.

(AQW 9770/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) In the last 12 months the ferries have been out of service for maintenance or due to a breakdown as follows:
 - a) MV Strangford II - five times. Once for the planned 6 week annual refit, once due to contaminated fuel and three times to address potential faults; and
 - b) MV Portaferry II – twice. Once for its planned 6 week annual refit, which was extended into June due to COVID-19 restrictions, and once due to a fault for which we are currently awaiting delivery of specialist parts to undertake repairs.
- (ii) In the last 12 months the maintenance costs for the MV Strangford II and MV Portaferry II have been £80.4k and £228.1k respectively.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for Infrastructure, pursuant to AQW 8335/17-22, to detail (i) the projected full cost of the wastewater upgrade works for Limavady; (ii) the works included in the potential £63,000 preparation works for the project; and (iii) the full works deemed necessary for the complete Limavady wastewater project.

(AQW 9782/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I have been advised by Northern Ireland Water that:

- (i) The estimated full cost of investment in wastewater upgrades for Limavady during the PC21 period is £4.2 million. This investment will be subject to funding;
- (ii) Preparation works will include surveys to confirm existing infrastructure; identify location of services; establish ground conditions; and engagement of contractors and consultant engineers to develop a detailed design that will deliver a best value solution; and
- (iii) The Limavady work package is contained within NI Water's £2 billion business plan for the period 2021 to 2027, known as Price Control 21 (PC21). The Utility Regulator will provide its Final Determination on NI Water's business plan in March 2021. The full package of work identified for Limavady for the PC21 period is anticipated to fall into three areas:

Limavady Catchment Upgrade

- Repair of sewers in the Edenmore Road area

- New trunk sewers in Scroggy Road, Greyabbey Road, Edenmore Road, Ballyquin Road, Roe Valley Park, Benevenagh Drive, Shanreagh Park, Church Street and Blackburn Park
- New pumps and additional storage at Whitehill Wastewater Pumping Station

Bovally Wastewater Pumping Station

- Construction of a new pumping station with storage

Ballyclose Street Combined Storm Overflow

- Provision of storage to protect watercourse from Unsatisfactory Intermittent Discharges

PC21 is subject to the appropriate public expenditure funding being made available to my department. The total funding required will be in the order of £2 billion. This compares to capital spend in the previous Price Control in the order of £940m, and demonstrates the scale of the challenge that we face in order to provide a first class water and sewerage services which enables health, development and economic growth.

Mr Robinson asked the Minister for Infrastructure what assurances she can give that complaints regarding (i) street lighting; (ii) ponding; and (iii) blocked gullies are dealt with in a timely manner.

(AQW 9802/17-22)

Ms Mallon: The NI Direct website provides an interface between the public and my Department through a Public Information Portal (PIP) system which allows members of the public to report road related faults such as street lighting and potholes or other defects such as spillages and gully blockages. The system also provides the facility for the person who reported the fault to track its progress.

Reports of ponding and blocked road gullies are prioritised, with those that are impacting on the safe passage of road traffic inspected and cleaned as soon as practicable and if considered necessary, this will extend to outside of normal office hours. Where traffic is not impacted these issues are usually dealt with by officials the next working day normally through inclusion within the next gully maintenance schedule.

My Department is currently providing a full street lighting repair service. Typically repairs will take up to 5 working days, however, there may be slight delays in some areas due to staff capacity issues related to Covid 19 that are affecting both our internal and external contractors.

I can assure the member that my staff endeavour to investigate and address all such complaints as quickly as possible and as permitted by availability of resources.

Ms Rogan asked the Minister for Infrastructure for an update on the progression of the Ballynahinch bypass.

(AQW 9808/17-22)

Ms Mallon: In June, I announced my commitment to fund the continued development of a number of Strategic Road Improvement schemes, including the A24 Ballynahinch Bypass, as part of my plan to aid economic recovery and community transformation, while addressing regional imbalance.

The Ballynahinch Bypass scheme is now at an advanced stage of development and preparatory work on contract documentation has been completed. I have asked officials to complete the work necessary to allow me to make the Direction Order. This includes a review of the environmental reports which is nearing completion and, subject to the outcome of the review, I hope to be in position to make the Direction Order for the scheme in the new year.

I reaffirm my commitment to moving ahead with the Ballynahinch Bypass scheme and I am currently considering the next steps.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure how many staff are employed in her Department's cycling unit.

(AQW 9813/17-22)

Ms Mallon: My Department's Active Travel Branch (originally named the Cycling Unit) consists of seven members of staff, two of whom are part-time.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for Infrastructure whether she intends to bring forward proposals to end permitted development rights for all fossil fuels including lignite.

(AQW 9817/17-22)

Ms Mallon: While I am bringing forward legislation to remove permitted development rights for petroleum (oil and gas) exploration, I have also asked officials to brief me on the operation of the minerals exploration permitted development regime for the remaining fossil fuels, including lignite. This will allow me to consider whether I wish to bring forward any further changes to permitted development rights for mineral exploration.

Mr Dunne asked the Minister for Infrastructure, given that there has been four road traffic accidents within the last four weeks, including a fatality, what plans she has to improve road safety on the section of road from the junction of Whinney Hill and Ballymiscaw Road to the Belfast Road, Newtownards, including the Craigantlet crossroads junction.

(AQW 9902/17-22)

Ms Mallon: I am aware that a serious road traffic collision occurred on the Holywood Road on 14 October 2020 and extend my sympathies to the family of the lady who lost her life in this tragic incident. I understand the PSNI are leading an investigation into this collision and upon its completion my officials will be liaising with them to obtain further information relating to this and the other collisions where injuries have been sustained. Officials will then consider any emerging factors relevant to my Department in respect of road safety.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for Infrastructure to detail (i) how many Glider inspectors there are; (ii) when they are on the Glider, broken down by location.

(AQW 9903/17-22)

Ms Mallon:

- (i) Translink currently have 23 Customer Revenue and Protection Officers (CRPOs).
- (ii) The CRPOs do not operate in a fixed location but patrol the entire Glider network during the operational day. Information on their location therefore is not collected.

Department of Justice

Ms Dolan asked the Minister of Justice when the recommendations of the Family Justice Review will be implemented in full; and when an independent Chair will be appointed to the Family Justice Board, as recommended in section 20 of the Family Justice Review.

(AQW 9470/17-22)

Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): Responding to the large number of wide-ranging recommendations of the Review of Civil and Family Justice is not for the Department of Justice alone. Many are matters for the judiciary, the legal profession and other Departments. Others have significant financial, operational or cross-cutting implications and require careful analysis. The key recommendations from the Review which fall to my Department are currently being considered as part of a wider evolving programme of civil and family modernisation. Good progress has been made in a number of areas. That includes the additional protections for vulnerable court users being introduced through the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill, the development of a pilot to help address unnecessary delay in public family law proceedings by allowing the appointment of experts in without prior approval and work on a joint action plan with the Department of Health to improve outcomes for parties to private family proceedings.

I intend to continue to build on this good start including considering recommendations on the establishment of the Family Justice Board. In making decisions, I will want to consider all options and learn from the experience of other jurisdictions. I have noted, for example, that the independent Chair of the Family Justice Board in England and Wales has been replaced by joint Ministerial Chairs from the Department of Education and Ministry of Justice. I will wish to learn from the experience that has driven that change in approach before reaching any decisions.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice whether her Department will consult on legislation to contain a requirement for jury directions to be given in modern slavery and human trafficking offence cases to enable juries to approach court evidence in a more informed manner, as recommended by CJINI in their recent report; and to detail the timeline for this consultation.

(AQW 9512/17-22)

Mrs Long: My Department is looking at a number of recommendations relating to jurors' responsibilities emanating from the CJINI report on modern slavery and human trafficking and the Gillen Review, which includes a similar recommendation about giving directions to rape trial jurors (an issue which was also previously noted by CJINI).

I intend to roll these together into a policy review in 2021, which will include a public consultation on a range of juror issues later in the year.

Any proposals for legislation which emerge will be considered for inclusion in the legislative programme for the next mandate.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister of Justice whether statistics on the racial background of people fined in Northern Ireland for breaches of COVID-19 restrictions have been compiled; and whether the findings of Lady Lawrence's inquiry that BAME people were seven times more likely to be fined than white people for COVID-19 infringements in England also applies in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 9549/17-22)

Mrs Long: The Department does not hold the information requested. Fixed Penalty Notices (FPNs) in respect of breaches of COVID regulations may be issued by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), local councils, Border Force and any other body designated by DoH.

The issue of fixed penalty notices by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the associated statistics is a matter for the Chief Constable, who is accountable to the Northern Ireland Policing Board. I am committed to respecting the operational independence of the Chief Constable and the role of the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

You may, therefore, wish to direct your question to the PSNI or to District Councils.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Justice why legislation does not make provision for time remanded on bail counting towards time served in the case of an imposed curfew and the use of electronic monitoring.

(AQW 9554/17-22)

Mrs Long: The introduction of credit for periods on bail with an electronic monitoring condition in England and Wales was facilitated by provisions in the Criminal Justice & Immigration Act 2008 ("the 2008 Act") that were brought forward in response to a recommendation in Lord Carter's Review on the efficient and sustainable use of custody (essentially to curb prison overcrowding).

The provisions were implemented alongside another accepted Carter recommendation to reserve custody for the most serious offenders for which provision was also made in the 2008 Act.

This was achieved by means of an amendment to the Bail Act 1976 (Section 3AB) to provide a pre-condition that electronic monitoring can only be imposed as a condition of bail where the judge would otherwise have remanded an individual into custody.

Neither the provisions of the 2008 Act referred to above nor the Bail Act 1976 extend to Northern Ireland. Here, electronic monitoring is available as a condition of court bail without pre-condition as to its application, not just to those who might otherwise have been remanded into custody.

In this sense it is no different to court bail with a curfew condition (without an electronic monitoring requirement) where freedom of movement is also restricted by the court during curfew hours.

In neither scenario does the time spent on bail count as time served for sentence calculation purposes under the Treatment of Offenders Act (Northern Ireland) 1968.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister of Justice whether she has any plans to introduce legislation to make provision for time remanded on bail counting towards time served in the case of an imposed curfew and the use of electronic monitoring, similar to the corresponding provision in England and Wales contained in Section 240A of the Criminal Justice Act 2003.

(AQW 9555/17-22)

Mrs Long: The introduction of credit for periods on bail with an electronic monitoring condition in England and Wales was facilitated by provisions in the Criminal Justice & Immigration Act 2008 ("the 2008 Act") that were brought forward in response to a recommendation in Lord Carter's Review on the efficient and sustainable use of custody (essentially to curb prison overcrowding).

The provisions were implemented alongside another accepted Carter recommendation to reserve custody for the most serious offenders for which provision was also made in the 2008 Act.

This was achieved by means of an amendment to the Bail Act 1976 (Section 3AB) to provide a pre-condition that electronic monitoring can only be imposed as a condition of bail where the judge would otherwise have remanded an individual into custody.

Neither the provisions of the 2008 Act referred to above nor the Bail Act 1976 extend to Northern Ireland. Here, electronic monitoring is available as a condition of court bail without pre-condition as to its application, not just to those who might otherwise have been remanded into custody.

In this sense it is no different to court bail with a curfew condition (without an electronic monitoring requirement) where freedom of movement is also restricted by the court during curfew hours.

In neither scenario does the time spent on bail count as time served for sentence calculation purposes under the Treatment of Offenders Act (Northern Ireland) 1968.

Any proposals to replicate the different arrangements in England and Wales for time remanded on bail to count towards time served would require significant reforms to both electronic monitoring and sentencing arrangements in Northern Ireland.

I do not have any plans to introduce any such legislation.

Ms Bunting asked the Minister of Justice for an update on recent and current waiting times for victims of sexual assault to access counselling via Nexus.

(AQW 9624/17-22)

Mrs Long: There are two steps in the process of beginning counselling with an individual. The first step is an Assessment Interview (AI) and once that is complete the person will then move on to Ongoing Counselling (OC).

At the end of Quarter 2 (July – September 2020) the waiting list was 1029 with an average waiting time to be seen for AI of approximately 12 weeks. The waiting list at 5th November 2020 is now 839 for an AI, with an approximate average waiting time of 6 weeks.

To date the waiting time for ongoing counselling is 3 to 4 months but due to additional funding from my Department that increased the Nexus contract value, it is hoped the waiting list and waiting times will reduce further moving forward.

Department for the Economy

Dr Archibald asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) what cross-border agencies fall within the remit of her Department; and (ii) what engagements she has had with these cross-border bodies since taking up post.
(AQW 3300/17-22)

Mrs Dodds (The Minister for the Economy): There are two cross-border agencies falling within the remit of my Department.

Tourism Ireland is the body responsible for marketing the island of Ireland as a tourism destination overseas and helping Northern Ireland achieve its tourism potential.

I have had a number of meetings with Niall Gibbons, Chief Executive of Tourism Ireland since taking up post. These have covered a range of key tourism issues, such as the impact of COVID-19 on tourism, the importance of air access, and how we can best maximise the potential of the Northern Ireland Experience Brand “Embrace a Giant Spirit”. Niall Gibbons is also a member of the Tourism Recovery Steering Group which I chair.

I have also participated in Tourism Ireland events. I attended a Tourism Ireland Northern Ireland Tourism Breakfast event in New York on 10th March 2020. This provided an opportunity to meet the Tourism Ireland team and to network with representatives of the US travel industry, media guests and tourism/business leaders from Northern Ireland. On 17th June 2020 I participated in the Tourism Ireland GB Marketing Partnership Group to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on marketing campaigns and heard from the industry about their views on travel to Northern Ireland.

InterTradelreland

InterTradelreland is the body responsible for the promotion of trade and business on a cross-border basis. It seeks to enhance the global competitiveness of the economy North and South to the mutual benefit of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland.

I have met with InterTradelreland’s Chair, Ken Nelson and the agency’s senior management. This provided the opportunity for me to learn of the excellent work InterTradelreland has been doing over the past 20 years supporting small to medium sized businesses in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Discussions also included the work that the body plans to do over the next few years to support cross-border business with the range of challenges they face, including the need to adapt to the emerging digital revolution, transition to a low carbon economy, the development of clusters on a cross-border basis, and the UK’s Exit from the European Union.

My Departmental officials are in regular contact with Tourism Ireland and InterTradelreland.

Mr McGuigan asked the Minister for the Economy what strategy her Department has to promote the tourism potential of cycling.

(AQW 6936/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The tourism potential of cycling was exemplified in 2014 when Tourism Northern Ireland supported and promoted the Giro D’Italia Grand Partenza, which generated £12.7 million in tourism impact and working through Tourism Ireland overseas gained a further £11.6 million in international media coverage. Tourism NI has subsequently provided £622,000 in funding for cycling events between 2015-2020.

While consumer research by Tourism NI highlights that cycling is not a key driver of visits to Northern Ireland, it is seen as an integral part of a holiday and demand is likely to increase if cycling is made safer and more accessible for visitors.

Tourism NI works closely with a range of public and private sector organisations and businesses who can provide safe, enjoyable cycling experiences for visitors to develop and promote market-led cycling tourism products and experiences.

In order to contribute to the further development of safe, market-led cycling tourism experiences, Tourism NI fed into the Department of Infrastructure’s “Bicycle Strategy for Northern Ireland” and sat on the Cycling Working group.

Greenways are an integral part of the Department of Infrastructure’s ‘Bicycle Strategy for Northern Ireland’ and, as a result, there are several Greenways at various stages of development across several Local Authority areas in Northern Ireland.

The significant investment in Greenways and other cycling infrastructure by central and local government has begun to increase the opportunity for tourism through cycling.

Visitors expect and appreciate this investment and destinations such as Northern Ireland need to be able to demonstrate a sustainable approach in order to stay competitive. My Department is very aware of this from a tourism perspective and also a wider economic perspective, and seeks to encourage and work with partners on all initiatives that support a greener and more sustainable economy for NI.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has plans to support the local newspaper industry across Northern Ireland.

(AQW 7706/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I fully appreciate the difficulty and stress that the COVID-19 public health crisis has created for local businesses and our economy at large, and I do recognise the specific problems faced by this particular industry.

During this pandemic, the Department for the Economy has led in paying out over £340m in support grants to almost 32,000 businesses across Northern Ireland as part of a wide range of support measures introduced by the Executive and UK Government to help those who have been affected by the consequences of COVID-19.

In addition, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has recently announced further measures to protect jobs and support businesses over the coming months, at a time when the Covid-19 pandemic will unfortunately continue to have significant public health and economic impacts for our society.

There are many employment and business sectors calling for additional support at this time. Therefore, in considering further interventions, including any new funding or packages of financial support, it will be for the Executive collectively to determine how this will be allocated to best support the economy.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy for a breakdown of the tourism sectors that will benefit from the additional £9.9 million announced recently.

(AQW 7778/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The additional £9.9m funding will support a portfolio of interventions, which aim to maximise the benefits to the whole of the tourism industry by creating demand, stimulating footfall and driving business revenue as opposed to supporting specific tourism sectors.

In the absence of international visitors, current marketing campaigns to encourage Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland residents to holiday in Northern Ireland, are being uplifted to continue to stimulate consumer demand through the autumn and winter months. In addition to supporting Tourism NI's campaign activity, individual businesses will also be supported in the form of a 75% marketing grant of up to £5,000 towards their own marketing activity on the island of Ireland.

To drive further demand, Tourism NI will run a Holiday at Home Voucher Scheme providing NI consumers with discount vouchers to redeem against participating accommodation providers, attractions and activity providers.

Tourism NI is also focusing on securing business for 2021/22 by supporting Northern Ireland businesses to work in partnership with international tour operators and destination management companies. The aim is to ensure that Northern Ireland attractions, experiences and accommodation providers are being actively sold for the 2021/22 seasons by tour operators to consumers in overseas markets.

Funding is also being allocated to Tourism Ireland to support airlines in the marketing of sea and air routes between GB and Northern Ireland's ports and airports. This is aimed at increasing visitor numbers from the GB market whilst helping to sustain these routes which are important not just to tourism but also to the wider economy.

Additionally, Tourism NI will be providing targeted support to tourism businesses to adapt their products and services to respond to changes in the market place as a result of COVID-19.

Ms Sheerin asked the Minister for the Economy whether data in the skills barometer will form the evidence base for the upcoming skills strategy.

(AQW 8021/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Jobs Supported by Invest NI

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy for a breakdown on the number of jobs Invest NI have supported in 2020, by each Assembly Constituency.

(AQW 8041/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI is unable to release the number of jobs that it has supported in 2020 as this information is due for release in official publications at the end of the 2020-21 financial year. However, information on the number of jobs announced by Invest NI since 1st January 2020 is included in the table below. It should be noted that these projects may have been approved for support by Invest NI in previous years but only publicly announced in 2020. Jobs arising from these projects will be created over the next 3 to 5 years.

Jobs Announced by Invest NI (January to September 2020)

Parliamentary Constituency Area	New Jobs Announced
Belfast East	94
Belfast North	151
Belfast South	808
Belfast West	123
East Londonderry	179
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	7
Foyle	29
Mid Ulster	141
Newry & Armagh	31
North Antrim	20
North Down	31
South Antrim	19
South Down	10
West Tyrone	50
Multi-Location	300
Total	1,993

Note: Multi-location refers to jobs that may be created across a range of constituencies.

Job creation is only one element of the support Invest NI provides to businesses to help them grow. Its support ranges from expert advice and guidance to a wide portfolio of financial support towards productivity improvement, skills development, strategic planning, job creation, Research & Development, technical capability and exporting.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy for a breakdown on the number of jobs Invest NI have created in 2020, by each Assembly Constituency.

(AQW 8042/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest NI tracks the number of additional jobs created each year from KPI data collected from businesses it works with. As this process has not yet happened for 2020 we are unable to provide this information in response to your question. This information is normally available after the end of the financial year, once it has been collated and validated.

However, we have provided the number of jobs announced by Invest NI since 1st January 2020 in the table below. It should be noted that these projects may have been approved for support by Invest NI in previous years but only publicly announced in 2020. Jobs arising from these projects will be created over the next 3 to 5 years.

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Job creation is only one element of the support Invest N I provides to businesses to help them grow. Its support ranges from expert advice and guidance to a wide portfolio of financial support towards productivity improvement, skills development, strategic planning, job creation, Research & Development, technical capability and exporting.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for the Economy, (i) how many requests her Department have received from airlines and airports for support with route development; and (ii) what decision the Department has taken on each request.

(AQW 8270/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My responsibility is with maintaining and enhancing Northern Ireland's air connectivity, both domestically and internationally, which is essential to rebuilding Northern Ireland's economy. In doing so, I fully acknowledge that civil aviation is a reserved matter for the UK Department for Transport (DfT).

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.

For the calendar year to 12 October 2020, my Department has received two direct requests for support, one of which was supported, through co-operative marketing. This is the mechanism by which we provide route development support. It is delivered by Tourism Ireland and all airlines serving NI airports can apply directly to Tourism Ireland for support.

For the calendar year to 12 October 2020, Tourism Ireland have informed me that they have received eight requests for co-operative marketing support and all have been approved. This includes the one noted above.

Diane Dodds

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy whether meeting the costs of an increased cohort of teaching students at Stranmillis Univeristy College is consistent with the strategic priorities of her Department and the findings of research into Northern Ireland skills deficits.

(AQW 8285/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Whilst my Department provides the funding to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers, the Department of Education (DE) determines the ITE intake.

For Academic Year 2020/21, the NI Executive made a decision to ensure that no student who would have secured the necessary grades would be disadvantaged. DE therefore increased the overall number of ITE places and Stranmillis University College received an additional 28 places while St Mary's University College received 35.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the reasons for Ireland's university sector containing three and a third times more students than Northern Ireland's, compared to a population size two and a half times larger.

(AQW 8286/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The size of the student population in Northern Ireland (NI) is necessarily limited due to the levels of total funding available for the higher education sector. Such funding includes the level of available government budget for the NI higher education sector, student tuition fee levels in NI, and student support available for NI students. My Department must operate within these budgetary limits, which consequently impact on the number of HE students here on an annual basis.

It is not my position to comment on the higher education policy direction of the Republic of Ireland.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 6464-17/22, for an expected timeline for bringing forward proposals and a consultation on banning zero hours contracts.

(AQW 8317/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As outlined in my reply to AQW 6464-17/22, I will wish to take account of the views of stakeholders on this important issue. The pandemic has had a significant impact on the economy and I have sought to prioritise those legislative measures required to immediately address the effects of the pandemic on workers and businesses. In light of this ongoing priority, it is not possible to give a firm timeframe in relation to bringing forward consultation on this matter. However, I

recognise the importance of the issue and I have asked my officials to continue to work towards bringing forward proposals at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 6555/17-22, to specifically outline (i) which areas of funding for COVID-19 response measures were ring-fenced; (ii) where reallocations of £23.7 million originated from; and (iii) where they were directed to in order to fund emerging pressures.
(AQW 8319/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The Department for the Economy has received a total of £481.6 million Resource DEL funding from the Executive for COVID-19 response measures. All of this funding is ring-fenced.

In May 2020, £410.0 million was received relating to schemes to assist businesses experiencing financial hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with the overarching aim being to protect jobs and prevent business closures. £68.1 million of this funding was surrendered as it was not required based on the uptake of the schemes. £1.4 million was also received for student hardship. These schemes are ring-fenced.

As part of the June monitoring process £4.7 million was allocated to my Department for four COVID-19 interventions in Invest NI and Higher Education, each of these is ring-fenced. In respect of the COVID SME Process & Organisational Improvement Grant £1.2 million was surrendered at October monitoring as demand was less than originally anticipated.

In August and September 2020, as a result of the Chancellor's Summer Economic Update, my Department received urgent allocations for six initiatives totalling £26.3 million. Three for Apprenticeship schemes; two for Further Education relating to the provision of a safe learning environment and the additional cost of free school meals; and one for Higher Education to meet increased student numbers as a result of the policy change in respect of awarding A-level results in 2020. Each of these six initiatives is ring-fenced.

More recently, in the COVID-19 Allocation Exercise agreed on 24 September 2020, £39.2 million was allocated to my Department for 23 initiatives grouped into eight categories:

- Assistance to Business - £8.5 million;
- Skills and Youth Training - £8.35 million;
- Tourism £9.85 million;
- Stimulating Air Access Restoration – £1.85 million;
- Energy Strategy - £1.35 million;
- University Research - £5.8 million;
- Provision of a safe learning environment in Higher Education - £2.5 million; and
- Provision of a safe learning environment in Further Education not funded in earlier exercises - £1.0 million.

For this most recent funding, as detailed in AQW 6555/17-22, the Executive approved the ability to exercise flexibility across similar initiatives within the same category of funding. For previous funding there is no flexibility to reallocate funds across the various COVID-19 response measures.

- (ii) and (iii) In addition to the allocations from the Executive detailed above, as noted in AQW 6555/17-22, £23.7 million of funding was reallocated from the budget of my own Department, as part of June monitoring, to address emerging COVID-19 budget pressures. This funding is not ring-fenced. These reallocations originated from areas where Reduced Requirements as a result of COVID-19 were identified, and also from an assessment to determine if anything could be reduced or stopped to address priority COVID-19 pressures. The funding was mainly re-prioritised from Invest NI and Higher Education. More details on the pressures which were met from the reallocations are detailed on pages 25 and 26 of the Finance Minister's June Monitoring Statement at the following link:

<https://www.finance-ni.gov.uk/publications/year-monitoring-public-expenditure-2020-21>

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the support being given to students who are away from home and currently in isolation at our universities.
(AQW 8340/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In Northern Ireland, there are 3 main types of student accommodation:

- University owned and operated student accommodation (Halls of Residence);
- Purpose built and managed student accommodation (Private); and
- Houses of multiple occupation (HMOs) and the private rented sector.

For university owned and operated student accommodation, the universities already have in place systems to advise, support and assist isolating students living in this type of accommodation. For the remaining two types of student accommodation, it is proposed to issue a 'support framework', through the HEIs, to keep them informed of the range of support measures which are already in place, whether at the university-level, or even information on local providers of groceries and medical supplies. Officials have been working to develop this framework with the Department for Communities, who developed the Covid-19 Regional Community Helpline (Advice NI) and which can help to triage students' individual needs through appropriate sign-

posting. This framework will provide clear and consistent information on the support which is currently available for isolating HE students, and will issue shortly.

In addition, my Department provides support to students facing genuine financial hardship through the provision of support funds. These funds are distributed by the universities on behalf of my Department. A total of £5.6m was allocated to the universities in this financial year, and students should contact their institution for details on eligibility and how to apply for support.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy, with regard to the ending of the current European Social Fund Programme funding period in 2022, for her assessment of the risks to funding to Northern Ireland disability employment groups.
(AQW 8409/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The funding for existing projects supported by the Northern Ireland European Social Fund (ESF) Programme (2014-2020) continues until March 2022. A joint project with the Department for Communities has been established to consider the policy and delivery options once the current projects conclude.

Securing the necessary funding will be a key consideration. Until we have clarity from the UK Government on the UK Shared Prosperity Fund there is a risk to provision after March 2022. Engagement on the funding issues is being progressed by the Department of Finance with the objective of securing at least the same level of funding as we currently receive from the EU.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department has reviewed all BT broadband schemes that her Department funded, or part funded.
(AQW 8423/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has not funded any BT schemes. BT has, as the successful bidder, delivered a number of public broadband interventions following a public procurement process. These include the Next Generation Broadband Project (NGBP), the Northern Ireland Broadband Improvement Project (NIBIP), and the Superfast Rollout Project (SRP). Of these, a Post Project Evaluation (PPE) has been carried out in line with Government practice on the NGBP. NIBIP and SRP were funded jointly with BDUK which has carried out an assurance on the expenditure on NIBIP, and will also conduct this exercise on SRP. In due course PPEs will be undertaken by the Department on both projects when the projects have completed.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy what engagement she is undertaking with other Departments to ensure (i) the new renewable electricity target which she said should not be below 70 per cent by 2030 is achievable; and (ii) that all necessary cross-Departmental action is taken to ensure it is delivered.
(AQW 8459/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Given the inter-related nature of your questions, I will answer them together.

I agree that the success of a future Energy Strategy will require action across a number of Department. This is why my Department leads an Energy Strategy Government Stakeholders Group, covering both central and local government, to ensure partnership-working across all the relevant departments. In addition, many departments are represented on the five working groups looking at policy options in respect of power, heat, transport, energy efficiency and consumers.

This collaborative approach ensures that the Energy Strategy is not only aligned with other Departmental strategies, e.g. DAERA Green Growth, but also that where action may be required by other Departments, this is being adequately considered with those officials involved from the outset.

The issues around achieving at least a 70% renewable electricity target, including grid development and route to market, are being considered within the Power Working Group.

This group includes representation from both the Transmission System and the Distribution Network Operators, as well as the Utility Regulator, to ensure that ambitions in relation to renewable electricity generation can be accommodated by the grid in the most cost effective way possible. This will require a combination of grid investment and greater system efficiency and flexibility through the deployment measures such as smart system technology, better use of data and ancillary services.

The Power Working Group is also considering any future support mechanisms that may be needed to bring forward investment. As a first step, I have asked my officials to engage with their counterparts in the Department for Business,

Energy and Industrial Strategy to look at the potential of the Contracts for Difference Scheme. However, a wide range of potential mechanisms are also being considered.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy how her Department will ensure the electricity grid is capable of facilitating the new renewable electricity target of at least 70 per cent by 2030.
(AQW 8460/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Given the inter-related nature of your questions, I will answer them together.

I agree that the success of a future Energy Strategy will require action across a number of Department. This is why my Department leads an Energy Strategy Government Stakeholders Group, covering both central and local government, to

ensure partnership-working across all the relevant departments. In addition, many departments are represented on the five working groups looking at policy options in respect of power, heat, transport, energy efficiency and consumers.

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Energy and Industrial Strategy to look at the potential of the Contracts for Difference Scheme. However, a wide range of potential mechanisms are also being considered.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, given the role it will play in attracting investment and creating jobs as part of the green recovery, what steps her Department has been taken to accelerate the publication of the new Energy Strategy.

(AQW 8461/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I welcome your recognition of the important role that energy will play in supporting a green recovery.

The Energy Strategy, led by my Department, will provide a long-term direction of travel for the future decarbonisation of energy, and the decisions within it will have significant implications for consumers and taxpayers for decades to come. This work needs to be given the appropriate time to ensure decisions are evidence-based and thoroughly considered.

A large work programme is therefore progressing through the five working groups which brings together over 70 stakeholders to develop appropriate policy options relating to heat, power, transport, energy efficiency and consumers.

I have also made clear that I will not wait for the strategy to be published to progress urgent issues that need to be moved forward now. In that regard, I have set out my ambition for both hydrogen and renewable electricity in advance of the strategy being published in order to provide a clear signal to industry and encourage investment now.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, given her recent commitment that the new renewable electricity target should not be below 70 per cent by 2030, for an update on what work has been done to introduce a route to market for renewable projects.

(AQW 8462/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Given the inter-related nature of your questions, I will answer them together.

I agree that the success of a future Energy Strategy will require action across a number of Department. This is why my Department leads an Energy Strategy Government Stakeholders Group, covering both central and local government, to ensure partnership-working across all the relevant departments. In addition, many departments are represented on the five working groups looking at policy options in respect of power, heat, transport, energy efficiency and consumers.

This collaborative approach ensures that the Energy Strategy is not only aligned with other Departmental strategies, e.g. DAERA Green Growth, but also that where action may be required by other Departments, this is being adequately considered with those officials involved from the outset.

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The Power Working Group is also considering any future support mechanisms that may be needed to bring forward investment. As a first step, I have asked my officials to engage with their counterparts in the Department for Business,

Energy and Industrial Strategy to look at the potential of the Contracts for Difference Scheme. However, a wide range of potential mechanisms are also being considered.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what action she is taking to co-ordinate with other Executive Ministers to support students and staff at universities and colleges in Northern Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic.

(AQW 8483/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

Universities

While my Department is responsible for higher education policy in relation to teaching and research, as autonomous institutions, the universities are ultimately responsible for their own policies in relation to responding to the Covid-19 pandemic in line with Public Health Agency (PHA) advice – this includes ensuring there are robust protocols in place to minimise the spread of Covid-19. My Department has no formal remit to intervene, although we have shared a range of relevant supporting guidance with the universities.

That said, I and my officials are in very regular contact with our universities and university colleges, and I have sought assurances from them on provision for a safe opening, for both students and staff. My officials, along with the universities, have also been participating in the Executive Office's Covid-19 Strategic Enforcement Group. For the past couple of weeks, this group has had higher education as a key agenda point, in order to discuss actions to help minimise the spread of Covid-19, and discuss support for students who are self-isolating.

All HEIs have confirmed that the health, safety and wellbeing of their staff and students is their first priority. Plans for a safe return to campus were developed in accordance with the NI Executive's Pathway to Recovery plan, and are in adherence to all guidelines issued by the Public Health Agency.

From a financial perspective, 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. 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.

Further Education Colleges

My Department and I recognise that since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the needs of staff and learners at Further Education (FE) colleges have changed, as has the nature and delivery of the support they require. Supporting them at this time is a key priority for both the Department and the FE colleges themselves.

In June my Department established an Advisory and Oversight Group (AOG) to work collaboratively with the FE Sector to prepare for the safe resumption of on-site educational delivery. The AOG developed the 'Framework for Recommending On-site Educational Provision and Related Activities in FE Colleges and Non-Statutory Contractors (NSCs)' which was provided to FE colleges and published online. This document provides clear guidance about how FE colleges should support their staff and learners, for example, through the provision of an extended induction process to ensure that both staff and learners are aware of and understand the college's policies, procedures and controls; the provision of support services and pastoral support; and guidance for those who are delivering and engaging in industry related courses at the colleges.

In developing this Framework Document, my Department liaised with other Executive Departments as required. Recognising the need for appropriate medical and scientific advice in guiding the safe resumption of onsite education, my officials engaged with DoH and the Chief Medical Officer, resulting in a number of discussions with the PHA to obtain specific advice for the FE Sector and the challenges it faces. Further, over the summer months, officials liaised with the Department of Education on their approach to Education Restart in schools on a weekly basis; as well as reviewing and considering guidance issued to schools when developing similar guidance for the FE Sector.

My Department will continue to engage with other Executive Departments as necessary to ensure that issues relating to the resumption of onsite educational delivery and related activity are resolved, and the support required by staff and learners is provided as efficiently and effectively as possible.

From a financial perspective, my Department secured £1.078 million of additional resource funding from the Department of Finance for the FE colleges, allocated as part of June monitoring. This was used to provide laptops, equipment and software for financially vulnerable learners and staff to assist with digital and remote study and working during the initial lockdown. More recently, I secured £6.5 million to support the safe resumption of learning in the colleges. This will provide additional IT, cover additional staff costs and embed appropriate measures to provide for safe resumption of delivery at FE 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.

During the pandemic, my Department ensured that FE student support arrangements continued to operate effectively or were adapted to direct flexible support to students in need. This included paying childcare retainer fees during the initial lockdown, acceptance of electronic applications and evidence, paying Free School Meal allowances into households and ensuring there was effective public transport arrangements for Term 1.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the potential additional financial burden facing further and higher education students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; and what support she can provide.

(AQW 8486/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department provides approximately £435 million of support to students across further and higher education every year. For Further Education (FE), this includes FE Grants, College Hardship Fund (both of which include childcare support), Free School Meals and Home to College Transport.

In addition to the current support arrangements, my Department initially secured £1.078 million of additional resource funding in June monitoring for the colleges to provide IT equipment for financially vulnerable learners to assist with remote learning during the initial lockdown. More recently I secured an additional £6.5 million from the Executive to support safe resumption of learning in FE colleges.

An additional £0.43 million has been allocated to fund direct payment of Free School Meal Allowances into the households of almost 1,900 eligible school-age FE students. My Department also continued to pay Educational Maintenance Allowance to eligible FE students when the FE Colleges shifted to online provision earlier this year.

During the pandemic, my Department has ensured that current FE student support arrangements continued to operate effectively, or were adapted, to direct support to students in need. This included paying childcare retainer fees during the initial lockdown, acceptance of electronic applications and evidence, paying Free School Meal allowances into households and ensuring there was effective public transport arrangements in place.

Regarding Higher Education (HE), it is a priority for me that students continue to receive the support to enable them to continue their higher education during this time. To date, a total of £56.2m of support has been paid out to 38,000 students by Student Finance NI for the current financial year. This comprises tuition fee loans, maintenance loans and grants, Disabled Students Allowance and other support.

I am aware that many HE students may be facing financial hardship due to the effects of the pandemic. In response, I have doubled the amount of support funds available to our universities from £2.8m to £5.6m for the current financial year. These funds are distributed by the universities on behalf of my Department and I would encourage any students who are experiencing financial genuine financial hardship to contact the student support team at their institution for details on how to apply.

My Department continues to keep support arrangements for HE and FE students under review and will adapt these as required in response to evolving needs.

Ms Sugden asked the Minister for the Economy whether those returning to Northern Ireland from travel to a country on the quarantine list, and are required to self-isolate for 14 days upon return, are eligible for (i) Statutory Sick Pay; and (ii) Contractual Sick Pay from their employer.

(AQW 8499/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Sick pay entitlement varies from job to job as there are different sick pay schemes in operation.

(i) Statutory Sick Pay

Statutory Sick Pay is paid to employees, who are unable to work due to sickness, at a flat rate of £95.85 for up to 28 weeks. In order to qualify for payment an individual must be classed as an employee, have worked for their employer, have been ill for at least 4 days in a row (including non-working days) and earned an average of at least £120 per week. They must report that they are sick in advance of their employer's deadline or within 7 days if the employer has not set a deadline.

A number of amendments have been made to Statutory Sick Pay in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and these include:

- extending eligibility to those who need to self-isolate for medical reasons to protect others,
- temporary removal of the three day waiting period meaning that where an eligible individual is sick or self-isolating due to COVID-19 Statutory Sick Pay will be available from day one,
- providing for those who have been advised by the Regional Agency for Public Health and Social Well Being that they have had contact with a symptomatic person or who have tested positive for COVID-19, and should therefore stay at home and self-isolate as a result.

No specific provision has been made for those who have chosen to travel to countries on the quarantine list and who are required to self-isolate on their return home, but depending on their personal circumstances they may be able to claim Universal Credit.

Additionally, anyone who finds themselves in a crisis situation can apply for financial assistance with short-term living expenses from the Discretionary Support Scheme which is available to employed earners whose income does not exceed £20,404.80 per annum.

(ii) Contractual Sick Pay

Many employers offer Contractual Sick Pay schemes that are more generous than the legal minimum (Statutory Sick Pay). The options available to individuals in these circumstances will depend on the terms of their employment contract.

Details of an employer's sick pay entitlement should be included in a written statement of employment particulars. If an employer does not offer a scheme, the written statement should say so.

An employer can offer any scheme that does not fall below the legal minimum. If an employer does not have a company sick scheme, then an individual will be paid, if they qualify, Statutory Sick Pay (SSP). As highlighted above, this would not include a situation where an individual is self-isolating after entering or returning to the UK and does not need to self-isolate for any other reason.

Further information on employer responsibilities and employee rights concerning sick pay can be found at <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/sick-pay-rights>.

Employees who believe they have been unfairly treated, or their terms of contract breached, may be able to complain to an Industrial Tribunal. Anyone who finds themselves in this position may wish to consider contacting the Labour Relations Agency - Workplace Information Service on 03300 555 300 for confidential and impartial information.

In addition, the Law Centre NI provides free, independent, specialist legal advice (subject to capacity) on employment rights. The Law Centre can be contacted on their advice line on 028 9024 4401 or by email: employmentadvice@lawcentreni.org.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy whether the priorities of the Utilities Regulator Northern Ireland will be changed by legislation to ensure that expenditure requests ensures both the lowest cost of electricity to the consumer and enables Northern Ireland to effectively contribute to meeting the UK's 2050 net zero target.

(AQW 8517/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Energy Strategy Call for Evidence, which was published in December of last year, specifically asked for views on changes to legislation and regulatory frameworks that may be required to facilitate energy transition. Any changes deemed necessary to achieve net zero energy in a cost-competitive manner for consumers, which may include amending existing legislation, reviewing statutory duties and obligations or introducing new responsibilities, will be considered as part of the Energy Strategy development process.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy, following her comments to the Northern Ireland Energy Forum on 29 September 2020, what urgent issues will be addressed in advance of the implementation of the forthcoming Energy Strategy.

(AQW 8518/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I have stated that I will not wait for the Energy Strategy to be published to move forward urgent issues. This is why I have prioritised work to progress opportunities around hydrogen and renewable electricity.

Hydrogen

I have met with a number of key players in Northern Ireland who can help to support the growth of the hydrogen economy, and my Department has identified a range of potential projects across the public and private sectors that can help to position Northern Ireland as leader in this space.

I have subsequently been seeking to identify potential funding routes, particularly from UK Government, to help move these forward in advance of publication of the Energy Strategy.

I have also met with Ministerial colleagues to seek to establish a public sector hydrogen working group to deliver a coordinated approach across government to identifying and furthering such projects.

Renewable Electricity

I recognise that a supportive policy environment needs to be in place to deliver investment in this sector so I set out my belief that a target for renewable electricity should be at least 70% by 2030. This has provided a clear signal to industry about my ambition, to allow them to begin to develop potential projects now rather than waiting for the strategy.

In addition, I have instructed officials to engage with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) on the potential for the Contracts for Difference Scheme to be extended to Northern Ireland, subject to securing an agreement around how this could accommodate our individual circumstances and protect local consumers.

I have also made clear the opportunities I see in offshore wind, and my officials have been engaging with BEIS on offshore wind supply chain opportunities as well with The Crown Estate with regards to seabed leasing rights.

Mr Givan asked the Minister for the Economy to outline the COVID-19 safety measures implemented by local airports and airlines to limit the spread of the virus.

(AQW 8550/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Civil aviation is a reserved matter for the UK Department for Transport (DfT). On 11 June 2020 DfT published Coronavirus guidance for aviation operators and safer air travel guidance for passengers. This guidance applies to all workers in the aviation industry such as aircrew and flight crew, ground crew, retail staff, baggage handlers, maintenance engineers, shuttle / bus drivers, security staff, cleaners, catering company workers and workers who assist passengers with reduced mobility or disabilities. The guidance to operators supports staff by promoting safe practices and workplaces, including extensive cleaning of aircraft, increasing the availability of handwashing and hand sanitiser facilities, reducing face-to-face interactions with passengers, and introducing protocols for symptomatic passengers and staff. It is available at

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-aviation-guidance-for-operators>

The guidance to passengers covers all aspects of the travel experience, from checking the public health requirements before booking a flight, to navigating the airport safely and boarding the flight or leaving the airport. It is available at <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-safer-air-travel-guidance-for-passengers>

Local airports and airlines have implemented a range of measures to comply with public health guidelines and taking account of the guidance above in order to limit the spread of the virus.

Social distancing measures have been supported by signage, seat spacing, one way systems, protective screens at counters and provision of hand sanitising stations, revised boarding procedures and the wearing of face coverings.

Social distancing is a key public health measure and it is important that everyone plays their part; the airport, airlines and airport users including members of the public by adhering to the measures put in place.

Dr Aiken asked the Minister for the Economy what bids she has made to the Minister of Finance for additional COVID-19 support.

(AQW 8561/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Bids made by the Department for the Economy to the Department of Finance for COVID-19 response measures are detailed in the tables below. Some bids were made in more than one exercise and amounts changed due to the passage of time and more up to date information.

Resource DEL Bids

Bid	Amount £'000
June Monitoring	
Higher Education Commercial Research	10,740
Higher Education Teaching Grant	1,574
Invest NI - SME Process and Organisational Improvement Grant Support	1,500 ¹
Invest NI Communication Campaigns	876
Summer Allocation Exercise – Part 1	
Fast Start: Northern Ireland Companies in the Blue Zone	2,500
Catalyst Co-Founders Initiative	250
Support for University Research and Development	13,000
Additional Corporate Function Related Costs to ensure the DfE Emergency Response to COVID-19	320
Challenge Fund	500
All Age Apprenticeships	1,300
Youth Training Demand Pressure	3,500
Training for Success Increased Demand and Extended Age Eligibility	5,000
Advanced Vocational and Technical Award at Level 3	300
Hydrogen Economy - Electrolyser Factory and Power to X Portfolio	1,350
COVID Digital Innovation and Productivity Programme	250
Robust Research, Insights and Market Intelligence Programme	225
Short term skills interventions	3,000
Additional Budget for Skills Focus Programme	300
Screen Industry Reboot	400
Additional funding for Invest NI Innovation Support Schemes	3,100
Additional support under Invest NI Skills Intervention Programme including Skills for Growth and Skills Advancement Grant	2,300
Additional funding for the InnovateUs programme	300
COVID International Market Access Programme	200
COVID Market Led Product Development Programme	1,500
COVID Recovery - Tour Operator and Destination Management Company Support	550
Selective Financial Assistance Project Acceleration	2,500
Additional staffing to provide post-furlough employment support	195

Bid	Amount £'000
Additional Teaching Grant - 5% Phased Increase to Maximum Student Numbers	74
Additional staffing for Industrial Tribunals	150
Great Britain - Rebuilding Over The Winter and Stimulating Demand for 2021	6,000
Mainland Europe - Restarting Business from Germany, France and The Netherlands	2,500
Northern Ireland Industry and Overseas Trade Partners Driving Recovery	1,500
Regional Skills Hubs	500
Small Business Accelerator	375
Extension of European Social Fund	22,595
COVID Recovery - Business Tourism and Conference Support	900
Project Spring	1,000
Increasing Northern Ireland Consumer Confidence	243
Stranmillis Resource Pressure - Loss of Income due to Covid-19	1,109
Additional Teaching Grant - Funding to Support Part Time Provision at Open University	750
COVID-19 Related Additional Expenditure To Provide Safe Learning Environment	6,508
Free School Meals Allowances Pressure	430
Loss of Income due to COVID-19	3,630
Retain Your Apprentice - Return, Retention, Result	8,400
Incentives to Support the Recruitment of New Apprenticeships	12,500
A COVID Recovery Heavyweight Consumer Advertising Programme Across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland	4,000
Stimulating Air Access Restoration	2,000
COVID Holiday At Home Vouchers Campaign	1,300
Promotion of "We're Good to Go" Industry Standard and Consumer Mark	350
Summer Allocation Exercise – Part 2	
Assistance to Business	8,550
Skills and Youth Training	12,100
Assistance to Tourism	9,850
Hydrogen Economy - Electrolyser Factory and Power to X Portfolio	1,350
Support for University Research and Development	13,000
Further Assistance to Business	2,875
Assistance to Tourism	5,900
Additional Staffing	345
Extension of European Social Fund	22,595
Additional Teaching Grant - 5% Phased Increase to Maximum Student Numbers	74
Increasing Northern Ireland Consumer Confidence	243
COVID Cruise Hub Investment	70
Project Spring	1,000
COVID-19 Related Additional Expenditure To Provide Safe Learning Environment	1,000
Stranmillis College Loss of Income due to COVID-19	1,109
Additional Teaching Grant - Funding to Support Part Time Provision at Open University	750
Loss of Income due to COVID-19	3,500

Bid	Amount £'000
Additional Corporate Function Related Costs to ensure the DfE Emergency Response to COVID-19	311
Additional Higher Education Teaching Grant due to Change in Policy on Awarding of A-Level Results in 2020	3,175
Additional Exercise – Higher Education Safe Learning Environment	2,500
October Monitoring	
Support for University Research and Development	7,200
Further Assistance to Business	2,875
Assistance to Tourism	4,050
Additional Staffing	345
Additional Teaching Grant - 5% Phased Increase to Maximum Student Numbers	74
Increasing Northern Ireland Consumer Confidence	143
COVID Cruise Hub Investment	70
Project Spring	1,000
Loss of Income due to COVID-19	2,500
Free School Meals Allowances Pressure Term 1	171

1. Surrender of £1,154k at October Monitoring

Financial Transactions Capital and Conventional Capital DEL

Bid	Amount £'000
June Monitoring – Financial Transactions Capital	
Invest NI	10,000 ²
Tourism NI	10,000
Summer Allocation Exercise – Part 1 – Capital DEL	
Hydrogen economy – electrolyser factory and Power to X portfolio	4,825
SFA Project Acceleration	300

2 Surrender of £7,000k at October Monitoring

In addition to these bids my Department received £411.4 million for COVID-19 response measures. Of this amount, £410.0 million was for grant schemes to assist businesses experiencing financial hardship as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and £1.4 million was for student hardship. Due to underspends across the three grant schemes, £68.1 million of funding was returned to DoF.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy what independent research she has (i) commissioned; and (ii) consulted on regarding the role that freeports can play in incentivising international trade, boosting innovation and regenerating disadvantaged areas post-Brexit.

(AQW 8576/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I want to ensure that the emerging UK Government Freeport proposals are shaped in a manner which can drive economic growth in Northern Ireland and bolster our medium to longer term response to the Covid pandemic.

It is important to get this policy right and I am exploring, alongside Executive colleagues, how a Freeport can complement and magnify our economic ambitions in a way that supports a regionally balanced economy. Alongside our own internal analysis, my Department has commissioned research from the Institute for Export and International Trade to inform that assessment.

My officials engage regularly, alongside DoF colleagues who are leading on this work from an NI perspective, with their UK Government counterparts on this emerging policy. They participated in a series of consultation events organised by HMT, and engagement has continued with a range of stakeholders, conscious of the potential for a future Freeport allocation process.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy what discussions she has had with (i) the UK Government; (ii) Executive colleagues; and (iii) Northern Ireland port authorities regarding freeport status.

(AQW 8577/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The UK Government's Freeports policy is being developed by Her Majesty's Treasury and as such is being led by the Finance Minister from a Northern Ireland perspective. The Finance Minister wrote to HM Treasury last August setting out the Executive's position and seeking further clarity on the policy, some of which has been provided in the Government's response to its Freeport consultation.

In seeking to ensure that this emerging policy is designed in a manner that works best in the Northern Ireland context, my officials engage regularly, alongside DoF colleagues, with their UK Government counterparts. They participated in a series of consultation events organised by HM Treasury, and engagement has continued with a range of stakeholders, including representatives of the NI port authorities, while remaining conscious of the potential for a future Freeport allocation process.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy has her Department given generation consent for Mullavilly, Drumkee and Kells BESSs in the full knowledge that they have obtained planning permission on the basis of being non-generating developments and with no stated capacity on their planning permissions.

(AQW 8588/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department is satisfied the Mullavilly, Drumkee and Kells battery storage plants fall within and require consent under Article 39 of the Electricity (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 Order. Accordingly, and as the applications were in order, the Department granted the consents requested.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether they share the commitment of the Irish government in its Programme for Government of working with the Northern Irish Executive to create a coastal tourist trail, linking the Wild Atlantic Way, the Causeway Coastal Route and along our eastern and southern coast; and (ii) if so, how they will fulfil that joint objective.

(AQW 8613/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The Wild Atlantic Way Experience Brand is one of several experience brands in the Republic of Ireland that was created by Fáilte Ireland to fulfil market need. The Wild Atlantic Way has been supported by marketing communications and experience development activity which gives the consumer reasons to visit.

It has been clear for many years, that if Northern Ireland is to compete effectively for tourism spend with the rest of the Island of Ireland, it urgently required its own distinctive tourism brand, which is reflective of the experience that a visitor truly encounters when on a trip to Northern Ireland.

Following extensive national and international testing, a new Experience Brand was developed and launched for Northern Ireland in 2019: Northern Ireland – Embrace a Giant Spirit. When this brand was tested against existing marketing content, there was a 30% increase in the number of people showing an interest in visiting Northern Ireland.

The priority has been to create a brand that will give the whole of Northern Ireland standout in the marketplace. The tourism industry has adopted Northern Ireland's new experience brand with significant enthusiasm as it recognises the potential of the new brand to contribute to local economic growth and to spread the economic benefits across all regions of Northern Ireland over the long-term. The Causeway Coastal Route is a key offer within our new brand.

- (ii) There has been to date no formal discussions at Executive level to link The Wild Atlantic Way with the Causeway Coastal Route with the objective to form a single coastal tourist trail. Both are distinct brands that serve to market separate geographies and jurisdictions and both are recognised internationally.

It is important that the new Northern Ireland brand is embedded with both the local industry and the international trade. The economic rationale for creating a new coastal tourist trail, linking the Wild Atlantic Way and the Causeway Coastal Route would need to be fully understood and have the agreement of the industry, Tourism Northern Ireland, Fáilte Ireland and the local authorities on both sides of the border.

The implementation of a new coastal tourist trail would have to be undertaken in a way that makes sense from a consumer perspective and executed in a way that would not dilute the new Northern Ireland brand or convey conflicting messages to the tourism industry, trade operators or consumers.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy whether her Department intends to remove the NI Apprenticeship schemes age limit cap.

(AQW 8628/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As part of my Department's response to COVID-19 there has been ongoing consideration to removing age-related funding criteria on the ApprenticeshipsNI programme to improve access to apprenticeships, providing reskilling opportunities and pathways to employment and life-long learning for all. It is important that any Departmental proposals do not disadvantage young people, as analysis of previous recessions demonstrates that young people, and in particular school leavers, are disproportionately impacted during times of recession.

I have instructed my Department to continue to develop this proposal, including assessing how implementation should be monitored to prevent a negative impact on youth unemployment, with a view to introducing all-age apprenticeships at the earliest opportunity.

Higher Level Apprenticeships, including funding, are already available for applicants of all ages who meet the qualifying criteria.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to detail her plans to reimburse students who have paid for student accommodation but will not receive face to face education on campus.

(AQW 8644/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Higher education institutions are autonomous bodies, and are therefore responsible for determining the cost of student accommodation insofar as university-managed Halls of Residence are concerned. The same principle applies for the private rental market.

My Department therefore has no remit in determining whether students should receive a refund or reduction of their accommodation fees as a result of the disruption caused to face-to-face learning.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the robustness of the information upon which the level of support was determined for anaerobic digesters under the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation scheme.

(AQW 8647/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Neither anaerobic digestion plants nor the biogas they produce are eligible for support under the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO). The NIRO supports the generation of renewable electricity, including electricity generated by stations fuelled by biogas produced through the anaerobic digestion process.

This is an important distinction as any revenue streams for anaerobic digestion plants that do not relate to electricity production by a generating station are not within the scope of the NIRO.

The banding levels set for such stations were informed by information gathered through a public call for evidence in 2010 and subsequent consultation. Information was provided from a range of sources with knowledge and experience in anaerobic digestion, and provided examples from international best practice. Further information was gathered in 2014, upon which banding levels were maintained.

The decision on banding levels was scrutinised by the Enterprise, Trade & Investment Committee, and debated in the Assembly where the associated legislation was subsequently passed.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy how she will ensure that recommendations made by the Northern Ireland Audit Office in regards to the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation scheme are incorporated into any future energy schemes.

(AQW 8648/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation scheme

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the levels of return for anaerobic digesters as part of the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation scheme; and whether these represent value for money.

(AQW 8650/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Neither anaerobic digestion plants nor the biogas they produce are eligible for support under the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO). The NIRO supports the generation of renewable electricity, including electricity generated by stations fuelled by biogas produced through the anaerobic digestion process.

This is an important distinction as any revenue streams for anaerobic digestion plants that do not relate to electricity production by a generating station are not within the scope of the NIRO. I therefore cannot comment on the rates of returns of anaerobic digesters themselves.

The levels of returns for renewable electricity generating stations are based on a number of factors, not just the Renewable Obligation Certificate (ROC) banding levels set, and the rates of returns will differ substantially depending on the assumptions about the individual circumstances of generators used to calculate any figures.

I note that the Audit Office report includes a recommendation to carry out a review of the levels of support available and rates of return for renewable generators, and I have accepted this.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for the Economy (i) whether the Barnett consequential of circa £30 million per year until 2040 for renewable heat, as outlined by the Chancellor, will be available to new projects from 1 April 2020; or (ii) whether the money will be returned to Treasury if it is not committed to projects, or to schemes that it was allocated to under the Northern Ireland Renewable Heat Initiative, are subsequently closed.

(AQW 8656/17-22)

Mrs Dodds:

- (i) The NDNA includes a commitment that, "RHI will be closed down and replaced by a scheme that effectively cuts carbon emissions". I will bring forward a new scheme in due course. Any new scheme will be introduced in line with the new Northern Ireland Energy strategy, as part of an overall framework to support the pathway to net zero carbon.
- (ii) Funds for the RHI scheme are drawn down from the AME budget as required. Where funds are not drawn down, they will be retained by HM Treasury.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy given that Mullavilly, Drumkee and Kells BESSs obtained planning permission on the basis of being non-generating developments and with no stated capacity on their planning permissions, will the generating consents given by her Department now be withdrawn.

(AQW 8682/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department is satisfied the Mullavilly, Drumkee and Kells battery storage plants fall within and require consent under Article 39 of the Electricity (Northern Ireland) Order 1992 Order. Accordingly, and as the applications were in order, the Department granted the consents requested.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the reliability of the thirty one Independent Technical Assurance Reports submitted to OFGEM relating to off-grid or zero exporting generating stations.

(AQW 8692/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Ofgem are responsible for the administration of the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation on behalf of the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation.

They have advised that all of the information included in the Independent Technical Assurance Reports, referred to in the NIAO report entitled 'Generating electricity from renewable energy', was set aside. Comparable alternative evidence was gathered and analysed to enable Ofgem to complete their investigations.

Mr McHugh asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the postcodes from the former Strabane District Council area will be included in the roll out of Project Stratum.

(AQW 8711/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is still in the procurement and governance phase for Project Stratum, and therefore I cannot currently confirm which premises will be included in the roll out. It remains the aspiration of the project to maximise broadband coverage across the target intervention area. The table below lists the 533 postcodes from the former Strabane District Council area that contain at least one premises eligible to benefit from Project Stratum, along with a count of how many premises in the postcode are eligible (3597 premises).

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT47 2SJ	1
BT47 2SN	1
BT47 2SP	1
BT47 4JL	4
BT47 4JN	3
BT47 4JW	5
BT78 4AH	1
BT78 4BZ	10
BT78 4DA	6
BT78 4DB	3
BT78 4DE	4
BT78 4DF	1
BT78 4DG	10
BT78 4DH	4
BT78 4DJ	8
BT78 4DL	8
BT78 4DP	28

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT78 4DQ	17
BT78 4DR	4
BT78 4DW	3
BT78 4ED	17
BT78 4EE	2
BT78 4EF	7
BT78 4EG	9
BT78 4EW	7
BT78 4EX	2
BT78 4EY	3
BT78 4EZ	10
BT78 4HB	2
BT78 4HD	8
BT78 4HE	3
BT78 4HF	1
BT78 4HG	8
BT78 4HH	1
BT78 4HL	2
BT78 4HN	2
BT78 4HP	3
BT78 4HR	9
BT78 4HS	22
BT78 4HU	2
BT78 4HW	1
BT78 4HX	6
BT78 4JA	4
BT78 4JD	4
BT78 4JF	2
BT78 4JH	8
BT78 4JJ	11
BT78 4JU	3
BT78 4JZ	13
BT78 4LA	6
BT78 4LB	11
BT78 4LD	3
BT78 4LE	6
BT78 4LF	15
BT78 4LG	5
BT78 4LP	3
BT78 4LQ	2
BT78 4LS	3

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT78 4LT	3
BT78 4LU	7
BT78 4LW	5
BT78 4LX	6
BT78 4LY	1
BT78 4LZ	1
BT78 4NA	2
BT78 4NB	3
BT78 4NH	4
BT78 4NJ	6
BT78 4NL	8
BT78 4NN	4
BT78 4NP	1
BT78 4NQ	10
BT78 4NW	5
BT78 4PS	8
BT78 4PT	22
BT78 4PU	4
BT78 4PZ	2
BT78 4TB	4
BT78 4TD	1
BT78 4TH	1
BT78 4UG	2
BT79 8AG	2
BT79 8AL	2
BT79 8AP	9
BT79 8AQ	1
BT79 8AR	2
BT79 8AS	7
BT79 8AT	2
BT79 8AW	15
BT79 8AX	5
BT79 8BG	9
BT79 8BJ	9
BT79 8BN	8
BT79 8BP	11
BT79 8BS	5
BT79 8BT	1
BT79 8BU	1
BT79 8BW	9
BT79 8DN	6

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT79 8DP	10
BT79 8DR	9
BT79 8DS	2
BT79 8DT	2
BT79 8DU	3
BT79 8DW	23
BT79 8DX	12
BT79 8EH	4
BT79 8EJ	2
BT79 8EL	21
BT79 8EN	1
BT79 8EP	5
BT79 8EQ	7
BT79 8ER	1
BT79 8ES	5
BT79 8EW	2
BT79 8JX	12
BT79 8JZ	10
BT79 8LA	3
BT79 8LB	3
BT79 8LD	1
BT79 8LE	2
BT79 8LF	1
BT79 8LH	1
BT79 8LJ	1
BT79 8LL	10
BT79 8LN	5
BT79 8LP	2
BT79 8LQ	3
BT79 8LS	27
BT79 8LT	2
BT79 8LU	6
BT79 8LW	4
BT79 8LX	3
BT79 8LY	3
BT79 8LZ	12
BT79 8QD	16
BT81 7DU	1
BT81 7EF	2
BT81 7EH	9
BT81 7EJ	5

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT81 7EP	3
BT81 7ER	7
BT81 7ES	3
BT81 7ET	8
BT81 7EU	3
BT81 7EX	1
BT81 7EZ	8
BT81 7HA	8
BT81 7HB	13
BT81 7HD	12
BT81 7HE	8
BT81 7HF	18
BT81 7HQ	2
BT81 7HU	3
BT81 7HZ	5
BT81 7JB	4
BT81 7JH	3
BT81 7JJ	5
BT81 7JL	11
BT81 7JN	3
BT81 7JQ	1
BT81 7JR	3
BT81 7JS	2
BT81 7JT	3
BT81 7JU	10
BT81 7JW	5
BT81 7JX	6
BT81 7JY	15
BT81 7JZ	2
BT81 7LA	5
BT81 7LB	7
BT81 7LD	8
BT81 7LF	1
BT81 7LG	6
BT81 7LH	11
BT81 7LL	2
BT81 7LQ	1
BT81 7LS	5
BT81 7LT	2
BT81 7LU	13
BT81 7NE	3

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT81 7NF	8
BT81 7NG	8
BT81 7NH	4
BT81 7NJ	5
BT81 7NL	8
BT81 7NN	9
BT81 7NP	10
BT81 7NQ	1
BT81 7NR	7
BT81 7NT	2
BT81 7NU	9
BT81 7NW	7
BT81 7NX	4
BT81 7NY	8
BT81 7NZ	5
BT81 7PA	3
BT81 7PD	3
BT81 7PE	6
BT81 7PF	3
BT81 7PG	6
BT81 7PH	3
BT81 7PJ	2
BT81 7PL	1
BT81 7PN	3
BT81 7PQ	7
BT81 7PW	6
BT81 7PY	1
BT81 7PZ	1
BT81 7QA	2
BT81 7QF	12
BT81 7QH	15
BT81 7QJ	10
BT81 7QL	1
BT81 7QN	5
BT81 7QP	6
BT81 7QQ	3
BT81 7QR	4
BT81 7QS	8
BT81 7QT	8
BT81 7QU	10
BT81 7QW	11

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT81 7QX	3
BT81 7QY	15
BT81 7QZ	13
BT81 7RA	18
BT81 7RB	10
BT81 7RD	10
BT81 7RE	7
BT81 7RF	15
BT81 7RH	6
BT81 7RJ	14
BT81 7RL	4
BT81 7RN	3
BT81 7RQ	10
BT81 7RT	1
BT81 7RZ	9
BT81 7SA	1
BT81 7SB	8
BT81 7SD	1
BT81 7SH	5
BT81 7SJ	4
BT81 7SL	27
BT81 7SQ	9
BT81 7SR	3
BT81 7ST	1
BT81 7SU	4
BT81 7SX	18
BT81 7SY	6
BT81 7SZ	5
BT81 7TA	3
BT81 7TB	7
BT81 7TF	6
BT81 7TG	6
BT81 7TH	3
BT81 7TQ	5
BT81 7TS	9
BT81 7TT	4
BT81 7TU	11
BT81 7TZ	4
BT81 7UA	10
BT81 7UB	11
BT81 7UD	10

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT81 7UE	8
BT81 7UF	29
BT81 7UG	1
BT81 7UJ	7
BT81 7UL	11
BT81 7UN	6
BT81 7UP	1
BT81 7UQ	3
BT81 7UT	6
BT81 7UU	9
BT81 7UX	14
BT81 7UY	1
BT81 7UZ	14
BT81 7XA	10
BT81 7XB	21
BT81 7XD	5
BT81 7XE	6
BT81 7XF	4
BT81 7XG	2
BT81 7XS	5
BT81 7XT	16
BT81 7XU	3
BT81 7XX	4
BT81 7XY	4
BT81 7XZ	1
BT81 7YA	14
BT81 7YB	32
BT81 7YD	2
BT81 7YE	9
BT81 7YF	24
BT81 7YG	15
BT81 7YH	4
BT81 7YJ	23
BT81 7YL	3
BT81 7YN	8
BT81 7YQ	6
BT82 0AA	30
BT82 0AB	29
BT82 0AE	4
BT82 0AF	1
BT82 0AG	1

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT82 0AH	16
BT82 0AJ	11
BT82 0AL	2
BT82 0AN	9
BT82 0AQ	3
BT82 0AR	4
BT82 0AS	1
BT82 0AT	2
BT82 0AY	3
BT82 0BD	14
BT82 0BE	1
BT82 0BP	7
BT82 0BX	1
BT82 0BY	2
BT82 0BZ	1
BT82 0DA	7
BT82 0DD	1
BT82 0DF	5
BT82 0DG	2
BT82 0DJ	5
BT82 0DP	1
BT82 0DS	4
BT82 0DW	20
BT82 0DY	10
BT82 0DZ	4
BT82 0EA	3
BT82 0EB	19
BT82 0ED	1
BT82 0EN	1
BT82 0EP	8
BT82 0ER	3
BT82 0ES	11
BT82 0EU	1
BT82 0EW	2
BT82 0EX	6
BT82 0EZ	5
BT82 0FD	3
BT82 0HD	9
BT82 0HE	3
BT82 0HJ	4
BT82 0HP	17

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT82 0HR	1
BT82 0HS	9
BT82 0HT	2
BT82 0HX	1
BT82 0HY	7
BT82 0HZ	2
BT82 0JA	16
BT82 0JB	1
BT82 0JD	21
BT82 0JE	7
BT82 0JP	1
BT82 0JR	4
BT82 0JS	2
BT82 0JT	1
BT82 0JU	3
BT82 0JX	5
BT82 0JY	13
BT82 0JZ	7
BT82 0LA	7
BT82 0LB	2
BT82 0LD	7
BT82 0LE	10
BT82 0LF	14
BT82 0LG	7
BT82 0LH	3
BT82 0LL	1
BT82 0LN	4
BT82 0LQ	3
BT82 0LS	13
BT82 0LT	5
BT82 0LU	9
BT82 0LW	14
BT82 0LX	2
BT82 0LY	9
BT82 0LZ	10
BT82 0NA	2
BT82 0ND	2
BT82 0NE	8
BT82 0NF	1
BT82 0NG	13
BT82 0NH	2

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT82 0NJ	14
BT82 0NL	1
BT82 0NN	8
BT82 0NP	5
BT82 0NW	3
BT82 0PE	3
BT82 0PG	3
BT82 0PJ	10
BT82 0PL	1
BT82 0PN	8
BT82 0PP	8
BT82 0PR	3
BT82 0PS	1
BT82 0PT	2
BT82 0PU	1
BT82 0PW	4
BT82 0PX	8
BT82 0PY	6
BT82 0PZ	7
BT82 0QA	21
BT82 0QB	6
BT82 0QD	16
BT82 0QE	10
BT82 0QF	4
BT82 0QG	4
BT82 0QH	9
BT82 0QJ	9
BT82 0QL	1
BT82 0QN	2
BT82 0QQ	5
BT82 0QW	5
BT82 0RB	13
BT82 0RD	6
BT82 0RE	13
BT82 0RF	14
BT82 0RG	1
BT82 0RH	4
BT82 0RJ	10
BT82 0RL	1
BT82 0RN	1
BT82 0RP	11

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT82 0RQ	1
BT82 0RR	5
BT82 0RT	4
BT82 0RU	1
BT82 0RX	11
BT82 0SA	2
BT82 0SB	26
BT82 0SD	16
BT82 0SE	15
BT82 0SF	12
BT82 0SG	1
BT82 0SH	9
BT82 0SJ	1
BT82 0SL	8
BT82 0SN	12
BT82 0SP	3
BT82 0SQ	3
BT82 0SR	1
BT82 0SS	7
BT82 0ST	18
BT82 0SW	13
BT82 0TB	2
BT82 0TD	2
BT82 8FD	3
BT82 8LE	1
BT82 8LH	15
BT82 8LL	4
BT82 8LN	2
BT82 8LR	1
BT82 8LS	19
BT82 8LT	2
BT82 8NA	2
BT82 8ND	2
BT82 8NE	4
BT82 8NF	10
BT82 8NG	13
BT82 8NH	14
BT82 8NJ	1
BT82 8NN	9
BT82 8NP	8
BT82 8NR	1

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT82 8NS	1
BT82 8NT	17
BT82 8NU	20
BT82 8NW	1
BT82 8NX	3
BT82 8NY	7
BT82 8NZ	3
BT82 8PA	9
BT82 8PD	5
BT82 8PE	15
BT82 8PF	6
BT82 8PH	2
BT82 8PJ	11
BT82 8PL	4
BT82 8PN	11
BT82 8PP	11
BT82 8PQ	2
BT82 8PT	13
BT82 8PW	8
BT82 8QA	1
BT82 8QD	15
BT82 8QE	36
BT82 8QF	1
BT82 8QG	2
BT82 8QH	1
BT82 8QL	7
BT82 8QN	1
BT82 8QQ	13
BT82 8QR	4
BT82 8QT	2
BT82 8QW	9
BT82 9JJ	10
BT82 9JL	8
BT82 9JN	8
BT82 9JR	8
BT82 9JW	4
BT82 9LA	4
BT82 9LB	2
BT82 9LH	6
BT82 9LJ	2
BT82 9LL	8

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT82 9LP	8
BT82 9LS	1
BT82 9LU	2
BT82 9LW	10
BT82 9LX	3
BT82 9LY	6
BT82 9LZ	7
BT82 9NA	9
BT82 9NB	4
BT82 9ND	3
BT82 9NE	5
BT82 9NF	7
BT82 9NG	5
BT82 9NJ	12
BT82 9NL	5
BT82 9NN	6
BT82 9NP	1
BT82 9NQ	10
BT82 9NS	1
BT82 9NT	3
BT82 9NZ	1
BT82 9QP	11
BT82 9QS	4
BT82 9QT	16
BT82 9QU	7
BT82 9QX	8
BT82 9QY	5
BT82 9QZ	7
BT82 9RA	3
BT82 9RB	9
BT82 9RD	8
BT82 9RE	18
BT82 9RF	1
BT82 9RP	1
BT82 9RQ	18
BT82 9RR	4
BT82 9RX	2
BT82 9SA	11
BT82 9SB	7
BT82 9SD	1
BT82 9SE	4

Postcode	Eligible Premises
BT82 9SF	4
BT82 9SG	3
BT82 9WE	2

Miss Woods asked the Minister for the Economy (i) when the new public consultation on Tamboran Resources (UK) proposed changes to the work programme of PLA2/16 will take place; (ii) whether the new consultation will be considered as part of the wider research into petroleum licencing by her Department; and (iii) how this public consultation will be taken into account in light of the research currently being undertaken by her Department.

(AQW 8715/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In March 2020, following its own review of the responses received by the Department to the public consultation on petroleum licence application PLA2/16, Tamboran Resources UK Ltd (TRUK), made a request to my Department to revise its work programme. The proposed revision will remove the need for fracking; very much a direct result of the strength of opposition to this controversial technique highlighted by the respondents.

Given the potential significant change to the Work Programme, my Department is currently 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.

This consideration of the next steps in the assessment of PLA2/16 will include consideration of the requirement to undertake further consultation in relation to the agreed revision to the Work Programme, and if required, how and when that consultation will be taken forward.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy to detail how she plans to engage with student representatives to guarantee their voices are heard in any COVID-19 planning for universities and colleges.

(AQW 8734/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On 14 October 2020, I had a very productive meeting with representatives from NUS-USI, at which we discussed ways in which my Department could support students during these difficult times, as well as ensure that students' voices are represented in discussions which concern them.

I have agreed with NUS-USI that my officials will seek their views and ensure that they are taken into consideration as we move forward, as well as seek to ensure they are invited to any further Executive Office discussions on matters relating to higher and further education.

My officials have already ensured that NUS-USI will be invited to participate in the weekly meetings between Queen's and Ulster universities and the Public Health Agency (PHA).

Mr Beggs asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of the Northern Ireland Audit Office report into generating electricity from renewable energy.

(AQW 8737/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I welcome that the Northern Ireland Audit Office report has recognised the many achievements of the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO). Most notably, the role that the NIRO played in ensuring that the Executive's 40% renewable electricity consumption by 2020 target was achieved a year early, with the figure now at almost 48%.

I recognise that the report has made three recommendations that are specifically for my Department, and I will ensure these are implemented going forward.

Mr McGlone asked the Minister for the Economy what financial measures will be put in place to support businesses and employees affected by the restrictions announced on 14 October.

(AQW 8742/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Executive agreed restrictions that came into effect on 16 October 2020, for a period of four weeks, in order to reduce the concerning rise in the transmission of COVID-19. While this will be a difficult time for everyone across Northern Ireland, I am acutely aware of the particular impact the restrictions will have on businesses and employees, not only in the hospitality sector but across the economy.

The Department of Finance's Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) seeks to support those businesses in commercial premises severely restricted in use or now forced to close directly by the new Regulations.

The scheme launched for all council areas on 19 October 2020 and provides up to £1,200 per week to eligible businesses for the duration of the restrictions. Further information and applications can be made at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-localised-restrictions-support-scheme>.

I recognise that not all businesses who have been effected by the restrictions are able to access support through this scheme. I have therefore introduced the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme to provide support to restricted businesses who do not qualify for support through LRSS and businesses in the supply chain of restricted businesses.

Part A of the scheme, which opened on 28 October 2020, is targeted at those businesses required to close or cease trading as a result of the restrictions and are not eligible for the LRSS. Eligible businesses under this part of the scheme will received a flat grant payment of £600 per week, paid in one lump sum. Applications will be processed as soon as possible and first payments will be issued this week.

Examples of businesses that may be eligible for Part A of the scheme include businesses that deliver their product or service on a mobile basis or operate from their home, or their customers' homes; for example a driving instructor or mobile hairdresser or beautician. Self-employed individuals and sole traders, who may not have been covered by previous schemes are eligible to apply.

Further details and the application portal are available at <https://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/covid-restrictions-business-support-scheme>.

Part B of the scheme will provide support to businesses who directly provide goods or services to the businesses that have been required to close or cease trading as a result of the 16 October 2020 restrictions and are significantly impacted as a result.

Further details on Part B will be released by the Department as soon as possible.

Businesses can also claim a proportion of salary costs through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. The UK Government has announced an extension to the scheme for November with employees receiving 80% of their salary for hours not worked, up to a maximum of £2,500. Under the extended scheme, the cost for employers of retaining workers will be reduced compared to October.

The Chancellor has announced further support measures including an expansion to the Job Support Scheme to provide support to businesses across the UK who are required to close as a result of restrictions. Businesses can claim two thirds of their employees' salaries from 1 November 2020 up to a maximum of £2,083.33 per month.

I have also asked my officials to develop a tourism and hospitality scheme and a scheme for the recently self-employed in order to address gaps in current funding. I will make a further announcement on these schemes in the near future.

Mr Blair asked the Minister for the Economy what efforts her Department will undertake to implement the recommendations in the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office report into generating electricity from renewable energy.

(AQW 8769/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Of the six recommendations in the report, three are specifically for my Department. The Department has accepted these recommendations and will ensure they are addressed going forward.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 7948/17-22, whether her officials, in their capability assessment review of Ulster University, made specific recommendations or conclusions with regard to Ulster University's capability and capacity to undertake expansion of its Magee campus; and to disclose these recommendations or conclusions.

(AQW 8786/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: No specific recommendations or conclusions were made in the review commissioned by the Department with regard to Ulster University's capability and capacity to undertake expansion of its Magee campus.

Mr O'Toole asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will review the funding structure for post-graduate students before the next academic year.

(AQW 8787/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department's proposed Postgraduate Loan Review is a complex piece of work comprising different strands of the postgraduate funding system in Northern Ireland. It is anticipated that appropriateness of the current postgraduate fee loan of up to £5,500 towards the cost of taught postgraduate courses, will be reviewed alongside a range of potential options for maintenance loans or grants. Separate from that, there will be a review of the Postgraduate Awards Scheme.

It is anticipated that a public consultation on the Postgraduate Loan Review, comprising the different options for fee loans and maintenance provision, will be published before the end of this year. However, you will appreciate that the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for higher education are currently taking priority.

With respect to a date of implementation for any approved policy changes following the consultation, this will be dependent on the ability of the Student Loans Company to implement any policy changes.

Ms Bailey asked the Minister for the Economy when updated guidance for students living in houses of multiple occupancy will be published on weekend and half-term travel.

(AQW 8857/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: On 14 October 2020, I had a very productive meeting with representatives from NUS-USI, at which we discussed ways in which my Department could support students during these difficult times, including the provision of detailed advice and guidance. NUS-USI subsequently forwarded my Department a list of specific questions to inform this guidance, and my officials are working urgently to develop and publish full advice on the back of this.

While NUS-USI have also requested guidance on student travel, it is my firm view that this is a matter of public health, and any such advice must be provided by the relevant public health authorities. I have, however, requested urgent advice from those health authorities which, once received, will be included in the full range of guidance which will be published in due course.

Mr McNulty asked the Minister for the Economy whether she plans to bring forward assistance for students who have been told they will be educated remotely in terms of (i) a reduction in university fees; or (ii) assistance with rental costs for those in private sector properties.

(AQW 8897/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: While my Department is responsible for determining the annual maximum tuition fee level that can be charged by higher education institutions in Northern Ireland, it is a decision for the higher education institutions to determine what they wish to charge Northern Ireland and EU domiciled students, up to that maximum level. This includes any decision regarding whether a student should receive a refund or reduction of this fee.

My Department has no role in determining the cost of student accommodation, whether that is for university-managed Halls of Residence or private rental.

However, students who find themselves in financial hardship may be eligible to receive an award from the Support Funds made available by my

Department. This financial year, I secured an additional £1.4m from the Executive and a further £1.4m from the Department's own budget for these Support Funds, making a total of £5.6m available to support students facing genuine financial hardship.

Mr McCrossan asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the postcodes in West Tyrone which have been (i) included in Project Stratum; and (ii) removed from the project.

(AQW 9289/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Premises in the West Tyrone constituency fall within 3,039 postcodes. Eligibility for Project Stratum has been determined based on the Open Market Review (OMR) and State aid Public Consultation, the findings of which were published on 16th December 2019. On 5th February 2020, an addendum to the OMR was published, based on further information that had been made available to the Department (see <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/consultations/extending-broadband-across-northern-ireland-project-stratum>). This information was used to determine whether individual premises did, or soon would, have access to a broadband service with a download capacity of at least 30Mbps.

i) There are 1,513 postcodes in the West Tyrone constituency that contain at least one premises eligible for Project Stratum. These were listed in the response to AQW 8913/17-22.

ii) In the OMR publication from December 2019, 1,720 postcodes in the West Tyrone constituency were identified that contained at least one eligible premises. However, based on further information provided to the Department following the publication of 16th December 2019, 207 of these postcodes were removed as this new data received indicated that there were no eligible premises in that postcode. This left the 1,513 postcodes referenced in part (i) and published on 5th February 2020. The 207 postcodes are listed in Annex A. There are also 1,526 postcodes in the West Tyrone constituency that do not contain at least one premises eligible for Project Stratum. These are listed in the Annex B.

Annex A

West Tyrone Postcodes removed in February 2020 as new data received indicated that there were no eligible premises in in that postcode

BT79 9LU	BT78 3JA	BT82 8QJ	BT79 7JX	BT78 5HZ
BT79 9HQ	BT78 3SX	BT82 9FX	BT79 0PU	BT79 7HQ
BT78 5LB	BT82 9QW	BT79 7HT	BT82 0LR	BT79 9HD
BT79 7LA	BT78 1QZ	BT79 8AN	BT79 7TZ	BT79 0SY
BT78 5BA	BT78 2RT	BT79 7SR	BT78 2PZ	BT79 0PT
BT78 3RX	BT79 7RN	BT78 4TE	BT82 0DH	BT78 2SJ
BT81 7PX	BT78 5NE	BT78 3AF	BT81 7AS	BT82 8PB
BT82 9TY	BT78 5JX	BT82 9TL	BT78 1UF	BT79 7WW
BT82 9RG	BT79 7HE	BT79 7LF	BT79 9NF	BT79 7NN
BT79 7LR	BT81 7EG	BT82 8EE	BT79 8PQ	BT79 0UH

BT81 7TY	BT78 3HG	BT78 1TX	BT79 9PY	BT82 0HQ
BT79 0PF	BT78 5JR	BT79 7JZ	BT82 0RZ	BT78 1BL
BT82 9RL	BT81 7LE	BT79 7WU	BT79 9EQ	BT78 5GZ
BT79 7PQ	BT78 3RN	BT78 2QA	BT78 1SH	BT78 4PN
BT79 0PZ	BT79 8PN	BT79 7NB	BT79 7NJ	BT78 1RB
BT82 9RJ	BT82 8NB	BT79 7ET	BT82 9FP	BT79 0EP
BT81 7TR	BT78 3BN	BT78 2AQ	BT78 5BN	BT79 7PT
BT81 7GZ	BT79 0PH	BT78 4NG	BT78 3ST	BT82 0BB
BT79 7LD	BT82 8EF	BT81 7NB	BT82 9LN	BT78 1EX
BT82 9TP	BT78 3RW	BT79 7FB	BT79 0SZ	BT78 2BB
BT82 9RH	BT81 7LZ	BT78 1BZ	BT82 9JH	BT81 7BU
BT78 4JY	BT78 4BD	BT78 4AQ	BT79 7EZ	BT82 9RY
BT79 7PG	BT78 4AD	BT79 7GG	BT78 3DX	BT79 7RU
BT79 7LL	BT78 3AH	BT78 2BN	BT79 9JY	BT79 0TD
BT78 3DU	BT78 3AB	BT78 5JH	BT79 7RW	BT79 7LP
BT81 7AT	BT79 7HA	BT79 7LB	BT82 0EG	BT79 0TS
BT79 0TQ	BT81 7AN	BT78 5BT	BT78 2BG	BT78 4AX
BT81 7GY	BT82 9EX	BT81 7SE	BT81 7EQ	BT79 9JJ
BT81 7JG	BT79 0HR	BT78 5JJ	BT78 4AA	BT79 7PN
BT79 7PJ	BT79 7UT	BT78 3AA	BT78 2JQ	BT82 0DE
BT78 2HP	BT82 9NR	BT78 4AZ	BT78 1NB	BT78 4PH
BT82 9EP	BT82 9GD	BT78 1DG	BT81 7HW	BT82 9JY
BT79 7FZ	BT78 2AE	BT79 0BT	BT82 8EP	BT79 7NE
BT81 7ND	BT79 0AX	BT78 1EH	BT79 8NA	BT79 7UR
BT78 3FE	BT78 1LL	BT82 9PU	BT78 3AE	BT82 0JW
BT82 9GG	BT82 0DQ	BT82 9NU	BT79 7DF	BT81 7EL
BT81 7JF	BT79 0SA	BT79 9NY	BT82 8AQ	BT78 4LN
BT79 8PS	BT78 2BY	BT79 7YG	BT78 4SB	BT81 7JA
BT78 5NN	BT78 4AS	BT79 0AP	BT79 8QH	BT78 2AW
BT81 7EW	BT81 7BG	BT79 9BQ	BT79 7LU	
BT78 2DA	BT78 4QY	BT79 0PD	BT79 9BD	
BT82 9GZ	BT78 3RB	BT78 2JG	BT47 2SQ	

Annex B**West Tyrone postcodes that do not contain any premises eligible for Project Stratum**

BT47 2GD	BT78 3JT	BT79 0HW	BT79 8PH	BT82 8EB
BT47 2RR	BT78 3NP	BT79 0JE	BT79 8PJ	BT82 8ED
BT47 2RS	BT78 3PX	BT79 0JF	BT79 8PN	BT82 8EE
BT47 2RT	BT78 3QB	BT79 0JG	BT79 8PQ	BT82 8EF
BT47 2RU	BT78 3QR	BT79 0JH	BT79 8PS	BT82 8EG
BT47 2RX	BT78 3QS	BT79 0JJ	BT79 8PU	BT82 8EH
BT47 2RY	BT78 3QW	BT79 0JN	BT79 8QH	BT82 8EL

BT47 2RZ	BT78 3RA	BT79 0JQ	BT79 9AD	BT82 8EN
BT47 2SB	BT78 3RB	BT79 0JX	BT79 9AP	BT82 8EP
BT47 2SD	BT78 3RD	BT79 0LP	BT79 9AT	BT82 8EQ
BT47 2SG	BT78 3RG	BT79 0NT	BT79 9AU	BT82 8ER
BT47 2SH	BT78 3RJ	BT79 0NU	BT79 9AW	BT82 8EU
BT47 2SL	BT78 3RL	BT79 0PB	BT79 9AY	BT82 8EW
BT47 2SQ	BT78 3RN	BT79 0PD	BT79 9BD	BT82 8FA
BT47 2SU	BT78 3RW	BT79 0PF	BT79 9BF	BT82 8FB
BT47 2SW	BT78 3RX	BT79 0PH	BT79 9BG	BT82 8FF
BT47 2SY	BT78 3SL	BT79 0PJ	BT79 9BQ	BT82 8GW
BT47 2TD	BT78 3SR	BT79 0PN	BT79 9DE	BT82 8HB
BT47 2TX	BT78 3SS	BT79 0PP	BT79 9DH	BT82 8HD
BT47 3UT	BT78 3ST	BT79 0PQ	BT79 9DJ	BT82 8HE
BT70 2AL	BT78 3SU	BT79 0PR	BT79 9DN	BT82 8HF
BT78 1AA	BT78 3SX	BT79 0PS	BT79 9DQ	BT82 8HG
BT78 1AE	BT78 4AA	BT79 0PT	BT79 9EG	BT82 8HJ
BT78 1AN	BT78 4AB	BT79 0PU	BT79 9EQ	BT82 8HL
BT78 1AP	BT78 4AD	BT79 0PW	BT79 9ES	BT82 8HN
BT78 1AR	BT78 4AE	BT79 0PX	BT79 9HD	BT82 8HP
BT78 1AS	BT78 4AF	BT79 0PZ	BT79 9HN	BT82 8HQ
BT78 1AT	BT78 4AG	BT79 0QD	BT79 9HQ	BT82 8HR
BT78 1AU	BT78 4AL	BT79 0QY	BT79 9JE	BT82 8HS
BT78 1AW	BT78 4AN	BT79 0RB	BT79 9JF	BT82 8HT
BT78 1AY	BT78 4AP	BT79 0RD	BT79 9JH	BT82 8HU
BT78 1BA	BT78 4AQ	BT79 0RY	BT79 9JJ	BT82 8HW
BT78 1BH	BT78 4AR	BT79 0SA	BT79 9JR	BT82 8HX
BT78 1BJ	BT78 4AS	BT79 0SB	BT79 9JS	BT82 8HY
BT78 1BL	BT78 4AT	BT79 0ST	BT79 9JT	BT82 8JA
BT78 1BN	BT78 4AU	BT79 0SU	BT79 9JU	BT82 8JB
BT78 1BP	BT78 4AW	BT79 0SX	BT79 9JW	BT82 8JD
BT78 1BQ	BT78 4AX	BT79 0SY	BT79 9JY	BT82 8JE
BT78 1BS	BT78 4AY	BT79 0SZ	BT79 9LA	BT82 8JF
BT78 1BT	BT78 4AZ	BT79 0TA	BT79 9LB	BT82 8JG
BT78 1BU	BT78 4BA	BT79 0TB	BT79 9LH	BT82 8JH
BT78 1BW	BT78 4BB	BT79 0TD	BT79 9LN	BT82 8JJ
BT78 1BX	BT78 4BD	BT79 0TE	BT79 9LQ	BT82 8JL
BT78 1BY	BT78 4BE	BT79 0TF	BT79 9LU	BT82 8JN
BT78 1BZ	BT78 4BF	BT79 0TG	BT79 9LY	BT82 8JP
BT78 1DB	BT78 4BG	BT79 0TQ	BT79 9LZ	BT82 8JQ
BT78 1DD	BT78 4BH	BT79 0TS	BT79 9NA	BT82 8JT
BT78 1DE	BT78 4BJ	BT79 0TT	BT79 9NB	BT82 8JW
BT78 1DG	BT78 4BL	BT79 0TU	BT79 9ND	BT82 8JX

BT78 1DL	BT78 4BN	BT79 0UD	BT79 9NF	BT82 8JZ
BT78 1DQ	BT78 4BP	BT79 0UE	BT79 9NH	BT82 8LA
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Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether there is a potential conflict of interest in including the Chief Executive Officer of Grafton Recruitment Agency on the Northern Ireland Economic Advisory Group.
(AQW 9362/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I established the Economic Advisory Group (EAG) in June 2020 to provide me with independent advice, aimed at challenging and developing public policy and strategic thinking on the economy.

The approach to this EAG is in line with its original remit as set out in the Independent Review of Economic Policy which recommended “the establishment of a small advisory body, comprising expertise on regional economic development (drawn from business and economics), to provide independent advice to the Economy Minister.”

The focus of EAG advice will be on the refinement and implementation of actions to be taken for medium and long-term regional economic recovery, following the COVID-19 outbreak, aimed at underpinning and supporting a longer term economic strategy.

Members of the EAG have been appointed on the basis of their knowledge, experience and acumen, and I am satisfied that they will act and advise on the wider interests of the Northern Ireland economy.

EAG members have provided a conflict of interest and integrity declaration to the secretariat. The Chair and I are content with the responses received.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of whether the inclusion of the Chief Executive Officer of Grafton Recruitment Agency on the Northern Ireland Economic Advisory Group contradicts the NI Executive's commitment to satisfy the spirit of the workers' rights pledge in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 9363/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Members of the EAG have been appointed on the basis of their knowledge, experience and acumen, and I am satisfied that they will act and advise in the wider interests of the Northern Ireland economy.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy whether she has made any recommendations to increase the capacity of the Health and Safety Executive.
(AQW 9366/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Health & Safety Executive for Northern Ireland was established in 1999 to promote health, safety and wellbeing in the workplace. HSENI's locus predominantly covers larger commercial businesses. These include the public sector estate (health, education, policing and prisons), major hazards, gas, transport, agriculture & food, extractive industries & waste, manufacturing, utilities & docks, construction and occupational health & hygiene.

Since March, when Coronavirus became an issue in the UK, HSENI staff worked with businesses to seek to offer them advice which was coming from the Public Health Agency as the lead organisation for dealing with a viral pandemic.

HSENI currently has 8 trainees employed and undertaking their Regulatory Diploma course which typically takes 2-3 years to complete. The organisation provides mentors for these trainees to assist them in developing the appropriate evidence to develop their portfolio. As trainees complete this diploma, the organisation would seek to bring on board more trainees as required to fill posts vacated by other staff.

I am aware that the organisation has also just recruited two additional complaints officers who will assist with call handling as well as site visits. In addition HSENI has bid for additional resources as part of the work likely to emerge from EU Exit and the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Diane Dodds

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy how the forthcoming Energy Strategy will be integrated with a climate change act for Northern Ireland, which was committed to in New Decade, New Approach.
(AQW 9453/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The new Energy Strategy is being developed in the context of the UK's legislation requirement for net-zero carbon emissions by 2050.

The strategy is taking a collaborative approach, ensuring we actively involve relevant departments across the Executive in its development.

This joined-up approach ensures that the Energy Strategy will be integrated with other relevant strategies outlined in 'New Decade, New Approach' including work on the Climate Change agenda, which the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) lead on.

Mr Muir asked the Minister for the Economy to detail the actions her Department is taking to support the fintech sector in Northern Ireland.

(AQW 9540/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Northern Ireland has a strong and world renowned FinTech sector. Indeed the Financial Times FDI markets has placed Northern Ireland as the world's top region for Financial Services technology inward investment projects (FDI markets FT 2020). Northern Ireland has also been identified as a top 3 Fintech location of the future, after London and Singapore (FDI markets FT 2019).

There are nearly 10,000 people employed in Fintech roles in Northern Ireland and major companies such as Citi, Allstate, First Derivatives, FinTrU, Insurance Office of America, Peak6, Qarik and Aflac have chosen to locate here.

My Department and Invest NI have been working closely with these and other companies and key stakeholders in this sector for many years with both financial support and sector development through a number of activities including:

- Supporting sector specific trade missions and promoting NI at a number of key trade events
- Arranging a number of meet the buyer events with major banks and financial institutions in strategic markets
- Conducting market research and supporting new trade activities in potential new markets.
- Working closely with the NI Fintech Envoy and Fintech NI to promote NIs Fintech capability on a national and global stage.
- Engaging with national and cross border Fintech organisations to showcase NIs capabilities in the sector and increase access to investment and funding.
- Working closely with the universities and Further Education colleges along with industry to build a future pipeline of skills and talent for the sector.

My Assured Skills team also works closely with companies in this sector providing pre-employment training to individuals, from a diverse range of degree backgrounds, through its Academy model. Academy participants gain up-to-date skills delivered by Further and Higher Education Institutions, that are highly sought after by Fintech companies. Many Academy graduates have been employed by our local Fintech employers helping to meet the skills demand of the sector.

Invest NI and my Department will continue to work closely with Fintech businesses, as a key element of the Economic Recovery Plan, and to support them during this challenging time.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the progress of Project Stratum.

(AQW 9590/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The evaluation of tenders for Project Stratum was completed on 11 August 2020 and a preferred bidder was identified. The necessary robust corporate governance and internal approval processes were conducted at that time. These, along with a number of contract finalisation matters, have now concluded.

Subject to final approval and State aid Assurance, contract award is anticipated in the coming weeks. My Department will then work with the preferred bidder to ensure that citizens and businesses can access further information regarding phased deployment plans and relevant updates related to project implementation.

Mrs Barton asked the Minister for the Economy how her Department will support adults returning to part-time education to improve basic numeracy and literacy skills.

(AQW 9592/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department's Essential Skills Strategy focuses on the needs of adults and, in particular, those who have low levels of literacy, numeracy and Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Essential Skills qualifications in literacy and numeracy from Entry Level to Level 2 are available free of charge to all learners. These courses are designed to help improve reading, writing, mathematics and computer skills for anyone over the age of 16. Courses are delivered by Further Education (FE) colleges, private training providers and community organisations, using a variety of delivery methods to help meet differing needs of learners in employment and training.

There are a range of financial support arrangements that have been in place over many years for eligible part-time FE students. These include FE Grants for living costs, fees and childcare support and the Hardship Fund which is intended to provide support to learners who are experiencing exceptional financial difficulty with meeting costs associated with learning including childcare. Assistance with childcare may also be available for adults up to 20 years of age through the Care to Learn (NI) Scheme.

Mr Allister asked the Minister for the Economy arising from her Department's subsidising of small scale wind turbines and anaerobic digesters, did any whistleblowers come forward to her Department; and how were their concerns processed.

(AQW 9620/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Three whistleblower cases have been received by my Department. The issues relate to small scale onshore wind and to stations fuelled by biogas produced from anaerobic digestion, however, they do not relate directly to the level of support available under the Northern Ireland Renewables Obligation (NIRO).

All issues have been fully investigated in collaboration between the Department, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation and Ofgem, through the NIRO Assurance & Risk Management Steering Group.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy, further to AQW 8870/17-22, (i) what role her Department's officials had in producing Transform to Deliver; (ii) whether that role included the drafting of the proposals; (iii) whether the proposals originated within her Department; and (iv) whether she will now publish Transform to Deliver.

(AQW 9650/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: As set out in my response to AQW 8870/17-22, Departmental officials have not been involved in drafting Transform to Deliver proposals.

I am content that the Department has acted at all times within its role as sponsor Department for the Further Education (FE) colleges including, as I have set out previously, the assessment of any business cases developed by the colleges.

As employers in their own right, FE colleges are responsible for setting the terms and conditions of their staff including the development of any proposals to reform these. As such, discussions on staff pay, terms and conditions are a matter for negotiation and agreement between the Lecturers Negotiating

Committee of the College Employers Forum (CEF), which represents the six FE Colleges, and Trade Union Side.

If an agreement is reached through this process, it will then be for the CEF to develop a business case to be submitted to the Department to seek approval for any additional resources required. I am not, therefore, in a position to publish any proposals in relation to Transform to Deliver at this time.

Ms Anderson asked the Minister for the Economy, pursuant to AQW 7668/17-22, what support is available for those in rural areas not included in Project Stratum, who cannot wait up to three years for a better internet connection and for who other UK Government schemes are not suitable, as is the case for some residents in the BT47 2SL area near Newbuildings, Derry.

(AQW 9654/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: A number of premises have not been included in the proposed intervention area under Project Stratum as, following consultation with telecoms infrastructure providers, my Department was advised that such premises already have access to a superfast broadband service, or will be able to access such a service by January 2022. Under State aid rules, these premises are not eligible to benefit from Project Stratum. For premises which will be served solely by one or more Wireless Internet Service Providers (WISPs), these will be kept under review by my officials over the course of the project to ensure that the coverage claims made by the relevant WISPs are adhered to. If this is not the case, such premises can be re-categorised and deemed eligible to benefit from Project Stratum or any future public intervention. This applies to a number of premises within the BT47 2SL postcode area.

In my response to AQW 7668/17-22, I provided details, and the appropriate links, of the UK-wide schemes available to residents and businesses that cannot currently avail of an acceptable broadband service. If consumers are experiencing difficulties accessing these schemes, they should raise this with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport with regard to the Rural Gigabit Connectivity Scheme and with Ofcom regarding the Universal Service Obligation.

Alternatively, consumers may wish to explore the provision of a service from one of the satellite broadband providers operating in Northern Ireland.

Mr Carroll asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on her plans around student travel over the Christmas period.

(AQW 9671/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Given the overlap between the above questions, I have decided to answer them all in a single response.

It is my firm view that any issues relating to travel for students, as they would be for any other members of the public, are a matter of public health. Any such advice and guidance must therefore be provided by the relevant public health authorities, and I have made this case to both the Minister of Health as well as my Executive colleagues. Both I and my officials are ready to assist public health authorities by liaising on these matters, if necessary, with both the higher education institutions, as well as representatives of students.

That said, both I and my officials have been involved in some discussions with our other UK counterparts, so that we are kept apprised of their respective plans for student travel before the Christmas period. This way, any implications for Northern Ireland can inform local public health authorities' guidance.

There have not yet been any discussions around the return of students for semester two, either with other UK jurisdictions, or between myself and the Minister of Health.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy whether the unsuccessful bid for capital funding for Project Stratum in the October monitoring round will impact or delay the project.

(AQW 9677/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There is no anticipated delay to Project Stratum as full project funding has been confirmed.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy to detail (i) the legislation required to be progressed by her Department for the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland; and (ii) the specific constraints on progress for each.

(AQW 9678/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is progressing six Statutory Rules that are required for the implementation of the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, concerning: the carriage of dangerous goods and use of transportable pressure equipment; biocidal products; biocides / classification, labelling and packaging; equipment and protective systems intended for use in potentially explosive atmospheres; priority dispatch of renewable generators and transposition of priority Single Electricity Market related aspects of the Electricity Directive. The main constraint for each is the limited time available until the end of the Transition Period.

Further Protocol related legislation will be progressed by my Department after the Transition Period. Greater clarity on the interpretation and outworkings of the Protocol and the UK/EU negotiations is required to inform the full scope of potential legislative requirements.

Ms Armstrong asked the Minister for the Economy what her Department is doing to fulfil the Executive's commitment to building a united and shared society through the Together: Building a United Community strategy.

(AQW 9684/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has responsibility for the United Youth Commitment under the Executive's 'Together: Building a United Community' strategy. This commitment of 10,000 places for young people aged 16-24 is currently being delivered via the cross border Peace IV funded Peace4Youth Programme.

The Programme will target 7,400 14-24 olds who are disadvantaged, excluded or marginalised; have deep social and emotional needs; and are at risk of becoming involved in anti-social behaviour, violence or paramilitary/dissident activity.

To date around 4,500 young people have completed their Peace4Youth Programmes.

Ms McLaughlin asked the Minister for the Economy for her assessment of media speculation that completion of the energy strategy will be delayed until 2022.

(AQW 9735/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The timeframe for Energy Strategy remains unchanged. I intend to publish a public consultation on policy options in March 2021 and launch the final Strategy before the end of 2021.

Mr Hilditch asked the Minister for the Economy (i) what discussions she has had with Caterpillar following today's announcement it is to set to cut around 700 jobs in Northern Ireland; and (ii) what immediate support is available for the employees affected by this decision.

(AQW 9751/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The decision by Caterpillar in the US to enter a period of consultation will be a worrying time for many. While the company has explained that this is part of a process for the restructuring of its Electric Power Division at Larne, the scale of the potential job losses will have come as a great shock to the workforce and their families.

I met with Caterpillar NI's Senior Management Team, along with representatives from Invest NI on Friday 6 November 2020, to express my disappointment at the decision. I have asked Invest NI, which has a good working relationship with Caterpillar, to continue to engage with the company throughout this consultation period to explore ways to minimise the impact at the Northern Ireland sites. I also met the UNITE union on Tuesday 10th November 2020 to hear their concerns and I am confident that everyone will be working to ensure that we can support the workforce at this time.

At the meeting with Caterpillar NI I made it clear that the Executive is committed to exploring ways to minimise the impact at both Northern Ireland sites. I told the Senior Management Team that I was keen to discuss with them what future opportunities might exist for the Caterpillar NI operations as the company focusses on other business areas. The team at Invest NI will continue to explore where it might be possible to assist the company with any potential new investment opportunities.

My Department's Careers Service officials made contact with the company on Monday 9th November 2020 to make them aware of the advice and guidance services available to support those employees who may be facing redundancy.

The Careers Service, Invest NI, alongside other stakeholders (including Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, NI Chamber, Manufacturing NI, and MEGA), are liaising with Caterpillar Senior Management to ensure that assistance is available to support workers through this process. This will include helping employees to match their skills and experience to existing job vacancies, and personalised job searching advice. Employees will also be supported to re-skill and will be provided with labour market information on growth and emerging sectors.

The company is also working with both Union Representatives and Salaried Worker Representatives as it enters the 90-day consultation period.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy what action she is taking (i) to avoid the loss of 700 jobs at Caterpillar in Larne and Belfast; and (ii) to help support workers at these sites.

(AQW 9763/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The decision by Caterpillar in the US to enter a period of consultation will be a worrying time for many. While the company has explained that this is part of a process for the restructuring of its Electric Power Division at Larne, the scale of the potential job losses will have come as a great shock to the workforce and their families.

I met with Caterpillar NI's Senior Management team, along with representatives from Invest NI, on Friday 6 November 2020 to express my disappointment at the decision. I have asked Invest NI, which has a good working relationship with Caterpillar, to continue to engage with the company throughout this consultation period to explore ways to minimise the impact at the Northern Ireland sites. I also, met the UNITE union on Tuesday 10 November 2020 to hear their concerns and I am confident that everyone will be working to ensure that we can support the workforce at this time.

At the meeting with Caterpillar NI senior management I made it clear that the Executive is committed to exploring ways to minimise the impact at both Northern Ireland sites. I told the Caterpillar Senior Management that I was keen to discuss with them what future opportunities might exist for the Caterpillar NI operations as the company focusses on other business areas. The team at Invest NI will continue to explore where it might be possible to assist the company with any potential new investment opportunities.

My Department's Careers Service officials made contact with the company on Monday 9 November 2020 to make them aware of the advice and guidance services available to support those employees who may be facing redundancy. The Careers Service will maintain contact with Caterpillar over the coming weeks and will be available to support employees at any stage throughout the transition process.

My Department and Invest NI, alongside other stakeholders (including Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, NI Chamber, Manufacturing NI and DfE Careers Service), are liaising with Caterpillar Senior Management to ensure that assistance is available to support workers through this process. This will include redundancy clinics, re-skilling, job fairs and identification of job opportunities.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for the Economy what assessment has been made of the fitness for purpose of the Trader Support Service and its ability to cope with trade in both directions between Great Britain and Northern Ireland from 1 January 2021.

(AQW 9826/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Trader Support Service (TSS) is being designed and implemented by a consortium led by Fujitsu. The TSS was procured by the UK government (UKG) and falls under the remit of HMRC. The TSS will provide guidance and advice to NI businesses that receive goods from GB or the rest of the world on a free to use basis. Furthermore, the TSS portal will enable customs declarations to be made by, or on behalf of, these NI businesses.

In terms of the capacity within the TSS, I understand that the information and guidance will be embedded within the TSS portal for businesses to access and there will also be a dedicated call centre for enquiries. Frank Dunsmuir, part of the Fujitsu-led consortium, estimated that approximately 30 million customs declarations will be made annually and that TSS would be able to process this number. I have repeatedly pressed UKG, and will continue to do so, to ensure that our businesses have the necessary services and information to prepare for the trading arrangements under the Protocol.

For businesses selling to GB, UKG has committed to providing NI goods with unfettered access to the GB market – including no new paperwork or processes (except in a small number of highly regulated goods) – and I intend to hold them to this commitment.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for the Economy whether Northern Ireland-based firms will be required to have a different VAT numbering system to firms in the rest of the United Kingdom from 1 January 2021.

(AQW 9827/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: NI businesses that trade only with the UK will continue to follow the same VAT registration procedures they do now. Unlike UK sales, NI-EU transactions will have to be recorded on Interstat and EC Sales Lists. So it is likely that NI companies will need some mechanism to identify themselves.

The EU has proposed that NI companies attach a 'XI' prefix to their VAT number whilst GB companies are assigned a 'XU' country code. This is to allow a means of distinguishing between NI and GB companies for UK reporting purposes and to fulfil obligations in the Protocol for NI to align with EU VAT rules.

This issue remains in negotiation through the Joint Committee and my officials are in regular contact with HMRC to press for information and guidance so that NI businesses are fully prepared to trade from 1 January 2021.

Mr Chambers asked the Minister for the Economy what assessment has been made as to the financial cost to hauliers as a result of any checks that may be required on goods travelling in either direction between Northern Ireland and Great Britain from 1 January 2021.

(AQW 9828/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Until final decisions are made by the Joint Committee overseeing the implementation of the Protocol it is difficult to assess accurately what additional costs hauliers may face. The UK has set up the Trader Support Service to educate and assist business, including hauliers, with the new processes required to move goods between GB and NI. This is a free to use service, initially set up for 2 years and should be helpful to hauliers moving goods on this route.

Additionally, the UK Government has guaranteed unfettered access to the GB market for NI goods, and is negotiating for the waiving of export summary declarations. This will ensure that goods moving from NI-GB should do so without incurring any additional cost.

Mr Durkan asked the Minister for the Economy whether (i) her Department intends to bring forward a support scheme for students experiencing financial hardship; and (ii) financial assistance will be provided to cover rental costs for those in student accommodation.

(AQW 9867/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department has provided support for students facing genuine financial hardship for many years through our Support Funds. These funds are distributed by the Universities on behalf of my Department and any students facing genuine financial hardship should contact the Student Services team at their University for details on how to apply. This financial year, in recognition of the impact of Covid 19 on our students, I secured an additional £1.4m from the Executive and a further £1.4m from the Department's own budget for these Support Funds, making a total of £5.6m available to support students facing genuine financial hardship.

The funds may be used to provide financial assistance to students who, for whatever reason, face financial difficulties in meeting their living costs. Students who are facing specific issues related to rental costs should firstly speak to their accommodation office or private landlord, as applicable, as accommodation rental agreements are between the student and the university/private landlord.

Ms Mullan asked the Minister for the Economy how much did it cost to pay the Educational Maintenance Allowance during the recent extended mid-term break.

(AQW 9879/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Department of Education announced on 27 October 2020 that Educational Maintenance Allowance would be paid to eligible school students during the extended half term break of 19 - 23 October. The cost of providing EMA to these students during the extended half term break is estimated to be £270,000.

The cost of providing EMA support to all eligible students – both at schools and at Further Education Colleges - is in the region of £450,000 per week, with approximately £270,000 of that attributable to school students and £180,000 to those within further education colleges.

Ms Bradshaw asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will consider establishing a body similar to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland to promote and support the development of renewable energy.

(AQO 1027/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Energy Strategy Call for Evidence asked if there was a need for a dedicated organisation to 'champion, lead and deliver' sustainable energy advice and support in Northern Ireland, and if so, what should this look like.

The majority of responses supported the concept of a "one stop shop" for delivery of energy information, advice and funding in Northern Ireland. The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland was cited as a best practice example.

The Energy Strategy is developing options based on the evidence received, and further research is also being carried out to gather additional evidence.

We are looking at best practice in Sustainable Energy Authorities in the Republic of Ireland, Great Britain, Europe and further afield.

The findings from this work will be presented in the Energy Strategy Options Consultation planned for March 2021.

Mr McAleer asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on the number of health and safety inspections carried out in meat processing plants since April 2020.

(AQO 1028/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: There have been a total of 35 Inspections of meat processing plants since 1 April 2020 to 23 October 2020).

All 35 health and safety inspections were unannounced and all were conducted by either 2 or more HSENI Inspectors.

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for the Economy whether she will accelerate the completion of her energy strategy to contribute to capital investment and job creation in co-operation with her counterpart in Dublin.

(AQO 1029/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: I welcome your recognition of the important role that energy will play in supporting a green recovery and growing our local economy.

The Energy Strategy, currently under development, seeks to decarbonise the energy sector in a cost-competitive way by 2050. It will provide a long-term direction of travel across every aspect of energy production and consumption, and will have significant implications for consumers and taxpayers for decades to come.

This is a complex topic which impacts on many areas, and a significant work programme is ongoing involving multiple departments, local government, the energy industry, consumers and wider stakeholders, including those in the Republic of Ireland.

Rather than rush this important work, I have progressed key priorities in advance of the strategy being published. This includes specifically including Clean Energy as one of four priority growth sectors in my Medium Term Recovery Plan, that will be target of future investment.

That is also why I recently made statements setting out my ambition for both hydrogen and renewable electricity, in order to provide a clear signal to industry and encourage investment now that will deliver economic benefits.

My department is already exploring and supporting a range of projects that will showcase our potential to develop cutting-edge hydrogen technology here. And my officials are engaging with some local councils seeking to develop clean energy and hydrogen training academies.

Mr Catney asked the Minister for the Economy, in relation to developing an economic strategy to address regional inequality, to outline which inequalities will be prioritised.

(AQO 1030/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: My Department is committed to improving economic conditions across the whole of Northern Ireland for the benefit of everyone.

There are regional variations in our economy in areas such as investment, employment and wage levels. It is important that we continue to put in place measures to address these and support local economies to grow, compete and prosper.

The Executive's current economic focus is supporting the businesses, people and places most heavily impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, and creating a foundation on which to deliver a greener, competitive and inclusive economy.

It is important to note that delivering an inclusive and regionally balanced economy requires a partnership-based and holistic approach including education, skills and infrastructure.

My Department will continue to support these key policy levers which have the collective potential to impact positively on people across Northern Ireland.

Miss McIlveen asked the Minister for the Economy for an update on her Department's plans to mark the Northern Ireland centenary in 2021.

(AQO 1031/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The centenary is an opportunity for us to showcase Northern Ireland to the world. This will clearly mark a milestone in our history, but it will also be a shop window for our competitive, inclusive and green economy.

My Department will be hosting a series of local and international events that will bring the story of Northern Ireland to the world. A year-long promotional campaign will celebrate our people; this place; and our innovative past, present and future.

Our programme for 2021 will include an International Investment conference that will bring together current and potential investors from all over the world.

A series of global showcase events throughout the year will showcase Northern Ireland in key export markets.

Proposals are also being developed for a range of bespoke one off cultural events that will bring the 100th anniversary of Northern Ireland to a global audience.

2021 provides us with a unique opportunity to tell the world of our achievements. In the past we built the world's greatest ships and weaved the finest linen. Today we lead the world in cyber security technology and financial services, our people can truly do anything.

The Centenary of Northern Ireland is an event to be proud of and my Department will use next year to promote all that is great about our economy.

Mr Buckley asked the Minister for the Economy what plans are in place to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021.

(AQO 1032/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Whilst my Department's focus remains on ensuring that our economy survives the devastating effects of this pandemic, we have not lost sight of our longer-term strategic aims.

The centenary of Northern Ireland provides us with a springboard from which to build an inclusive economic recovery and to promote Northern Ireland and its innovative business community throughout the world.

We continue to plan a series of local and international events. This will include a number of showcase events including the Dubai Expo 2021 an event which is expected to attract some 25 million visitors.

We cannot wait for economic conditions to be perfect to begin our recovery.

I have therefore asked Invest Northern Ireland to begin planning an investment conference to be held in the second half of 2021.

Planning such a conference will require great innovation and creativity to deal with the challenges that the world currently presents us with, but we must begin to rebuild an investment pipeline that will continue to deliver for us in the years to come.

It is only by looking to the future now that we can ensure that there will be many better days ahead for us all.

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for the Economy how much money has been allocated through the £1 million Digital Selling Capability Grant scheme.
(AQO 1033/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: Invest Northern Ireland has completed final assessment of applications for the Digital Selling Capability Grant and all of the applicants have been informed of the outcome.

A total of 100 businesses were successful and are being issued grant offers of between £5,000 and £20,000 to help them with their e-commerce and digital marketing. The £1m funding has been fully allocated.

Mr Easton asked the Minister for the Economy to outline discussions her Department has had with the Minister of Finance on providing financial support for sole traders.
(AQO 1034/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In recent months, the Northern Ireland Executive and UK Government have introduced an unprecedented range of support measures to businesses and individuals working across all sectors, including many sole traders.

To date, my Department has provided over £340 million of support to approximately 32,000 businesses through the Business Support Schemes for large, small and microbusinesses throughout Northern Ireland.

On 22nd October, I announced the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme. This latest financial support option has been designed to support those businesses, including eligible sole traders, who will be directly impacted by the four week period of restrictions that were deemed necessary by the Executive.

I understand the frustration shared by some in our business community who may not have been able to avail of as much support as others.

Unfortunately, it has not been possible to provide funding for every scenario that has presented itself during this pandemic.

In considering further interventions, it will be for the Executive collectively, to determine how the limited funding available, will be allocated to best support economic recovery moving forward, and I will continue to engage with the Minister of Finance and others to this effect.

Mr Sheehan asked the Minister for the Economy what support is available for the self-employed.
(AQO 1035/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: The Executive and the UK Government have introduced an unprecedented range of financial support packages to mitigate against the worst impacts of COVID-19.

Included in this range of options is the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme.

The latest release of information has revealed that approximately 66,000 self-employed individuals in Northern Ireland had claimed the second Self-Employment Income Support Scheme grant up to 30 September 2020, totalling £163m - this is an average value of £2,500 in terms of claims made, the same value as the UK as a whole.

This equates to 69% of eligible self-employed workers in Northern Ireland who have taken up the second grant, slightly higher than the take-up rate in the UK as a whole, which sits at 67%.

On 22nd October, I announced the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme. This latest financial support option has been designed to support those businesses, including self-employed, who will be directly impacted by the four week period of restrictions deemed necessary by the Executive.

I have also asked my officials to develop a new scheme, associated with current restrictions, to support those self-employed that were excluded from Self-Employment Income Support Scheme because they were not registered for self-employment in 2018/19.

Mr Dickson asked the Minister for the Economy how she will ensure that future COVID-19 financial support schemes do not exclude sole traders and others that have not been able to access support previously.

(AQO 1036/17-22)

Mrs Dodds: In recent months, the Northern Ireland Executive and UK Government have introduced an unprecedented range of support measures to businesses and individuals working across all sectors.

My own Department has provided over £340 million of support to approximately 32,000 businesses through Business Support Schemes for large, small and microbusinesses throughout Northern Ireland.

On 22nd October, I announced the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme. This latest financial support option has been designed to support those businesses, including self-employed sole traders, who will be directly impacted by the four week period of restrictions deemed necessary by the Executive.

Other schemes are also being developed and, in addition to the financial supports recently announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, aim to exclude no-one in our society.

I understand the frustration shared by some in our business community, such as sole traders, who may not have been able to avail of as much support as others previously.

Unfortunately, it has not been possible to provide funding for every scenario that has presented itself during this pandemic.

In considering further interventions, it will be for the Executive collectively, to determine how limited funding will be allocated to best support economic recovery moving forward.

Journal of Proceedings

Minutes of Proceedings

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 19 October 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Assembly Business

2.1 Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Steve Aiken replace Mr John Stewart as a member of the Committee for Standards and Privileges.

Mr Robbie Butler

Mr Andy Allen

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Motion: Suspension of Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4)

Proposed:

That Standing Orders 10(2) to 10(4) be suspended for 19 October 2020.

Minister of Finance

The Question being put, the motion was **carried** with cross-community support.

3.2 Motion: Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2020-2021

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £4,757,631,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 and that resources, not exceeding £4,791,050,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Food Standards Agency, the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2021 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Columns 3 (a) and 3 (b) of Table 1.3 in the volume of the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2020-2021 that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020.

Minister of Finance

Motion: Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-2017 Statement of Excesses

Proposed:

That this Assembly approves that a sum, not exceeding £112,618,000, be granted out of the Consolidated Fund, for or towards defraying the charges for the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 and that resources, not exceeding £183,290,000, be authorised for use by the Northern Ireland Departments, the Northern Ireland Authority for Utility Regulation, and the Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland for the year ending 31 March 2017 as summarised for each Department or other public body in Part 1 of the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-2017 Statement of Excesses that was laid before the Assembly on 13 October 2020.

Minister of Finance

A single debate ensued on both motions.

The debate was suspended for Question Time.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir.

4.2 Finance

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy.

The Speaker took the Chair.

5. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

5.1 Motion: Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2020-2021 (cont'd)

Motion: Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-2017 Statement of Excesses (cont'd)

Debate resumed on both motions.

The Question being put, the Motion on the Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2020-2021 was **carried** with cross-community support.

The Question being put, the Motion on the Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Estimates 2016-2017 Statement of Excesses was **carried** with cross-community support.

5.2 First Stage: Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 9/17-22)

A Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of a certain sum for the service of the year ending 31 March 2021; to appropriate that sum for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance to borrow on the credit of that sum; to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources (including accruing resources) for the year ending 31 March 2021; to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of an excess cash sum for the service of the year ending 31 March 2017; to authorise the use for the public service of excess resources for that year; and to repeal certain spent provisions.

The Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be printed.

The Speaker informed the Assembly that he had received correspondence from the Committee for Finance stating that the Committee was satisfied that the consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill had been appropriate as required under Standing Order 42(2).

5.3 First Stage: Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22)

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, on behalf of the Minister for Communities, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, introduced a Bill to make provision about liquor licensing and the registration of clubs.

The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be printed.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

5.4 Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

A single debate ensued on all three motions.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 5) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 6) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 7) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was **carried**.

6. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 7.01pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

19 October 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 15 October 2020 to 19 October 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

The Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22)

The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22)

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Northern Ireland Environment Agency's Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

The General Consumer Council for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2019-2020 (Department for the Economy)

Legislative Consent Memorandum - Westminster Pension Schemes Bill (Department for Communities)

5. Assembly Reports

Report on the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA 48/17-22) (Committee for Justice)

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Seventh Report of Session 2020 - 2021 (NIA 49/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/219 The Ornamental Horticulture Industry (Coronavirus, Financial Assistance) Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs)

SR 2020/220 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/221 The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)

SR 2020/222 The Carriage of Dangerous Goods and Use of Transportable Pressure Equipment (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

SR 2020/223 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 15) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/224 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/225 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

COVID-19 Update (Minister of Health)

8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 19 October 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Monday 19 October 2020:

Martina Anderson	Naomi Long
Caoimhe Archibald	Gordon Lyons
Kellie Armstrong	Séan Lynch
John Blair	Chris Lyttle
Cathal Boylan	Nichola Mallon
Sinéad Bradley	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradley	Fra McCann
Jonathan Buckley	Daniel McCrossan
Pam Cameron	Patsy McGlone
Pat Catney	Colin McGrath
Stewart Dickson	Philip McGuigan
Linda Dillon	Maolíosa McHugh
Diane Dodds	Sinead McLaughlin
Jemma Dolan	Justin McNulty
Gordon Dunne	Gary Middleton
Mark Durkan	Andrew Muir
Alex Easton	Karen Mullan
Arlene Foster	Conor Murphy
Órlaithí Flynn	Robin Newton
Colm Gildernew	Carál Ní Chuilín
Paul Givan	John O'Dowd
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	Mervyn Storey
Gerry Kelly	Robin Swann
Liz Kimmins	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 20 October 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 Second Stage: Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22)

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, moved the Second Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22).

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.59pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 Health

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann.

3.2 Infrastructure

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

4. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

4.1 Second Stage: Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22) (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22) passed Second Stage with cross-community support.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

5. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

Ms Martina Anderson spoke to her topic regarding the Lack of Rail Connectivity in Foyle.

The Assembly adjourned at 7.45pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

20 October 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 20 October 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
 - Armagh Observatory and Planetarium Annual Report and Accounts for year ended 31 March 2020 (Department for Communities)
 - British Library Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (British Library)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
7. Written Ministerial Statements
 - Extension of the Financial Support Agreed for Derry City and Strabane District to all Areas (Minister of Finance)
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
 - The Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.14) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Education)
 - The Coronavirus Act Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.13) Cancellation Notice (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Education)
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 20 October 2020

2017-2022 Mandate

Executive Bills

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Budget Bill (NIA Bill 02/17-22)	24/02/20	25/02/20	/	/	02/03/20	03/03/20	09/03/20	26/03/20
Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill (NIA Bill 03/17-22)	31/03/20	28/04/20	15/10/20					
Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Bill (NIA Bill 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 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 Bill 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 Bill 7/17-22)	23/06/20	07/07/20	29/01/21					

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Executive Committee (Functions) Bill (NIA Bill 8/17-22)	06/07/20	06/07/20	/	/	21/07/20	27/07/20	28/07/20	25/08/20
Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22)	19/10/20	20/10/20						
The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22)	19/10/20							

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 20 October 2020

The following Members notified the Speaker, under Standing Order 112, that they wished to avail of proxy voting arrangements for the sitting on Tuesday 20 October 2020:

Andy Allen	Gerry Kelly
Martina Anderson	Liz Kimmins
Caoimhe Archibald	Naomi Long
Kellie Armstrong	Gordon Lyons
Roy Beggs	Séan Lynch
John Blair	Chris Lyttle
Cathal Boylan	Nichola Mallon
Sinéad Bradley	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradley	Fra McCann
Jonathan Buckley	Daniel McCrossan
Pam Cameron	Patsy McGlone
Pat Catney	Colin McGrath
Alan Chambers	Philip McGuigan
Stewart Dickson	Maolíosa McHugh
Linda Dillon	Sinead McLaughlin
Diane Dodds	Justin McNulty
Jemma Dolan	Gary Middleton
Gordon Dunne	Andrew Muir
Mark Durkan	Karen Mullan
Alex Easton	Conor Murphy
Sinéad Ennis	Mike Nesbitt
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
David Hilditch	Pat Sheehan
Cara Hunter	Emma Sheerin
William Irwin	Christopher Stalford
Declan Kearney	Mervyn Storey
Catherine Kelly	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 2 November 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Assembly Business

2.1 Motion: Committee Membership

Proposed:

That Mr Jonathan Buckley replace Mr Alex Easton as a member of the Committee for Health; and that Mr Alex Easton replace Mr Jonathan Buckley as a member of the Committee for Communities.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr Gary Middleton

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement: North/South Ministerial Council - Transport Sectoral Meeting

The Minister for Infrastructure, Ms Nichola Mallon, made a statement regarding the recent North/South Ministerial Council Transport Sectoral Meeting, following which she replied to questions.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

3.2 Consideration Stage: Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22)

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, moved the Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22).

No amendments were tabled to the Bill.

Clauses

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Clauses 1 to 9 stand part of the Bill.

Schedules

The question being put, it was **agreed** without division that Schedules 1 to 5 stand part of the Bill.

Long Title

The question being put, the Long Title was **agreed** without division.

The Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22) stood referred to the Speaker.

3.3 Legislative Consent Motion: Pension Schemes Bill

Proposed:

That this Assembly agrees, in line with section 87 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Pension Schemes Bill dealing with collective money purchase benefits, the Pensions Regulator, pensions dashboards and further provision relating to pension schemes as contained in Part 2 and clauses 117, 120 and 129 of, and Schedules 4 to 6, 8, 9 and 11 to, the Bill which was introduced in the House of Commons on 16 July 2020.

Minister for Communities

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

4. Committee Business

4.1 Motion: Post-Primary Transfer Testing

Proposed:

That this Assembly takes note of the feedback to the Committee for Education's online survey into post-primary transfer testing; and calls on the Minister of Education to outline contingency plans for post-primary arrangements.

Chairperson, Committee for Education

Debate ensued.

The debate stood suspended for Question Time.

The Speaker took the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 The Executive Office

Questions were put to, and answered by, the deputy First Minister, Mrs Michelle O'Neill. The junior Minister, Mr Declan Kearney, also answered a number of questions.

5.2 Justice

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long.

6. Questions for Urgent Oral Answer

6.1 Small Business Support Grant Scheme

The Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Andrew Muir.

6.2 Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Robbie Butler.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

7. Committee Business (cont'd)

7.1 Motion: Post-Primary Transfer Testing (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Question being put, the Motion was **carried**.

8. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 5.40pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

2 November 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 21 October 2020 to 2 November 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly

2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly

3. Orders in Council

4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly

Northern Ireland Audit Office Annual Report and Accounts 2019-2020 Correction Slip (Northern Ireland Audit Office)

Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Finance)

Public Prosecution Service Northern Ireland - Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Office of the Attorney General for Northern Ireland)

Department for Infrastructure Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Finance)

Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland)

The Executive Office Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Finance)

Legislative Consent Memorandum on The Counter Terrorism and Sentencing Bill (Department of Justice)

Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland)

Northern Ireland Housing Executive Annual Report & Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Communities)

Forensic Science Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Forensic Science Northern Ireland)

Revised Code of Practice for Access NI (Access NI)

5. Assembly Reports

Report on a further Legislative Consent Memorandum on the Westminster Pension Schemes Bill (NIA 50/17-22) (Committee for Communities)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/226 The Universal Credit (Earned Income) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/227 The Social Security (Coronavirus) (Prisoners) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/228 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 16) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/230 The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus) (No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Finance)

SR 2020/231 The Licensing (Designation of Outdoor Stadia) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/232 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 11) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/233 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/234 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 17) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/235 The Children's Social Care (Coronavirus) (Temporary Modification of Children's Social Care) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

COVID-19 Update (Minister of Health)

COVID-19 Culture, Languages, Arts and Heritage Support Programme 2020/21 (Minister for Communities)

Clinical Concerns within Urology at Southern Health and Social Care Trust (Minister of Health)

October Monitoring and COVID-19 Funding (Minister of Finance)

COVID-19 Update (Minister of Health)

8. Consultation Documents

Consultation on Proposals to Establish a Regional Care and Justice Campus (Department of Health)

9. Departmental Publications

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 2 November 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 2 November 2020:

Steve Aiken	Dolores Kelly
Martina Anderson	Gerry Kelly
Caoimhe Archibald	Liz Kimmins
Kellie Armstrong	Naomi Long
Roy Beggs	Gordon Lyons
John Blair	Séan Lynch
Cathal Boylan	Chris Lyttle
Sinéad Bradley	Nichola Mallon
Paula Bradley	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradshaw	Fra McCann
Jonathan Buckley	Daniel McCrossan
Pam Cameron	Patsy McGlone
Pat Catney	Colin McGrath
Alan Chambers	Philip McGuigan
Linda Dillon	Maolíosa McHugh
Diane Dodds	Sinead McLaughlin
Jemma Dolan	Justin McNulty
Gordon Dunne	Andrew Muir
Mark Durkan	Karen Mullan
Alex Easton	Conor Murphy
Sinéad Ennis	Robin Newton
Arlene Foster	Carál Ní Chuilín
Órlaithí Flynn	Michelle O'Neill
Colm Gildernew	Edwin Poots
Paul Givan	George Robinson
Deirdre Hargey	Emma Rogan
Harry Harvey	Pat Sheehan
David Hilditch	Emma Sheerin
Cara Hunter	Christopher Stalford
William Irwin	Mervyn Storey
Declan Kearney	Robin Swann
Catherine Kelly	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 3 November 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Executive Committee Business

2.1 **First Stage: Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 11/17-22)**

The Minister of Justice, Mrs Naomi Long, introduced a Bill to amend the law relating to committal for trial.

The Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 11/17-22) passed First Stage and was ordered to be printed.

2.2 **Statement: Housing Policy**

The Minister for Communities, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, made a statement regarding Housing Policy, following which she replied to questions.

2.3 **Motion: The Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period for Meetings of Registered Societies and Credit Unions) Regulations (NI) 2020**

Proposed:

That the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Act 2020 (Coronavirus) (Amendment of Relevant Period for Meetings of Registered Societies and Credit Unions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

Minister for the Economy

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

2.4 **Second Stage: Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22)**

The Minister for Communities, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín, moved the Second Stage of the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22).

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 12.54pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Speaker in the Chair.

3. Question Time

3.1 **Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs**

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Mr Edwin Poots.

3.2 **Communities**

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for Communities, Ms Carál Ní Chuilín.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

4. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

4.1 **Second Stage: Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22) (cont'd)**

Debate resumed.

The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22) passed Second Stage.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

4.2 **Motion: The draft Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme Order 2020**

Proposed:

That the draft Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme Order 2020 be approved.

Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Debate ensued

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

5. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 6.59pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

3 November 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 3 November 2020

1. Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly
2. Bills of the Northern Ireland Assembly
The Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 11/17-22)
3. Orders in Council
4. Publications Laid in the Northern Ireland Assembly
2019-20 Annual Report and Accounts for Department of Health - Health and Social Care Pension Scheme (Department of Finance)

Northern Ireland Court Service Investment Account Annual Report for 2019-20 (Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service)
5. Assembly Reports
6. Statutory Rules
For information only

SR 2020/236 The Insolvency (Amendment) (2016 Act) (Commencement No. 2 and Saving Provision) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for the Economy)
7. Written Ministerial Statements
8. Consultation Documents
9. Departmental Publications
10. Agency Publications
11. Westminster Publications
12. Miscellaneous Publications

Northern Ireland Assembly Legislation:

Stages in Consideration of Public Bills

First Stage: Introduction of Bill.

Second Stage: General debate of the Bill with an opportunity for Members to vote on its general principles.

Committee Stage (Comm. Stage): Detailed investigation by a Committee which concludes with the publication of a report for consideration by the Assembly.

Consideration Stage (CS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, the details of the Bill including amendments proposed to the Bill.

Further Consideration Stage (FCS): Consideration by the Assembly of, and an opportunity for Members to vote on, further amendments to the Bill.

Final Stage: Passing or rejecting of Bill by the Assembly, without further amendment.

Royal Assent.

Proceedings as 3 November 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 Bill 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 05/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/	01/06/20	02/06/20	02/06/20	17/06/20
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA Bill 06/17-22)	26/05/20	01/06/20	/	/	16/06/20	23/06/20	30/06/20	28/08/20
Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 07/17-22)	23/06/20	07/07/20	29/01/21					

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Executive Committee (Functions) Bill (NIA Bill 08/17-22)	06/07/20	06/07/20	/	/	21/07/20	27/07/20	28/07/20	25/08/20
Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22)	19/10/20	20/10/20	/	/	02/11/20			
The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22)	19/10/20	03/11/20						
The Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 11/17-22)	03/11/20							

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 3 November 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 3 November 2020:

Steve Aiken	Dolores Kelly
Andy Allen	Gerry Kelly
Martina Anderson	Liz Kimmins
Caoimhe Archibald	Naomi Long
Kellie Armstrong	Gordon Lyons
Roy Beggs	Séan Lynch
John Blair	Chris Lyttle
Cathal Boylan	Nichola Mallon
Sinéad Bradley	Declan McAleer
Paula Bradley	Fra McCann
Paula Bradshaw	Daniel McCrossan
Jonathan Buckley	Patsy McGlone
Pam Cameron	Colin McGrath
Pat Catney	Philip McGuigan
Alan Chambers	Maolíosa McHugh
Linda Dillon	Sinead McLaughlin
Diane Dodds	Justin McNulty
Jemma Dolan	Andrew Muir
Gordon Dunne	Karen Mullan
Mark Durkan	Conor Murphy
Alex Easton	Robin Newton
Sinéad Ennis	Carál Ní Chuilín
Arlene Foster	Michelle O'Neill
Órlaithí Flynn	Edwin Poots
Colm Gildernew	George Robinson
Paul Givan	Emma Rogan
Deirdre Hargey	Pat Sheehan
Harry Harvey	Emma Sheerin
David Hilditch	Christopher Stalford
Cara Hunter	Mervyn Storey
William Irwin	Robin Swann
Declan Kearney	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 9 November 2020

The Assembly met at noon, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

Member Resignation

The Speaker informed Members that Ms Catherine Kelly resigned as a Member for the West Tyrone constituency with effect from 3 November 2020 and that the Chief Electoral Officer was notified in accordance with Section 35 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

3. Matter of the Day

US Presidential Election

Mrs Michelle O'Neill, under Standing Order 24, made a statement on the US Presidential Election. Other Members were also called to speak on the matter.

4. Executive Committee Business

4.1 Statement: North/South Ministerial Council - Education Sectoral Meeting

The Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir, made a statement regarding the recent North/South Ministerial Council Education Sectoral Meeting, following which he replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

4.2 Further Consideration Stage: Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22)

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, moved the Further Consideration Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22).

No amendments were tabled to the Bill.

The Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22) stood referred to the Speaker for consideration in accordance with Section 10 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

4.3 Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

Proposed:

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**Proposed:**

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**Proposed:**

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020**Proposed:**

That the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 be approved.

The Executive Office

A single debate ensued on all four motions.

The debate stood suspended for Question Time.

The Speaker took the Chair.

5. Question Time

5.1 Economy

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds.

5.2 Education

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Education, Mr Peter Weir.

6. Question for Urgent Oral Answer

6.1 Caterpillar: Job Losses

The Minister for the Economy, Mrs Diane Dodds, responded to a Question for Urgent Oral Answer tabled by Mr Stewart Dickson.

7. Assembly Business

7.1 Motion: Extension of Sitting on Monday 09 November 2020 under Standing Order 10(3A)

Proposed:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 9 November 2020 be extended to no later than 9.00pm.

Mr Keith Buchanan

Mr John O'Dowd

Mrs Dolores Kelly

Mr Robbie Butler

Ms Kellie Armstrong

Ms Clare Bailey

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

8. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

8.1 Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (cont'd)

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (cont'd)

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (cont'd)

Motion: The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (cont'd)

Debate resumed on all four motions.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 8) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 9) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 10) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was **carried**.

The Question being put, the motion on the Health Protection ((Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 was **carried**.

The Principal Deputy Speaker took the Chair.

9. Private Members' Business

9.1 Motion: Manufacturing Sector during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Proposed:

That this Assembly recognises the vital role played by our local manufacturing sector in sustaining and growing our economy; further recognises the huge pressures on our manufacturing sector during the COVID-19 pandemic; commends employers and workers in the manufacturing sector who continue to persevere in the most adverse of economic conditions with limited financial support; notes with concern the potential job losses in the manufacturing sector; calls on the Minister for the Economy to detail the short to medium-term support measures that will be put in place to support the manufacturing sector through the COVID-19 pandemic; and further calls on her to produce the long-overdue manufacturing strategy to help the long-term recovery of, and growth within, the sector.

Ms John Stewart

Dr Steve Aiken

Mr Robbie Butler

Debate ensued.

The Question being put, the motion was **carried**.

10. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 8.32pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

9 November 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 4 November 2020 to 9 November 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

2019-20 Annual Report and Accounts for Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (Department of Finance)

2019-20 Annual Report and Accounts for the Department for Communities (Department of Finance)

Statistics of Scientific Procedures on Living Animals Northern Ireland 2019 (Department of Health)

2019-20 Annual Report and Accounts for the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (Department of Finance)

Legislative Consent Memorandum on The Medicines and Medical Devices Bill (Department of Health)

Libraries NI Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department for Communities)

Northern Ireland Prison Service Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Northern Ireland Prison Service)

Department of Finance Superannuation and Other Allowances Pension Scheme Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Finance)

Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Justice)

Driver and Vehicle Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department for Infrastructure)

Northern Ireland Forest Service Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Northern Ireland Forest Service)

5. Assembly Reports

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Eighth Report of Session 2020 - 2021 (NIA 52/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly and the Appropriate Committees Ninth Report of Session 2020 - 2021 (NIA 53/17-22) (Examiner of Statutory Rules)

Committee for the Economy Energy Strategy Micro Inquiry (NIA 51/17-22) (Committee for the Economy)

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/239 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 12) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/241 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 18) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/242 The Social Security (Coronavirus) (Further Measures) (Amendment) and Miscellaneous Amendment Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

SR 2020/243 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 19) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/244 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 20) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

SR 2020/245 The Personal Independence Payment (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Communities)

For information only

SR 2020/240 The Road Traffic (Amendment) (2016 Act) (Commencement No. 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department for Infrastructure)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2020/232 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 11) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

Explanatory Memorandum for SR 2020/234 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) (Amendment No. 17) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (Department of Health)

7. Written Ministerial Statements

COVID-19 Update (Minister of Health)

8. Consultation Documents

9. Departmental Publications

10. Agency Publications

11. Westminster Publications

12. Miscellaneous Publications

Proxy Voting Notices – Monday 9 November 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 9 November 2020:

Andy Allen	Gerry Kelly
Martina Anderson	Liz Kimmins
Caoimhe Archibald	Naomi Long
Kellie Armstrong	Gordon Lyons
Rosemary Barton	Séan Lynch
Roy Beggs	Chris Lyttle
John Blair	Nichola Mallon
Cathal Boylan	Declan McAleer
Sinéad Bradley	Fra McCann
Paula Bradley	Daniel McCrossan
Paula Bradshaw	Patsy McGlone
Jonathan Buckley	Colin McGrath
Pam Cameron	Philip McGuigan
Pat Catney	Maolíosa McHugh
Alan Chambers	Sinead McLaughlin
Linda Dillon	Justin McNulty
Diane Dodds	Andrew Muir
Jemma Dolan	Karen Mullan
Gordon Dunne	Conor Murphy
Mark Durkan	Mike Nesbitt
Alex Easton	Robin Newton
Sinéad Ennis	Carál Ní Chuilín
Arlene Foster	Michelle O'Neill
Órlaithí Flynn	Edwin Poots
Colm Gildernew	George Robinson
Paul Givan	Emma Rogan
Deirdre Hargey	Pat Sheehan
Harry Harvey	Emma Sheerin
David Hilditch	Christopher Stalford
Cara Hunter	John Stewart
William Irwin	Mervyn Storey
Declan Kearney	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir

Northern Ireland Assembly

Tuesday 10 November 2020

The Assembly met at 10.30am, the Speaker in the Chair.

1. Prayers

Members observed two minutes' silence.

2. Speaker's Business

Procedures and Conventions.

The Speaker took the opportunity to remind Members about the procedures and conventions on Speaker's decisions, and in particular that Speaker's decisions are final and that it is not in order to challenge them.

3. Executive Committee Business

3.1 Statement: British/Irish Council Summit

The First Minister, the Rt. Hon Arlene Foster, made a statement regarding the recent British/Irish Council Summit meeting, following which she replied to questions.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr Beggs, took the Chair.

3.2 Final Stage: Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22)

The Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy, moved that the Final Stage of the Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22) do now pass.

Debate ensued.

The sitting was suspended at 1.00pm.

The sitting resumed at 2.00pm, with the Principal Deputy Speaker in the Chair.

4. Question Time

4.1 Finance

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Finance, Mr Conor Murphy.

4.2 Health

Questions were put to, and answered by, the Minister of Health, Mr Robin Swann.

The Deputy Speaker, Mr McGlone, took the Chair.

5. Executive Committee Business (cont'd)

5.1 Final Stage: Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22) (cont'd)

Debate resumed.

The Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22) passed Final Stage with cross-community support.

6. Adjournment

Proposed:

That the Assembly do now adjourn.

The Speaker

The Assembly adjourned at 4.33pm.

Mr Alex Maskey

The Speaker

10 November 2020

Northern Ireland Assembly

Papers Presented to the Assembly on 10 November 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

Members' Contributory Pension Fund Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2019 (Northern Ireland Audit Office)

Assembly Contributory Pension Fund Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2019 (Northern Ireland Audit Office)

Police Service Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Justice)

Police Service Northern Ireland Police Pension Accounts 2019-20 (Department of Justice)

Northern Ireland Policing Board Review of the policing response to COVID-19 (Northern Ireland Policing Board)

5. Assembly Reports

6. Statutory Rules

SR 2020/247 The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Travel from Denmark) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020
(Department of Health)

For information only

SR 2020/246 The Mental Capacity (2016 Act) (Commencement No.1) (Amendment) Order (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

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 9 November 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 Bill 04/17-22)	21/04/20	21/04/20	/	/	28/04/20	/	28/04/20	04/05/20
Budget (No. 2) Bill (NIA Bill 05/17-22)	26/05/20	26/05/20	/	/	01/06/20	02/06/20	02/06/20	17/06/20
Housing Amendment Bill (NIA Bill 06/17-22)	26/05/20	01/06/20	/	/	16/06/20	23/06/20	30/06/20	28/08/20
Pension Schemes Bill (NIA Bill 07/17-22)	23/06/20	07/07/20	29/01/21					

Title & NIA Bill Number	First Stage	Second Stage	Comm. Stage to Conclude	Report Ordered to be Printed	CS	FCS	Final Stage	Royal Assent
Executive Committee (Functions) Bill (NIA Bill 08/17-22)	06/07/20	06/07/20	/	/	21/07/20	27/07/20	28/07/20	25/08/20
Budget (No. 3) Bill (NIA Bill 09/17-22)	19/10/20	20/10/20	/	/	02/11/20	09/11/20	10/11/20	
The Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill (NIA Bill 10/17-22)	19/10/20	03/11/20						
The Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill (NIA Bill 11/17-22)	03/11/20							

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 10 November 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 10 November 2020:

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Pam Cameron	Philip McGuigan
Pat Catney	Maolíosa McHugh
Alan Chambers	Sinead McLaughlin
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Mark Durkan	Mike Nesbitt
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Órlaithí Flynn	Edwin Poots
Colm Gildernew	George Robinson
Paul Givan	Emma Rogan
Deirdre Hargey	Pat Sheehan
Harry Harvey	Emma Sheerin
David Hilditch	Christopher Stalford
Cara Hunter	John Stewart
William Irwin	Mervyn Storey
Declan Kearney	Robin Swann
Dolores Kelly	Peter Weir